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Building on the past, investing in the future through genealogy and local history services

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In the matter of genealogy and the study of family history, it is remarkable what advances have been made in recent times. Certainly over the three or four decades during which I have been involved. I recall two quite separate incidents, both from the 1970s, and both from my own professional experience. They perhaps demonstrate both the work that was needed for successful genealogical research, and the standard of proof that people were prepared to find acceptable at that time.

One Saturday morning an elderly American lady came into the manuscripts reading room of the National Library of Scotland, and said that she was descended from the family of Cumming of Presley which had emigrated to America at about the time of the second Jacobite rising. She was quite clear about this, and she had all the proofs necessary. What she wanted to be able to show was that the Cummings of Presley were descended from the Cummings of Altyre, and thus from the head of the clan. She had discovered that the Cumming papers were in the Library and she was determined to see what could be found. On that day, and on many others, with the calendar of the papers and the original documents, she laboured through some very complicated 17th century deeds, but eventually she came across, under the unpromising title of a >bond of caution=, exactly what she wanted.

One of the lairds of Altyre of the 1670s was a very wild young man, and in order to save him from prison or perhaps from the gallows, members of his extended family came together to form an agreement that they would guarantee his good behaviour. All these people, who included the Cumming of Presley of the day, proclaimed their loyalty to the Cummings of Altyre >from whom we are all descended=. The American lady had the proof she wanted even if it still lacked some precise details, and was absolutely delighted. But she had had to work long and hard for the information she needed.

My second incident relates to a man who wished to prove his descent from someone who had flourished in the 1770s and 1780s. The proof of this descent did not seem very good, to me anyway. However as if to clinch the argument, he brought out a photograph of a portrait of this gentleman, and asked me if I did not think there was a strong family resemblance between him and his supposed ancestor. As I still must have seemed less than convinced, he produced a further photograph of himself wearing just such a bobwig as was being worn by the man in the picture. I need hardly say that our conversation ended inconclusively, but as it was conducted in an open search room well within the hearing of other researchers, I noted the handkerchiefs that were being put to mouths, the splutterings of mirth and the heaving shoulders. That particular genealogist's standard of proof was not high.

The point I wish to make is that genealogical research is now in many areas a lot easier than it used to be, but that it is also a lot more rigorous. It is also, I rather suspect, a lot more interesting. I shall return to the first two of these; let us look at the interest of genealogy.

There is no doubt that at one time what was considered a sufficient achievement in itself was the linking of one person B usually male B with his father, and so on back with a few dates and places but often little else, in the faint hope of finding a royal or at least a noble ancestor. A Danish archivist once wondered aloud in my hearing why it was that everyone seemed to want to prove how they had come down in the world. Even fully written up family histories were exceptional if they made any effort to deal with anything beyond military or political achievements. Female members of the family, however influential, were simply cardboard cutouts. Agricultural, industrial or social activities are little mentioned before the 18th century, and then only grudgingly. As for musical or artistic skills B one thinks of the Burnetts of Leys, the Maules of Panmure, the Roses of Kilravock or the Clerks of Penicuik B you will have a task to find much reference to this aspect of their characters in the histories of those families, though evidence of their skill is readily available. As for the skeleton that lurks somewhere in every family's cupboard, it is simply overlooked.

Now, I believe, we are beginning to look for more rounded characters in our genealogies. The family tree needs a bit of foliage on its bare branches, and we are no longer satisfied with a simple relationship and a date. We realise that people who emerge from old documents, in difficult language and script, nevertheless had feelings, interests, worries and preoccupations which are not absolutely different from our own.

I lay some emphasis upon this because I think it is something which has brought what one might call >respectability= to genealogy. There are still, I regret to say, a few archivists who do not like dealing with genealogists, and who consider that family history is not true research. I like to think that they are a dying breed. I also like to think that many people interested in family history arrive in a library or archive with very much more information at their disposal than would have formerly have been the case, and are therefore ready to move on to more interesting research B to an examination of what lies behind the life events of which the bare record tells us little.

In 1789, William Malcolm was condemned to be transported to Australia for stealing a horse, but why did the judge at the trial find it necessary to pay for him to have a complete new set of clothing before he went? Agnes Murray Kynynmound died in 1778. How do we know so much about the development of her breast cancer? Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo, 7th baronet, died young, but is always thought to have married and had a son. Why is there not a single scrap of paper in the family archive for the period of eighteen months or so covering the marriage, the birth and Sir William's death?

