



CRESC Working Paper Series

Working Paper No. 71

The Ancestor in the Machine

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CRESC, The University of Manchester or CRESC

November 2009

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Abstract

The contemporary and burgeoning interest in genealogy and family history research in Britain has been identified as a 'new national obsession'. Its popularity is apparent in numerous television and radio programmes devoted to both 'ordinary' and 'celebrity' family trees, as well as a plethora of internet sites, computer software, databases, magazines, self-help manuals etcetera, and all these alongside masses of information and queries uploaded and disseminated by individuals, groups and networks. 'Family treeing', to use an idiom from the north of England, is a social practice through which a good number of broader contemporary preoccupations are revealed. As a practice, it straddles social class, confined to neither the middle nor the working classes but it shows a burgeoning and flourishing interest in the workings of social class and in a history that 'catches up' place, past and person. In the north of England, It is inflected by a post-industrial landscape and recent experiences of social and economic upheaval with attendant threats to working-class life and dignity, but is as much about continuity as rupture. It reveals a preoccupation with serendipity, fate and chance which turn on the ethereal and mystical. It is also suggestive of an 'imperative to connect' forging kin connections to both ancestors and newly-found living relatives. This paper draws on recent fieldwork in the north of England and attempts to look ethnographically at some of the practices, materials and meanings of family history research.

Key Words

Ethnography, family history, genealogy, kinship, social class

The Ancestor in the Machine

A local branch of the Lancashire Family History and Heraldry Society (FHHS) meets on the first Wednesday of the month in the back room of the Methodist Chapel in one of the three towns that, together with their satellite villages, comprise a northern English borough.¹ A monthly newsletter informs members of the topic of forthcoming meetings and usually includes a vignette, or two, from members about their own family history research, as well as queries about specific patronyms. The hope is that a reader will recognise a name from their own researches and be able to shed further light on the social life of the deceased and provide the enquirer with further information about the genealogical niche of their ancestors. At monthly meetings, there is usually a presentation by a guest speaker followed by questions and comments and then tea and biscuits. Occasionally, a meeting is devoted to short 'ten minute talks' from local members on their own current research, or to 'heirlooms', or 'research'. The society used to meet at the Mormon Temple but, the chairman tells me, they were not allowed to drink tea; now, at the Methodist Chapel, they can drink tea but can't have a raffle, which is regrettable, he continues, because it used to be 'a nice little earner'. Neither venue permits alcohol, which is not really an issue except perhaps, he muses, for the Christmas party. Tea lubricates a more general chitchat, usually about things other than family history because, as everybody knows, and as the secretary pithily put it, 'get them started and you can't shut them up'. It is clear that members like to talk, not only about their ancestors but also, and perhaps more so, about the struggle in finding them.

The talk at the first meeting I attended, which was during the winter of 2006, was billed 'The Witches of Pendle' by 'Mrs M. Stopworth'. The speaker gave an animated and amusing account to an attentive and amused audience of about thirty people - more women than men (but not many more), all over the age of forty (but many not much older than that), and ostensibly 'English'.² Mrs Stopworth owns a shop called 'Witches Galore' on the road leading up to Pendle Hill. On Halloween, crowds of people (some say thousands) - Goths, Pagans, Wicca, and others 'just out for the crack' - trudge up the hill and spend the night on its summit. Mrs Stopworth tells us that the shop attracts tourists from all over the world and not only at Halloween. She has brought a selection of her 'best sellers' to show us, they include flying witches, small, medium and large, made from wood, felt and fabric. With tall, black hats, hooked noses and patterned 'pinnies', the witches sit astride broomsticks with their black cats perching precariously behind. They are designed to be hung from a ceiling by elastic. From Mrs Stopworth's vivid description, it is not difficult to bring to mind a picture her shop. It is crammed with flying witches of different sizes, shapes and colours and bobbing at various heights, speeds and angles according to the stretch of the elastic attaching them to the ceiling and the strength of the draught from the door that jangles as it is opened and closed. As well as visitors from all over the world, Mrs Stopworth tells us, people with all kinds of interests in witches and witchcraft visit the shop and many of her customers imagine she is a witch.

At the end of her talk, the questions and comments from the audience take the discussion on a different tack: to the arrests, trial and hanging of eight women and two men, living in the Pendle area, who were accused of witchcraft in 1612; to the gruelling and cruel walk they suffered from Pendle to Lancaster assizes in shackles; and to Alice Nutter, with whom a number of people I have met in Rossendale who are 'doing' their family history suspect a connection. In many accounts of the Pendle Witches, Alice Nutter was the odd one out. It is said that those on trial belonged to two destitute and feuding families and that members of each family confessed and accused members of the other of witchcraft. Alice Nutter, by contrast, is said to have been wealthy, catholic and a landowner who did not confess to witchcraft but probably, and conveniently for the prosecution, was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mrs Stopworth's talk acts as a catalyst for a discussion about the social history of

Pendle Hill and its most famous ancestors. It provides the opportunity for the display and performance of the knowledge of local genealogists who are as interested in excavating and elaborating detailed social histories as they are in genealogy.

I am interested in what drives, shapes and constitutes the contemporary and burgeoning interest in family history in the UK. I am drawn to the contemporary popularity of family history and genealogical research in the north of England through my previous research on kinship and what I loosely glossed then as new reproductive technologies (NRT). As NRT revealed tacit assumptions about kinship - acting as an ethnographic window through which cultural and otherwise implicit understandings of what constitutes a person and relatedness could be discerned - I am interested in what the contemporary passion for genealogical research, what a recent report in the *Guardian* called 'our new national obsession', might tell us about another facet of English kinship.³ This has also compelled me to look again at the rise and demise of the Genealogical Method (GM) in British social anthropology at a time when a version of it is being mobilised by a large minority of the British population.

I am purposely confining what I say to England and the English, but more can and ought to be said about the breadth of this phenomenon. Recent research, from a range of social science perspectives, has focused on the genealogical research carried out by residents of what is still frequently and oddly called 'the new world' who are looking for their ancestors in what is just as oddly called 'the old world'. In social anthropology, for example, Paul Basu focuses on what he identifies as the Scottish diaspora - in this case, Australians, Canadians and New Zealanders - who visit Scotland, physically or virtually, in pursuit of knowledge of their 'ancestral lands' (Basu 2007). He argues that their search has to be understood in the light of a 'fractured modernity' - a search for roots is a search for a homeland in what they deem a more authentic country than the one in which they live and in a country from which they were expelled. The narratives of many of Basu's genealogists are inflected by injury and injustice and a claim to what rightfully belongs to them or perhaps, more precisely, a claim to where they rightfully belong.

Sociologist, Ronald Lambert, is also interested in Australian genealogists: specifically in the emergence of an interest in 'convict ancestry'. His analysis draws on interviews with forty six members of two Australian 'convict descendent societies' (combined adult membership 1000). Although we do not get much of a sense of the social life of the societies themselves, Lambert's reflections on social change are pertinent here. The majority of his respondents were unaware, prior to commencing their family history research, that one (or more) of their ancestors was transported, as 'a convict', to Australia from Britain. (Lambert 2002). For Lambert, this is indicative of the way in which 'convict ancestry' was, in the past, stigmatised: convict ascendants were screened out of family stories and effaced from family mythologies, thus forgotten. Today, by contrast, convict ancestors are prominent: they are not only sought but also celebrated. Lambert points to a shift from 'shame' to 'pride', which he dates to the 1960s.⁴ He goes on to show how present-day genealogists legitimate and accommodate their convict ancestors by either treating them 'quasi-professionally' as objects of historical interest (thus sanitising their attachment to them as a matter of scientific curiosity), or by minimising the crimes of their ancestors (by, for example, excavating mitigating personal circumstances and empathising with the harsh realities and injustices of the time). Although Lambert does not spell it out, this ability to both attach and detach ancestors is a feature of a particular kind of kinship thinking which has been glossed, albeit problematically, as Euro-American (Strathern 1992; Carsten 2000), and to which I will return below.

Here we might also add insight from geographer Catherine Nash who critiques the idea that genealogy fixes people in places (either geographic or genealogical). Her focus is on the search by white North Americans for European, particularly Irish, 'roots' and for her the genealogical imagination questions both the 'naturalness' of the nation and ideas of cultural

purity by revealing 'diversity, uncovering interconnection [and] charting complexity'. It can, she writes, 'map flows and contamination rather than confirm pure identities and fixed locations' (Nash 2002).

My own focus is on local genealogists who live in the north of England: many (but not all) define themselves as 'born and bred' in The Valley. They claim to belong to one of the three main towns in the borough, to one of their satellite villages or to a specific neighbourhood which, in turn, belongs to them. Amongst other things, a focus on family history research has led me to think again about expertise - how it is constituted, acknowledged and enacted. The FHHS, for example, hold regular 'Research Evenings' which are open to non-members who are encouraged to bring their notes and queries and to seek advice from those recognised as experts in family history research. A number of members also organise 'outreach' activities - sessions at local libraries to help family seekers find their way not only through the paper archives and records that the library holds but also through the software - through the internet portals and electronic databases. Family seekers either come in person to a research evening or send their queries by email or telephone via the secretary who answers their query directly if she can or posts it in the newsletter if she can't. While many members gain their expertise through experience and practice over time, there are some who are known to have 'a feel' for genealogy: not only are they able to manoeuvre comfortably and agilely around the archives but they act on hunches and 'feelings'. They are not only able to 'see' things that the inexperienced cannot, but also know (unlike the novice) how important it is to verify information (especially that found on the internet), to check and double-check. Intuition needs the back up of patient and painstaking attention to detail. At the same time, while only some family historians have a feel for genealogy, all family historians have feelings about genealogy: they are affected - moved - by what they discover. The stories that all family historians tell (both those who attend the society and those who pursue their interests independently) are emotionally charged: they feature joy as well as sadness, frustration as well as satisfaction, and empathy as well as anger.⁵ I am interested in how we take account of the emotion both invested in and elicited from genealogical research.

The Genealogical Method

The contemporary British interest in tracking down ancestors has an early 21st century complexion to it: it draws on the latest in information technology, an unprecedented speed of communication and ease of travel. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to look again at the Genealogical Method of early 20th century social anthropology. British social anthropology came of age with the Genealogical Method (GM). An emerging discipline attempting, on the one hand, to carve out a distinctive disciplinary identity and, on the other, to defend its scientific rigour: kinship was the solution to the former and the Genealogical Method to the latter. Kinship was the dominant paradigm of early 20th century British social anthropology, which saw as its prime and distinctive focus 'face to face' and 'small scale' society. The 'genealogical method of anthropological enquiry' developed by W.H.R. Rivers and on which he pinned his conversion from psychology to anthropology was first published in 1900. It was like an early rapid rural appraisal technique: the idea being that the anthropologist, pressed for time and without a (necessarily) sophisticated grasp of the relevant language, could quickly get sense of the social structure of a village or small community by collecting the pedigrees of knowledgeable people. Rivers advised that you should start by asking informants the name of their father and their mother, then their father's father and their father's mother and so on. You should also make it clear, he said, that you want the name of the person's *real* parents - he was clearly confident that the real father and mother, as opposed to any other person who might be referred to as such, could be elicited simply and straightforwardly. He writes, in the language of the time:

In collecting the genealogies I therefore limited myself to as few terms as possible, and found that I could do all that was necessary with the five terms, father, mother, child, husband, and wife. Care had of course to be taken to limit these terms to their English sense. The term which was open to the most serious liability to error was that of father, but I was able to make the natives understand very thoroughly that I wanted the "proper father" (Rivers 1900).

In subsequent publications Rivers went on to complicate this over determined grid of kinship, asserting four modes:

1. Social kinship: where fatherhood and motherhood do not necessarily depend on parturition and procreation as with adoption (Rivers & Perry 1924).
2. Genealogical kinship: which, he said, might be determined by blood relationships but can also be determined by other social procedures.
3. Relational kinship: that is, defined through the terms of the relationship (although ultimately he found this unsatisfactory as 'he considered pedigree and genealogy to determine the terms of relationship and not the reverse' (Read 2001).
4. Functional kinship: where '(p)ersons are regarded as kin of one another if their duties and privileges in relation to one another are those otherwise determined by consanguinity' (Rivers 1924 [1968]: 53).

It was this insistence on the consanguineal tie that led David Schneider to reject kinship as a domain of study and to assert that '[i]t exists in the minds of anthropologists but not in the cultures they study' (Schneider 1972; Read 2001). He accused anthropologists of imposing a European folk model of kinship onto other societies and alleged that 'his predecessors and contemporaries were mired in a genealogical way of thinking that rested, if only tacitly, on a view of kinship as ultimately biological' (Parkin & Stone 2004). According to Schneider, '[a]ll Rivers really does, then, is to say that kinship is in the first instance defined in terms of consanguinity . . . and that sometimes social convention alone may confirm a kinship relationship even in the absence of a relationship of consanguinity but that, when it does, it is created in the image of a consanguineal tie' (Schneider 1972:54; cited in Read 2001). Although Schneider has been held personally responsible for the demise of kinship in anthropology in the 1970s and indirectly responsible for its reincarnation in the 1990s, he was of course developing arguments that had been made before and elsewhere (Edwards 2009). The relationship between kinship as an analytical construct and kinship 'on the ground' – or kinship as anthropological model and as empirical reality – had already been hotly debated (Harris 1990), and the Genealogical Method was already out of favour by the 1960s. But I think it fair to say that, in the rejection of the method, the proverbial baby was thrown out with the bathwater and kinship went down the drain with the 'tool box'.