These are matters which a true family historian would wish to know about, and because so much basic information is so much more readily available now than it was in the 1970s, those interested in family research have the time and the opportunity to extend their studies. Sometimes this will be into the life and

work of an individual; sometimes into that of the locality in which the family flourished. What I find remarkable is the quality of the research being done. I do not speak here of the professional researchers and record agents whose knowledge and efficiency never cease to astonish me. I speak of the >ordinary= family historian, if such a person exists, who wants more information certainly but who can now look for it on the basis of greater knowledge, and of a better understanding of what the records will offer and of how to make best use of them.

It is nevertheless a feature of the last thirty years that record offices receive a much higher percentage of first time users. In June 1998, the Public Record Office conducted a survey of its readers. It showed that 22% were visiting, not just the PRO, but any record office for the first time. These first time readers are in a very large majority people who are interested in family or local history. One of the reasons why family historians take up such a disproportionate amount of the archivist=s time, and perhaps why some archivists so dislike them, is just that. They are more demanding because their needs are greater. Their perfectly reasonable questions keep the searchroom archivists from other tasks. But this very fact has encouraged archive services, and indeed those such as the LDS church with a particular interest in the matter B and in the case of the Scottish Archive Network both together B to move into making basic genealogical material available in more easily accessible ways.

I suppose the earliest examples of this in this country were the publication by the Scottish Record Society of lists of burials, testaments, apprentices etc, along with the lists of professional people, advocates, writers and of course ministers of the Church of Scotland. The involvement of the LDS Church made possible the microfilming of the Old Parochial Registers, and subsequently their indexing, and for the first time brought the search of genealogical records within the scope of modern technology. I should admit at once that this process was not viewed without some suspicion when it first began. It was justified as a necessary conservation measure, but of course it also meant that when, considerably later, technology permitted, there were several ways in which the information in the Old Parochial Registers could be managed and manipulated. This gave the researcher as much information as he or she could obtain from the registers without having to search, in volume after volume possibly in vain, for people who moved from one place to another, or for whom no record survives.

This type of access is now being dramatically extended by the Scottish Archive Network. Scanning the wills and testaments of Scottish men and women up to 1875 (the records most heavily used for genealogical purposes after the OPRs and the census records), and provision of networked access to the catalogues of the archive repositories in Scotland, are further examples of what new technology can offer. They will allow the researcher to do more and more work at home, or at least off site, before he or she has to consult those troublesome original documents. Mr MacKenzie will be speaking to you later about SCAN, but I mention it to make the point that much is being done to help the genealogist B and let us admit it B to help the archivist, so that when the family historian does arrive in the search room his or her visit will be of real value.

If all these developments make genealogical research easier, they also make it more rigorous. At least I would like to think so. Though there will always be points that are not absolutely clear, and others that are open to discussion, there is, on the whole, little use in arguing with the official record. Its compilers had no particular axe to grind, and I have only once come across an official document of the last two or three centuries which had clearly been tampered with. By offering a higher standard of accuracy in the traditional areas of genealogy, is it not reasonable to hope that higher standards will be maintained elsewhere?

The publication of Roots was groundbreaking in a number of ways. Perhaps the most obvious was that the author, as an American of African descent, wanted to find out where he came from and who his ancestors had been, and in particular, both in the title he chose and in the avowed aim of the book, he stated his purpose of needing to find a fixed point in the past of his own ancestors. Although the ancestors of most of

the people in this room have not been subjected to enormous social or political upheaval, there are probably few who live where they were born. Most Scotsmen if pressed will admit that a few generations back their forebears arrived from the Highlands, Ireland, England, the continent of Europe or even further away. But this is the generation, perhaps more than any other, which has seen social movement. People go from one side of the world to the other in search of work, and people settle in places to which they have no attachment beyond that of employment. As a consequence people naturally wish to have a better understanding of the family traits, the physical characteristics, and the instinctive loyalties with which they are blessed or cursed. The remarkable novel No Great Mischief by Alistair MacLeod is all about this personal heritage, which can be difficult to understand, but which it is impossible to escape. There is in fact an ever increasing demand to meet what for many people has become a psychological need B the need to find a few fixed points in a world of constant change. The locality in which you have settled offers one fixed point, but so does your family. You may not like your family; you may not consider your ancestors particularly estimable; but they are unalterably yours.

The future of genealogy itself I suspect is more of the same. Advances in IT and scanning technology suggest ways in which classes of records might be made available electronically. In Scotland, some of the great Registers B Deeds and Sasines in particular B might perhaps be given the same treatment as the wills. It is interesting that this idea was considered when SCAN was being set up, but was rejected as being altogether beyond what it was reasonable to undertake with the technology of the time B just a few short years ago. Now it is a definite option. Access to existing catalogues and indexes will little by little become easier. And just as advances are taking place in IT technology, so advances are taking place in popular understanding of and skill with IT. It is perfectly reasonable now to ask a prospective researcher what internet investigation he or she has made before coming to a record office, and it is to be hoped that the huge efforts made by archives and libraries to make their holdings more user friendly will be to everyone=s benefit.