In retrospect, the GM was neither as fixed nor as inflexible as its critics have made out and it is worth recalling Rivers' own observation that while genealogical kinship may be based on blood ties it can also be based on other social conventions. The mistake, it seems to me, has been to conflate genealogical kinship with genetic kinship.⁶ I am reminded of Rebecca Cassidy's observations on race horse and horse owner genealogies in Newmarket, England (Cassidy 2002). The genealogical diagrams that individual members of prominent racing families made for Cassidy were, she writes, 'missing out anyone who was not associated with racing, so long as they didn't provide any links to other racing families'. Cassidy tried to persuade her informants not to do this, but they argued the point. Eventually a compromise was reached. According to Cassidy, 'we put a diagonal line through non-racing folk ... this has the bizarre effect of recording reproduction that apparently takes place from beyond the grave'.

Cassidy's amusing account raises the question of what a genealogical diagram should look like. What is the relationship between the living genealogy produced as social commentary - in process, unfinished and indeed unfinishable - and the genealogical diagram of the anthropologist - necessarily truncated and for its purpose complete, albeit partial? In his recent book 'Lines: a brief history', Tim Ingold also goes back to Rivers and the GM. The line of the genealogical chart, he argues, 'neither grows nor flows but *connects*' (Ingold 2007). He points to the distinction at the back of River's mind between pedigree and genealogy, which John Barnes was to elaborate and insist upon fifty years later. For Barnes, the pedigree is the genealogical statement made by the informant 'orally, diagrammatically or in writing', whereas genealogy is the statement of the ethnographer as field record or analysis - one belongs to the realm of culture and the other science. Of course, what is interesting here is the work (effort) required to maintain a separation between these two realms (and indeed local historians produce both genealogies and pedigrees) but this is not what Ingold is concerned about (at least here): his interest is in the nature of the lines themselves. For Ingold, the consanguineal line of the genealogy is 'a connector' and the genealogical chart is purged of the 'elegant tracery and ornamentation of the pedigree': each of the persons on the genealogical chart signified by the small female circles and male triangles is 'immobilised on one spot, their entire life compressed into a single position within the genealogical grid, from which there is no escape'. In Ingold's elegant idiom: 'The lines of the genealogical chart do not go out for a walk, as those of the traditional pedigree do' (2007: 111). Instead they follow the logic of the dotted line forming an 'assembly of *point-to-point connectors*' (2007: 113). Put in a broader context, and in the light of Ingold's previous work on how people do not simply occupy but rather inhabit environments, he seems to be arguing that while residents of 'western', cosmopolitan societies live in fragmented environments which are assemblies of connected elements (like the genealogy), they nevertheless thread their way through these environments tracing paths as they go. Best then, he says, to shift from the paradigm of assembly (connecting up points) to the paradigm of the walk.

Ethnographically the walk is useful in thinking about the meanderings in the doing of family history - the digressions family historians take, for example, into finding out more about what a particular occupation, inscribed on a census form, entailed; or to speculate on the living conditions in either small and overcrowded houses or large and spacious mansions; or to dwell on the experience of high infant mortality or a life serviced by servants including wet nurses. The walk is also usefully applied to the genealogical diagrams they produce - the lines do more than connect up people they catch them up and carry them (in more than one direction). Family historians also talk about coming to dead ends - to cul-de-sacs - to lines that end abruptly.

Ingold's ideas resonate with Deleuze and Guattari's 'lines of flight' and their commentary on the need for mediators (Deleuze & Guattari 1988; Cray & Kwinter 1992). In his criticism of the retrenchment of philosophy back to eternal values and to reflection on things rather than movement, Deleuze writes of the relationship between art, science and philosophy (as aggregate, function and concept) and asks how, with their 'different rhythms and movements of production', is it possible for them to interact (1992: 283)? For him, they are separate melodic lines in constant interplay with one another and, in all three, creation requires mediators. Mediators tend to be, in his examples, other people (his, for example, is Guattari), but they can also be plants or animals. The point is that having found mediators you can say what you want to say.

It seems to me that family history research in the north of England marries art, science and philosophy. At least as they are imagined by Deleuze and Guattari: the art of creating sensory aggregates, the science of ordering, archiving and connecting-up, and a philosophy which mobilises concepts, in this case, of fate and chance which project the person outside the mundane, secular world. The ancestors - the nodes on the family tree - are the mediators. They are caught (up) in what Deleuze, following film-maker Pierre Perrault, calls *legending*.

In his 1963 film *Pour la suite du monde*, Perrault enters into 'a collaborative process of invention' with the Québécois islanders and fishermen who are the subject of his film. As the fishermen, at the instigation of Perrault, reenact the abandoned practice of building weirs (which they used to do to catch dolphins), they share their memories of the past and narrate the ancestral and hunting lore with which they are familiar. The camera catches them, in Perrault's words, 'in a state of legending' and in their legending they are creating a new collectivity with its own community lore. For Deleuze, they are 'fabulating without being fictive' (Bogue 2004). In their legending, the marginalised Québécois islanders invent and reinvent themselves in the face of the imperialism and orthodoxy of high French culture. I am struck by the notion of legending and am interesting in what gets 'caught up' in fabulation. If narrating ancestors in the north of England - elaborating their social lives and their genealogical positions which are processes entailed in family treeing - are states of legending (fabulations not fictions), then what kind of new collectivities are narrated into being and in the face of what perceptions and practices of marginalisation?

Catching-up

In what follows, I move around the Valley: from the Family History Society (FHHS) I introduced earlier, to a neighbouring town in which I have carried out research on and off for twenty years and which I have called Alltown. I move between (catch and catch-up with) individuals who are searching for their ancestors independently and those who guide and give advice to other family seekers and who know themselves and are known by others to be experts. The materiality of 'family treeing', to use a local idiom, is central: the paper pedigree and two dimensional family tree; the accompanying archives of photographs, certificates (birth, marriage and death), maps and letters; objects of evidence such as the inscription on a tombstone, a family bible, or a memorial, as well as the family 'heirloom' passed down through generational hands. What kind of narrative is woven from these heterogeneous materials and how are they configured and refigured as both social and personal and, above all, significant?

On my return to Alltown in late 2006, I lodged with a former neighbour and made contact with people I already knew some of whom I had not seen for several years. I had to be brought up to speed - told what I should know and what I had missed: what had happened to who, when and how. I was asked about my son, his father, my parents, my house and my work. What was I doing back in Alltown? It surprised no one that, as a social anthropologist, I was interested in family treeing. Everybody I spoke to seemed to know somebody who was doing it, and everybody had seen one or more of the television programmes dedicated to celebrity genealogy. I was passed on to relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues.

I started going to The Nat again.⁷ Like the small public libraries in this region of England (and I suspect elsewhere across Britain), The Nat has had a new lease of life with the rising popularity of family history research. Visitors now come on a Thursday evening when the library and museum are open to the public to consult the back run of the local newspaper (bound copies since 1865), to look at old photographs, books and maps, and to consult records that have been deposited at The Nat over many years. The new photo librarian is an avid 'family tree-er' (her words) and is delighted to help people with their research. She has designed and launched a web page which reports on her own research but also, significantly, and for the first time, promotes The Nat outside Alltown.

I also went to meet Paul, the youth worker based on the large, and what used to be infamous, council estate. He remembers me and reminds me that he was a Goth when I first met him (almost twenty years ago) and that I interviewed him and his friends when they were members of the theatre group attached to the youth club. It turns out he is going to be getting 'the kids' to do some family history with elderly residents on the estate. His aim, he says, is to work

with 'the younger end' and get the younger teenagers, before they reach the age when they are out and about on their own and potentially disruptive, to interview elderly residents and to ask them about their lives and the changes they have witnessed in the town generally and on the estate specifically.

My landlady, Barbara, took me to meet her cousin and his wife. Her cousin has been researching 'the family' for many years, she says, but she has some doubts about how accurate all his findings are. She also invites me to come and talk to the Baptist bible class again. Six years previously I had recorded a conversation with them about NRT. Barbara tells me they remember our discussion and are keen for me to visit again. The class meets one morning a month in the house of a key member of the group. The meeting begins with prayer, followed by a reading from the bible and a hymn and then occasionally a talk by a guest speaker. This is followed by tea, cakes and more conversation and the meeting ends with a prayer. Just as in our last meeting, members of the group engaged animatedly with the subject and were happy for me to record our discussion. They also, like last time, prayed with sincerity for the success of my research. The meeting revealed that they had all, unbeknownst to each other, either 'dabbled' in family history themselves or have a relative who has.

There has been a different quality to the strand of fieldwork at the FHHS, which, although changing over time, has been more formal and in many ways more circumscribed than fieldwork in Alltown. This is partly because I only meet members of the society at monthly meetings.⁸ And partly because my peculiar status as a social anthropologist (with a proclaimed interest in the phenomenon of family history research itself) is compounded by the fact that I am not tracing my family history at all, let alone in The Valley.

It might be worth saying at this point that many local genealogists insist that for me to fully understand the process of family history research - as well as the excitement, frustration and obsession the search for ancestors generates - then I should do it myself; that is, I should do my own 'family tree'. Up to now, I have demurred. This compelled one local genealogist in Alltown to do it on my behalf. The result, presented to me in the form of a computer generated 'all in one tree of John Joseph Frost' (my mother's father), was surprising, not least because it began from my mother's father who my own family would not consider the best relative to highlight. My father's father (with the same name as my father) and his siblings took the genealogical place of my father and his siblings who were missing from the chart. The family tree, with its errors, generously produced on my behalf shows how much can be discovered with so little information and at the same time the limits to what can be 'discovered'. On the one hand, it highlights the amount of information available on the internet and how little initial detail is needed in order to spin a relatively complex web (my genealogist had garnered little about me prior to her research: not much more than I was born in Liverpool and that my mother's maiden name was Frost). On the other hand, the 'all in one tree of John Joseph Frost' reveals the limits to 'information', showing how other personal and intimate knowledge is required in order for it to be put together (caught-up) in a meaningful manner. My genealogist has connected up my kin for me, whereas I would have had to go for a walk. The 'all in one tree of John Joseph Frost' is also interesting in what it reveals about the increasingly diminishing domain of privacy, anonymity and ability to remain silent (unknown). This last point has interesting methodological and ethnographic implications. It challenges anthropological conventions of maintaining privacy, of both researcher as well as researchee; it opens to scrutiny the decisions that researchers make about what they choose to reveal about themselves (there is no hiding place). While this only underscores (in a different way) what is readily recognised as the intersubjective nature of ethnographic research, it is also an example of what many see as the contemporary overload of 'information'. What Strathern calls the tyranny of transparency and Deleuze the tyranny of expression/communication: '... the problem is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say' (1992: 288).

Relative on the microfiche

The doing of family history research is as, if not more, significant than the results. Local genealogists describe the obsessive nature of their research and how it is like detective work with clues leading to other clues. The more one reveals the more there is to discover. The idiom of putting flesh or meat on bones is frequently mobilised: for many, the pedigree is the skeleton on which the detail - the flesh - is layered. One of the beauties of family history research for the people with whom I am working is its infinitude: a new affine, for example, even a daughter's new boyfriend, provides a whole different set of connections to explore: and an adoption, instead of curtailing genealogical connection, presents a new conundrum. The excitement of discovery features in the narratives of all the family historians I have spoken to, as does the thrill of the chase. Listen to Mr Jones who describes a moment of breakthrough - what he calls a Eureka moment - in the Mormon Temple.⁹

Mr Jones On Tuesday I went to the Mormons ... I don't know whether you have ever been?

Jeanette Not yet.

Mr Jones They have these microfiches and we found - we could never find Harriet's [his wife's] great grandma - but we found her this week on a microfiche.

He describes his excitement at the discovery: how he and his daughter-in-law punched the air above their heads and let out a football-supporter-kind-of cry on finding his wife's great grandma. In his words again:

That night we found Mabel, there were a bloke came in - we were in a room on our own - and he says, 'what's all the noise, it sounds like a football team scoring a goal'. It were 'Yes! We've found her!

Genealogical research is emotional work. Family treeing is likened to detective work where leads that go nowhere frustrate and discoveries excite: and where disappointment and doldrums are interspersed with joy and elation. In addition coming to know the life of an ancestor evokes feelings of sadness, pride, triumph, disdain etc. and family historians express fondness for some ancestors and antipathy towards others. Adam Reed identifies something similar in his description of a literary society in London. He is interested in the act of solitary reading, and describes the obsessive and imaginative qualities members take to their reading of the novels, in this case, of Henry Williamson. Members of the society are passionate readers and in the words of Reed:

They dwell on the quality of their engagement with literature, in particular those cherished moments of reverie or rapture. Indeed, the solitary reading experience is presented as an emotional investment, drawing out powerful and often unexpected depths of feeling that lead them to question who they are and how they perceive the world around them (Reed 2002).

Members of the FHHS describe their enthusiasm for family history in terms of both obsession and emotion: discovering detail of the social life of their ancestor evokes joy, sadness, antipathy etc, and clues lead to more clues. Of interest is what gets elided in their 'obsession': does a sustained focus on a dead relative, for example, come at the expense of living relatives? Are immediate family members ignored in the concentration on the distant? In searching for ancestors, how far do family treers escape family?¹⁰ The local genealogists I know seem to me, thusfar, to supplement thriving social networks of family and/or friends with more.