However there are problems associated with all of this which ought not to be underestimated. In a traditional library or archive search room there was a professional person who could explain and evaluate the records or books being used, and who could assess them properly in relation to other records which might be available. There was thus perhaps less danger of giving greater value to the material being consulted than the material would really bear. The fact for example that one of those marvellous town directories, which are so common for the 19th century, indicates that your ancestor was the best drawer of teeth for miles around, does not indicate either that the information is true, or that he practised in a particular place for longer than the time necessary to get his name into the directory.

The besetting virtue of the genealogist is optimism. Hope is always there and links are made which the actual evidence will not support. There was an Alexander Edward, known as a mathematician and musician; another was minister of Kemback in Fife; another was a garden designer of more than passing importance. Alexander Edward is also a rather uncommon name. The assumption that these people are one and the same B correct as it happens B is one which one might be tempted to take for granted. But I know from my own family that many people have assumed that Thomas Cadell, father and son, who were very successful publishers in London in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, must of course have been related to the equally successful Robert Cadell who published the works of Sir Walter Scott. In fact they are completely unrelated, though they operated at the same time in a small profession, and share an unusual name of Celtic origin. One lot comes from Wales, the other from Scotland.

I make these points because, with an increasing use of IT, there will be less need, and possibly less opportunity, for the genealogist to interface with that best of all finding aids, the archivist or librarian behind the desk. We have to be careful to see that the information available through the computer is properly described, not just as to its content, but as to its value. Frankly I have no suggestions as to how this should best be done, though I know that the many courses on genealogy run by universities, libraries,

archives and evening schools take the matter very seriously. The difficulty is more to do with the extent to which all potential genealogists are prepared - not just in terms of the information available to them electronically, but in terms of the value of that information B for the work they hope to do.

There are other difficulties. For many years it was assumed that one of the main functions of an archive service, particularly a national one, was to publish the records it held. This could be done in the form of calendars of documents B into which of course the archivist=s own value judgements intruded B or by printing them in full, and in both cases providing an index. Indeed publishing the records of Scotland was one of the main tasks of the National Archives of Scotland as set out in the various reports produced in the early years of the 19th century. Of the great series of state papers, only that of parliament has been published in what might pass for its entirety. If anyone fancies tackling the transcription of the many series of which there are incomplete published versions, I=m sure no one would stand in his or her way. The great advantage of the publication process was that it got over the difficulties of palaeography, if not necessarily those of language, and was much appreciated by researchers of all sorts. Indeed, although the cost of doing so had become prohibitive, and the demand seemed limited, I was still under some pressure in the early 1990s as Keeper of the Records of Scotland to continue that kind of activity.

Scanning it seems to me is the modern way of doing the same thing. Its advantages of speed and accessibility are obvious. It has, however, at least two drawbacks: it can only scan what it sees B that is the original text B and there is as yet no reliable means of indexing original documents automatically. This task has to be undertaken by teams of dedicated people as part of the scanning process B as the LDS Church has shown. In the case of material already printed, the problems of reading and indexing are perhaps less significant, but not those of choosing what to make available, and of course the wider the range of the material brought into an electronic system, the less actual research value it is likely to have, but the more expensive it will be to produce in the first place, to maintain, to make available and to preserve.

However I believe that these are problems which will resolve themselves as technology advances. I envisage, at some point in the future, that genealogists will be able to do the bulk of their work at home, that they will be able to order copies of documents electronically, and that their direct use of our archives and libraries will fall. In some ways I would regret this, but the objectives of making genealogical research easier, and lightening the genealogical load on the librarian and archivist, obviously tend in this direction. Perhaps we shall one day begin to miss all those family historians. We shall certainly be ignorant of what work is being done on material of which we hold the originals. Separating access to documents from the source of those documents removes a level, not so much of control, but of knowledge on the part of the repository of what research is in progress. Even now, researchers are not as careful as they should be B in their own interests as well as those of libraries and archives B to say what they are working on. When, in future, for example, someone can sit at his or her desk in New Zealand and carry out, very effectively, research which would once have involved a lengthy and expensive stay in Scotland, this situation will simply become worse. It is a brave and exciting new genealogical world, but not altogether without its hazards.