It is clear that internet has fed the burgeoning interest in family history research. Paul Basu describes how, for his informants, it is both research tool (mobilised to find links and organise data) and a medium (the forum where interaction takes place) (Basu 2007). Clearly the internet, and the ready availability of civil registration records, church registers and census records for 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901 (and now ‘finally!’, as many local family historians would say, 1911), as well as the masses amount of information uploaded by individuals and groups across the country, is a prime mover in the burgeoning contemporary interest in genealogical research in England. People ask questions, answer queries, share information and upload both their records and the narratives they craft from their findings on the internet. They also communicate with each other and with newly found kin by email, messenger services and in chat rooms. But not everybody uses the internet: not everybody is ‘connected’ and even if they are, not necessarily so all the time. Many other technologies and media facilitate genealogical research: paper, microfiche, television, teletext, inscriptions on graves, memorials, heirlooms. The genealogy industry is big, with a constant flow of new printed media - magazines and books - as well software and databases. Genealogical tourism is booming with travel agents and tour operators creating new niches in homeland, genealogy and war cemetery tours. In addition to producing their own web pages, local genealogists produce and disseminate newsletters, pamphlets and maps (indicating, for example, former parish boundaries), photographs and their own findings. Some Valley family trees have painstakingly transcribed, by hand, parish records, census forms, gravestone and memorial inscriptions, war records and more - reams of records. The sheer volume of unpaid labour that continues to go into transcribing, recording and making available various records, and the altruism embedded in the efforts on behalf of unknown others is striking.¹¹

Local genealogists express antipathy towards the professional genealogist who charges for his or her service but who may draw on information that is freely available or that has been collected and collated through the voluntary labour of others. Much has been written about the way in which the commoditisation of kinship in the context of NRT provokes disquiet. There is a commonly expressed aversion amongst the English, amongst others, to commercial surrogacy arrangements, or to buying and selling gametes, and people are acutely aware of the inequality implied in the privatisation of fertility treatments (Edwards 2002; Edwards 2004). As well as refusing to accept the commercialisation of their role, local genealogists also resist commoditisation of the genealogy. As a kinship object, it ought to be kept outside the realm of the market. Their attempt to keep the commercialisation of genealogical research at bay, while at the same time consuming tons of magazines, commercial software, television programmes and so on, is intriguing and something I can’t pursue here, but it might worth keeping in mind for when we come to their role as ritual experts.

In the machine

Martin flips open his Psion, Series 5, hand held organiser - it’s about 6’’ wide and 4’’ high - and with its pen-like stylus he taps on the keyboard and looks intently at the tiny screen - a few more taps - a studied silence - and then to the astonishment of the woman who has asked him if he has any information about her great uncle Fred Perry, proceeds to tell her where he is buried (Newchurch cemetery), when he died (1880), the names of those buried with him, when they died, when he was born, when he married and, finally, the plot number of his grave - which, he says, he can show her on the schematic map of the same cemetery over on the other side of the room and, furthermore, if she wants he can take her to the grave tomorrow because it is difficult to find as many of the older gravestones have fallen down and the plots are overgrown. The woman’s jaw drops, before the penny does. She is taken aback. She was clearly not expecting this, and certainly not so much information in such a short space of time. She’s been stuck, she had already told us, for a while: unable to go further with this particular branch of her family. Her initial bewilderment changes to delight - which she expresses in a sharp shriek fading to an awed silence. ‘How did you do that?’, she eventually asks.

Meanwhile, Martin is insouciant. He has got the timing down perfect and is familiar with the effect. He has found the woman's ancestor, and more besides, in his machine. I have seen this happen four or five times now. I have also witnessed Martin drawing a blank - the person he's looking for is not on his database - but he can still impress with a snippet of information, not required but nevertheless interesting, about somebody else: perhaps somebody with the same name but, unfortunately, with the wrong date.

There are, of course, many people who were born or who lived in The Valley who are not buried there and Martin started his database by matching burial records with gravestone inscriptions. A few weeks later, I get a chance to ask him about it. He had agreed to talk to me about the database on his palm top and, as I sit in his apartment, I fiddle with my new recording machine which is a very small Olympus digital recorder with which I am not yet confident and, if I am honest, still somewhat enchanted. Martin approves, he tells me he sells them in his shop (he is a manager in what was Dixons and is now Curry's Digital). 'They are very compact', he says, and agrees with me that the quality of the recording is excellent but, he hastens to add (as I randomly push the tiny folder button and murmur in its direction 'testingtestingtestingnetwo') he doesn't know how they work.

I sit facing a large television screen, which I think must be state of the art. The television is turned on and shows a teletext page with an enquiry from somebody looking for the Hiltons of Bromborough. Not familiar with teletext, I ask Martin about it. He scrolls through the various enquiries posted and explains how you might recognise a name from your own research and be able to provide the enquirer with a crucial lead. Local genealogists, it strikes me, seem to be constantly alert to the possibility of helping out unknown others: of providing sought-for information promptly and accurately.

In a talk entitled 'An email too many and a google too far' presented by the secretary of the FHHS a couple of weeks before my meeting with Martin, she read out a news clipping that she had accidentally come across when 'googling' something else. The newspaper piece mentioned that Martin was in his early fifties and a grandfather. He looks younger and is dapper. Other members of the society, both male and female, some of whom are younger than him and others not much older, tend to treat him with the kind of affection older people reserve for younger people. Sitting in his living room, facing the television screen which lists queries from around the country, surrounded by framed family photographs, and with a small digital recorder on the coffee table between us, I ask Martin how he got interested in family history.

Do you remember in 1991 there was an enquiry in the ... Free Press of somebody who wanted to know somebody that lived in Hawthorn? ... I went to see if I could find it and match it against the marriage records, which were on microfilm at [the] library, with what was on the gravestones ... to try and build up a better picture. And ... because it was an Australian ... in Melbourne, and because my brother lived in Melbourne, I had this obligation to help. But it were before the internet.

Needless to say I did not remember the enquiry in the Free Press in 1991, but that is beside the point. The obligation to help, that Martin appears to feel keenly, threads through the rest of our conversation. He remembers that I had originally asked if I could talk to him about the database on his palmtop and he is quite taken by the idea that what he has is a database, while at the same time suggesting that it is much more than that. In his words again:

And so all this, what people think is data, is like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. You try to build up a picture of people that once existed before you did and you try to think 'well how did they manage without all the mod cons that we've got?' and 'what kind of life did they lead?'. By helping people, I found that I needed to get more data. For instance, Hawthorn cemetery records were held at the Valley and I had to keep going

down there and saying 'who's in that grave?' because by obtain[ing] the grave records you knew whether [you could go back] two or three generations. And then each of those names could be matched against one of the censuses, either 1901, 1891, or 1881 ... so you're building up a bigger picture. But the names themselves don't mean anything. I remember somebody saying - 'Oh he collects dead people' ... [but] what I was doing was sitting there and copying out of the index books ... I would sit there for a couple of hours ... on my days off, in the afternoon. I would go for about two hours at a time, and I'd probably write down 100 maybe 150 names, but of course it was week after week, and month after month ... I transcribed the first three volumes from April 1902 to July 1969 and then I thought, 'that's enough that'. I had 8307 names. I was just doing it [then] with pen and paper ... But then Hawthorn cemetery with 8,307 names just didn't seem enough. [Meanwhile] I had joined the Family History group, so [as] a kind of contribution to that branch, I decided to do Rawthorn's burial records which had 20,000 names.

So Martin had 28,307 names in his palm and next to each name an age, a grave number and a last address. 'To make the picture complete', he then went looking for matching marriages in the local church records and was able to create other columns: 'not only did I have a burial', he says, 'I then had a marriage and most important I had a parent'. He turned his attention to other burial sites in the region and his database continued to grow. Its creation fuelled, he tells me, by curiosity, a desire to help people and as a contribution to the FHHS. The disjuncture between the hard slog of copying records by hand and laboriously entering them into a mini computer, and the flourish with which they are retrieved in response to a specific request is striking. Like the medium connecting mundane and spiritual domains, Martin conjures up the ancestor with a performance that is appreciated by his audience. Members of the FHHS recognise that some people have more of a feel for doing genealogy than others. There is a mastery of technique whereby practice and experience build up an expertise at navigating the archives - a skilled practice which is acquired over time. But there is more - some people have more of a feel for the archive than others: they mobilise intuition to great effect and are more adept than others not merely at following clues but at recognising a clue when they see one.

I ask Martin why he thinks people get interested in doing their family history.

I think sometimes the curiosity starts when there is a death in the family ... their great granddad has died and they suddenly realise that they don't know much about him. So for the ordinary person this starts the curiosity for family history, then they need to go further back and further back. And that's where we can help, but ... we are a bit old-fashioned - people used to come to us and ask us what we've got, but now most people don't have to join the societies they can simply connect to the internet. They can stay more and more at home and they find that this internet is just a gigantic library, and they can get to somebody the other side of the world who might be a possible connection.

Martin recognises that the role of the family history society - self-fashioned to promote family history research, to provide expertise and to help those who do not know where to start or those who have reached a 'dead-end' - might now be redundant. The society might be old-fashioned, anachronistic even, as people increasingly use the internet alone at home and forge connections and exchange information independently with others around the world. Yet, a spin-off group from the FHHS in a local library gets more queries and attracts more visitors than it can easily deal with, and the monthly meetings of the FHHS usually have an audience of between twenty and thirty people. Like members of *The Nat* (Edwards 2000), members of the FHHS are known (and know each other) for specific specialisms: one for local cemeteries and burial records, another for war graves, another for the history of a particular neighbourhood, another for monumental inscriptions and so on. Expertise is distributed and

allocated and members frequently note that 'if we don't know something, we know somebody who will'.

At the same time, members take seriously the responsibility entailed in revealing to somebody something about their ancestors that they did not know: 'you can't know how people will react', one member told me, 'when they find out they are not who they thought they were'. The implication of genealogy for one's self knowledge is stark. The genealogists are acutely aware that in matters of kinship what is known cannot be unknown. Towards the end of our conversation, Martin remarks, almost as an afterthought:

I can't do my family history because of my mum's circumstances. She was a prisoner of war and was taken prison from Western Ukraine, so I think for me it's a substitute: not being able to do my family history, but being able to do family history for my local area.

Inscribing kinship on behalf of others, and doing genealogical work, roots Martin here in his home town - where he was 'born and bred'. His sense of contributing to his 'local area' resonates with other ethnography of Britain which draws attention to the way in which notions of 'belonging', whether to places or persons, entails notions of reciprocity (e.g. Edwards 2000, Cohen 1982, Frankenberg 1957 and see contributors to Edwards, Macdonald and Savage 2006). Belonging is imagined in both claims upon, and contributions to, places, persons and pasts which in turn project a future and Martin's contribution is enduring and diffuse. Both his observations and practice encourage us to look at the dynamic processes of genealogy, at its materialities and performances, and to avoid being fixated by its potential to fix.

Class and contingency

As I mentioned above, the Nat's photo librarian is an avid family historian. I shall call her Joyce. She is in the process of identifying and indexing the Nat's extensive collection of old photographs. She has developed a web page which includes details about her own family history research, a list of Nat resources, such as the full and bound, albeit disintegrating, collection of the local newspaper from 1863, and a range of old photographs with captions. The web page encourages people to visit The Nat, and Joyce fields numerous queries from people looking for ancestors in Alltown and its satellite villages. As I also mentioned earlier, I think it fair to say that 'family treeing' has given The Nat a new lease of life (as it has many local libraries, many of which now have a dedicated member of staff to field family history enquiries).

For Joyce, doing her family tree has revealed the prominent role her ancestors played in the town. Participating in Alltown's history, deepens her connection. In her words:

I was born in Strawthorn [a satellite village] and lived in Alltown for eighteen odd years - I never felt really connected to it until I did me family tree and realised ... on my nana's side just how much her family had to do with really important people [in the town] like the mayor. My great granddad must have gone and had meals with the mayor and stuff like that because of the position that he had. He was only an overlooker in a cotton mill but because he was on these various hospital boards and Alltown's trade's council he would have had lunch and dinners with all these, you know, noble people. And I am thinking 'well, me dad never told me anything about that'. So I do feel more connected to Alltown and Strawthorn and I think it's a good thing.

For Joyce the knowledge that her nana's family hobnobbed with important people in the town - the discovery, for example, that her great grandfather who was a working man took up civic

responsibilities on the hospital board and the trade's council - connects her more firmly to the town and renders the boundaries between her own family and what she calls 'noble people' less firm. Her marginalisation is mitigated.

According to Paul Basu, the search for Scottish roots and the ensuing 'homecoming' narratives and experiences act to deepen class identity for members of the Scottish diaspora. His genealogists dwell on the injustice and inequality of the past where land was forcibly stolen from their ancestors who were forced to emigrate and seek their fortune and livelihood elsewhere. Drawing on Paul Heelas's work on new age movements, Basu identifies a 'demodernisation impulse' amongst his informants. Some 'homecomers', for example, draw parallels between their own and Aborigine land claims. Both, they claim, suffered injustice and had their ancestral homes taken away from them. The white Australian settlers thus confirm and affirm their connections to their ancestral home in Scotland and, according to Basu, are 'imagining a home and a past from a fractured modernity' (Basu 2007).