So we are making, and will continue to make the best use possible of the wonders of modern technology. I would like to come back to the one or two down sides that there are to the use of IT in historical research. While one can generally assume the accuracy of what appears on screen, the same is by no means true of its completeness. One may get the truth and nothing but the truth, but not necessarily the whole truth. While the SCAN wills project does indeed aim at being exhaustive, and in any case is involved with the processing of a well defined series of records, the same is far from true of networked catalogues. Can we be sure that the description of a family archive contains all the information necessary to allow us to assess the value of it B or otherwise B to our research? In any case the fact that there is a computer catalogue in an archive service does not mean that everything is in that catalogue or indeed that the original catalogues

on which the computer access is based are of even quality. Even with modern attempts to create cataloguing standards, ISAD(G) for example, archival description remains highly subjective. What may take my fancy in a collection of papers, and what I would therefore wish to mention in a catalogue description, may not be what you would find interesting, and vice versa. But the temptation to assume that what appears on screen is complete is a very powerful one. It allows us to assume that we have done all that it is reasonable to do, and at the same time it can excuse us from the tiresome chore of checking as to whether some archive at the other end of the country has material that might perhaps be relevant. Laziness is in fact a great motivator.

There is however something worse. This comes in two forms. There is beginning to be a break down in the distinction between archives and information. Librarians I suspect have been dealing with this for ages B the phenomenon of expecting repositories of books or documents to be able to offer instant replies to questions on matters of fact, even on matters of easily ascertainable fact. It is almost as though people were beginning to lose any understanding of where information comes from, rather like children who say that milk comes from a carton or from the supermarket, and are unable to relate it to a cow. The archives of the European Commission for example suffer from this in a big way, and are repeatedly being asked for basic information about the constitution and history of the EU which is perfectly accessible on websites and in easily available reference books.

The second problem relates to the use of E-mail for research purposes. Again, because people are so accustomed to working on screen, they always assume that on the one hand others do the same, and on the other, that those others can work at their rhythm. There is a tendency to assume that if you send off an E-mail message you should get a response almost at once. But of course that is not necessarily so. The E-mail may demand just as much time for a proper reply as did a traditional letter, but because it is easier to send, more are sent. Archives are beginning to develop defence mechanisms against this, which mainly boil down to the very traditional refusal to do someone else=s research. It is one thing to say what an archive holds, to suggest that certain collections would possibly interest the researcher, and to describe the facilities available at the record office. It is another to say that a particular collection does not relate to a researcher=s area of work, or that there is reference to a particular person or event in a bulky series of papers. In addition because E-mails are so easy to send out, they may for example be sent out indiscriminately to all the major archive services of the country. Many of them will be irrelevant, but will still add to the workload of the duty archivist.

I do not associate genealogists in particular with this, but it is a trend which has developed over the last few years. It was certainly very apparent in the National Archives of Scotland before I left at the end of 2000, and genealogists are not altogether innocent.

These are caveats which need certainly to be born in mind, but I think it is fair to say that the old reservations which archivists tended to have about genealogists and local historians have almost disappeared. The quality of research is improving; the means of carrying out that research are better and are improving all the time. What is pleasing, as I have already pointed out, is that the motives which lie behind the demands for access by the genealogist and bodies with similar interests on the one hand, and those which lie behind the need for archivists to make their holdings more readily accessible, may be different, but they are equally powerful, and are pushing us all in the same direction. I have great expectations of genealogical research, and the fact that it has found this important slot at IFLA=s conference shows perhaps that I am not alone.

Finally may I add a plea? We are told B especially by those bodies which are responsible for funding us, and also occasionally by those archivists who do not consider family history to be >proper= research B that genealogists are doing no more than enjoying their leisure. It follows from this, does it not, that what they are doing is not serious, and that in any case they should pay for the privilege of doing it. I do not

think it is for anyone to question a researcher's motives. Just because I am studying people rather than things, does not make the difference between enjoying or not enjoying the work of research. I imagine that the academic researcher gets just as much pleasure from his or her work as does the genealogist. If not, he or she should be in a different job.

However, the fact that the research process is pleasurable does not, it seems to me, remove from the researcher the obligation to make the results of that research available to a wider public. I rather suspect that many family historians have piles of notes at the back of some drawer which have great potential interest, and which, if they can be used, would certainly save others from going through the same documents. We all know of examples in Scotland of our debt to researchers who looked at and then transcribed, or at least described, documents which are now lost. Without the work of the antiquaries of the late 16th and early 17th century B the Earl of Haddington, and Balfour of Denmilne, in this country, SirWilliam Dugdale, John Selden for example in England and many many others B our knowledge of earlier periods would be much diminished. We should not underestimate the value of what we do, and we should make sure that it is preserved. Just because we do it now, does not somehow devalue it by comparison with work which has gone before. Balfour and Haddington and those other early researchers were not always right, but their work has in many cases provided a foundation on which others have been able to build. Research is an isolated activity, but its foundations are the work of others, and its results should be available to others. What may seem to you a comparatively modest investigation may lead on to other things for other people.