I could also argue that for many of the people I am working with in this area of England modernity is fractured. Many long-term residents have experienced a decline in the quality of community - the closure of mills and factories, small shops and local markets, the exodus of the sons and daughters who can leave, the problem of heroin use amongst some of those who cannot - incomers who, it is said, play no part in local life because they commute to work and they shop and play, and otherwise spend their money, elsewhere. However rather than only deepening class identity in the way that Basu identifies for the Australian genealogists, I want to suggest that genealogical research in the north of England also renders class identity a more arbitrary phenomenon. It does indeed, as Basu suggests, provide a deeper understanding of the historical workings of social class, but in doing so it has the potential of casting class as a more fickle and capricious phenomenon.

Stories are told of those who start 'family treeing' and stop abruptly because they find a distasteful relative, or an unpalatable truth, but such examples are presented as out of the ordinary, as evidence of the narrow mindedness of those who want only an unblemished ancestry, or of those who are in a sense 'social snobs' imagining that that their social standing will be diminished by the revelation of a convict, say, in the family. Most family tree-ers cheerfully embrace the wild one, the black sheep, the skeleton in the closet - these characters go with the territory and indicate an idiosyncrasy and non-conformity which can be appropriated safely from a distance. As one society member put it 'we family historians wear scandals like medals'.¹² Even though family myths may be confounded in the discovery that things were not as they seemed.¹³

Often, what intrigues the English about the celebrity genealogy, exemplified in the popular television series 'Who do you think you are', is the poor relative: the grandmother, for example, who died destitute in the workhouse or the great grandfather who worked in abysmally dangerous conditions as a navvy - conversely, what intrigues about the 'ordinary' person's genealogy is the discovery of wealth, fame and fortune.¹⁴ Of interest are the links that are made prominent and the ancestors that come to matter - 'the differences that make a differences'. Genealogy acts as a leveller smoothing out differences and inequalities between people which, in other fora, are construed as innate.

Serendipity, fate and chance

Local genealogists reveal to people links that are otherwise hidden and act as mediators between the past and the present and between the ancestors and the living. In this sense, they figure more as shaman than as archivist. In the accounts people give of and for their research, serendipity, fate and chance are prominent. Narratives about 'family treeing' almost always

touch on the accidental. Moreover, in the telling, serendipity accrues meaning and turns quickly to fate: to what was meant to be. Let me give two examples out of many.

Mrs Massey started researching her family history after the death of her son who died of Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. She was interested to discover if there was a history of the disease in her family. She thought that perhaps there was but that people just never talked about it in the past. She knew her great grandmother had six sons and Mrs Massey wanted to know how they had died. She started by joining the Family History Association in Manchester and visited their library.

Anyway I was browsing around there one day. I knew my family were from Lincolnshire - this is my grandma's family. So I started browsing through these family history booklets - you know all these associations publish something every so often - I picked up one started to flick through and there is this Arthur Lewis of Doncaster - now my family are the Lewis' of Doncaster. And I looked at it and all the names he was researching were all the names I was researching and I thought 'Wow'! ... It was the first one I picked up! Maybe I would have found it eventually - but I could not believe it - it was just there ... fate ... I sent him an email and he emailed back straight away and he says 'My grandfather was your grandmother's brother!'

Mrs Massey eventually found out that none of great grandmother's sons died of Duchenne, confirming what she had suspected, but she carried on her research anyway - by now, she tells me, she had 'the bug'. She has met up with Arthur and they both talk via MSN to another newly discovered cousin in Australia and the three are planning to meet up, she says, in Alltown, Doncaster or Adelaide. At present Mrs Massey has no money and the cousin in Adelaide is ill and cannot travel but nevertheless it is the juxtaposition of 'Alltown, Doncaster or Adelaide', in one breath, that gives pause for thought: that gives this endeavour a very 21st century complexion.

The second example is from the research of another local genealogist and it shows the interrelatedness of serendipity and materiality: where fate and objects (both of which mediate relations to the past and the present) collide. Occasionally, instead of a guest speaker or a research evening, the monthly meeting is designated as an 'heirloom evening'. Joanna Harvey is a long serving member of the society and she has been doing her own family history on and off for many years. Her research got a boost, she tells me, when her brother, while bird watching, accidentally came across a chapel with a graveyard that contained a 'bunch' of Harvey graves. Over several years she looked up burial records and came across and swapped notes with other Harvey's one of whom had traced his early ancestors to Gisburn Forest and to 1797. She became intrigued by her Great Uncle Ted Harvey who was killed in the First World War and her piecing together of his short life and brutal death provoked an interest in the thirty four other young men, listed alongside Ted Harvey, on the war memorial in the Parish Church of a relatively small village in the north eastern corner of the borough. She is compiling and collating family and residential information about each of the men including photographs of them and of their burial places - many in war cemeteries in France and Belgium. She is struck by how many of the men on the war memorial were siblings, cousins and/or neighbours. Between 1915 and 1918, she says, nearly all the young men of this particular village joined-up, together with their peers, as soon they reached the age of seventeen. She is also struck by the fact that over half the young village men who enlisted had at least one deceased parent. Joanna explains how, when you do this kind of research, you have to check and double check: accuracy, she says, is crucial. She went on an ancestry website, for example, and could easily have mistaken one of 'her men' with a man recorded on the site. 'My man', she tells me, 'was not married and had I not double-checked I might have had him married to Jane Smethers!'. If she cannot find a definite marriage record herself, as opposed to a secondary source, she would rather, she says, leave the detail out than run the danger of 'going down the wrong line'. In her words, 'You have got to be careful to sort out

the facts especially on somebody else's ancestors'. This obligation towards accuracy is something that all the local genealogists mention and it is often couched in terms of a responsibility towards both the dead and their living descendants. It is from this perspective that they criticise both the International Genealogical Index (IGI) compiled by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the television programmes which hide the hard slog and make it look so easy.¹⁵ The visitor who comes to the meeting and asks for their 'family tree' as if it can be compiled from 'thin air' thus falls into the category of the naive. Local genealogists convey a notable ethos of care and attention to detail. They also take their pastoral duties and responsibilities seriously.

Joanna brought her Great Uncle Ted's war medals to the heirloom evening. Another member, Maddie, brought in a gold locket which had belonged to her Great Auntie Lois. Joanna describes how at 'heirloom evenings' participants group around small tables and take it in turn to talk about the object they have brought to the meeting. On this occasion, Joanna talked about her Great Uncle Ted whose medals she showed and whose name is on the war memorial which is the subject of her ongoing research. Maddie talked about the gold locket which had belonged to her Great Auntie Lois in which two tiny photos are encased. At some point, with a crawling sensation at the back of her neck, Joanna realised they were talking about the same person. Aunt Lois' fiancé, killed in the war, whose photograph was lodged in the locket, was Great Uncle Ted. Maddie's Great Auntie Lois had been engaged to be married to Joanna's Great Uncle Ted. Joanna recalls how she and Maddie were 'gobsmacked'. Lois had never figured in the family mythology that had circulated in Joanna's family, while in Maddie's family it was always known that Auntie Lois had tragically lost her fiancé in the war but nothing was known of him and no details circulated. It turns out that Maddie also had some postcards that Ted had sent to Lois during the war from the front and, awkwardly for Joanna, who said felt like she was intruding, postcards from another soldier to whom Lois may also have been writing. Maddie and Joanna are now close friends. They travel to France together where they visit the war cemeteries in order to complete Joanna's research on 'her men' on the war memorial. Last year, Maddie gave the locket to Joanna as a gift. She had initially said she would leave it to Joanna in her will but changed her mind saying 'I am going to give it you now so that I am sure you've got it'.

Histories of place, past, persons (and things)

I started off thinking this would be a small self-contained 'project' that, amongst other things, would allow me to add a further ethnographic strand to a long-standing interest in 'English kinship'. It is early days and work in progress but 'family treeing' in the north of England is proving to be a social practice through which a number of broader aspects of contemporary English social life are revealed. It shows a burgeoning and flourishing interest in social history and particularly in the workings of social class. This is a history that marries place, past and person (and see Edwards 2000). It is inflected by a post-industrial landscape and recent experiences of social and economic upheaval with attendant threats to working-class life and dignity, but is as much about continuity as rupture. As a practice it straddles class, confined to neither the middle or the working classes (interesting given its aristocratic histories). It reveals a preoccupation with serendipity, fate and chance which hint, surprisingly (at least to me), at the ethereal and mystical aspects of genealogical research (which perhaps should not be so surprising given that it is devoted to 'finding' one's ancestors). My sense is that family treeing in the north of England is exercising some of the emotional capacities that would otherwise be exercised by organised religion - although they are not mutually exclusive. Serendipity is also mediated by 'things' - the chance encounter with a booklet, a necklace, a photograph, sets off a chain reaction and reveals hitherto unknown connections. Things elicit attention, as do the dead: they are caught up in legending. At the same time, family treeing exemplifies a contemporary enchantment with information technology and what Green, Harvey and Knox call 'the imperative to connect' (Green et al. 2005). And to

return in the final few words to kinship, the process of family treeing both unearths ancestors and creates new living kin: these are genealogical kin. The genealogies thus fashioned seem neither to fix nor geneticise kinship. Indeed genetics rarely comes up as an idiom of relatedness in this context. Instead family treeing reiterates the doubleness of this kind of kinship: your ancestors can be either deeply implicated in the person you are or distant enough not to be too influential. Like the ovum which is understood on the one hand to forge connections into the future and on the other to be a detachable, alienable, body bit, the genealogical ancestor is also both embodied and detached - he or she is both part of who you are and safely disconnected through the distance of time. The doing of family history research marries, amongst other things, the technological and the mystical, empirical research and imagination, kinship and class, thus connecting facets of human being that are often, in analysis, kept apart.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the family historians of The Valley for more than their patience and time. The fieldwork which informs this paper was made possible by the financial support of CRESC. I am grateful. I am also grateful to colleagues in CRESC, the Universities of Sheffield and Newcastle and Humboldt University, Berlin for listening to and commenting upon other versions of this paper - I am afraid have not yet begun to do justice to their questions.

¹ Which for present purposes, I shall call The Valley.

² I use 'English' here with caution: many members also lay claim to Irish, Scottish, Welsh or European ancestry, while at the same time laying claim to Rossendale either because they were born and/or 'bred' in the region or because they have settled there and entered into what are locally considered to be suitable, appropriate and sustaining reciprocal relations (Edwards 2000).

³ Sabine Durrant *The Guardian* 06.05.06

⁴ Other scholars are not convinced that the shift is complete and point to 'a lingering, subterranean anxiety' (Lambert 2002, citing Dixson 1999), which Lambert acknowledges.

⁵ Empathy with the ancestor might entail anger at what is perceived to be past injustice and inequality.

⁶ In anthropological theorising about 'western' kinship, what gets to be included as biological still remains notably under-problematised. Like other culturally competent actors, anthropologists seem to 'know' what belongs to the domain of biology. But the biology available to us today is quite a different biology from that available to Rivers and colleagues: as Hannah Landecker (Landecker 2009) suggests in a recent and insightful paper, 'biotechnology changes what it is to be biological' - her focus is on possibilities presented by cryopreservation where 'cells can be made to live differently in time'. In Sarah Franklin's words, 'biology can make itself strange quicker than any of its critics' (Franklin & McKinnon 2001).

⁷ The Natural History Society (The Nat) began in the middle of the 19th century with local men interested in collecting and identifying local 'flora and fauna'. By the beginning of the 20th century its focus had shifted to industrial and domestic artefacts and its identity from 'natural' to 'local' history (see Edwards 2000). Now at the beginning of the 21st century it is its collection of printed material that has come to the fore.

⁸ To borrow from Marilyn Strathern, we do not participate in each other's biographies (Strathern 2006).

⁹ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons) is responsible for the International Genealogical Index (IGS) which is an index 'to millions of names gathered from records all over the world' (Annal 2004) and comprises mainly parish records of baptisms and marriages as well as information submitted by church members based on their own research. Local genealogists advise family seekers to check what they find on the IGS with the original record, and point out that it is not comprehensive and only useful for records from before 1837.

¹⁰ Penny Harvey (pers. comm.) cites an example of the teenager who smashes the computer in anger at the time spent on it by a parent obsessed by family history. I guess this will resonate with the experience of those parents who try (often in vain) to prise their teenage offspring off the console in order for them to interact with humans rather than machines.

¹¹ I am reminded of Monica Konrad's ethnography on egg donors in the UK. She shows how a spiritual kinship is conceived between women who donate their ova and nameless and unknown recipients (Konrad 2005).

¹² Although, of course, it would be interesting to look at which scandals are okay and which at any particular historical moment are difficult to accommodate with glee (e.g. paedophilia in the present day).

¹³ This is clearly a significant dimension of genealogical research which needs further attention - although not here - and I am grateful to Brigitte Jordan for reminding me of the role that myth plays in the infrastructure of family life. How do genealogists manage unwelcome knowledge - knowledge that has implications for other family members who have not asked to know? How do they readjust what they thought they knew, render new knowledge impotent, or keep secrets? Similar questions emerge in the dilemmas that face patients undergoing medical genetic tests which have implications for other kin: do relatives have 'the right' not to be told what they do not want to know? (see, for example, Featherstone et. al).

¹⁴ Members of the FHHS were involved in the research for one of the 'Who Do You Think You Are' programmes which focused on an actress from the Valley. They were struck by the programme makers stated attempt to elicit tears from the subject of the programme. Interestingly they had failed to do with the Lancashire actress but had managed it with Jeremy Paxman a news caster famed for his 'tough' interviewing style (thanks to Tony Simpson for reminding me of this).

¹⁵ Local genealogists advise family seekers to check what they find on the IGS with the original record and point out that it is neither comprehensive nor accurate and only useful for records from before 1837.

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