

How DNA Can Get in the Way of History, Sometimes

Family Historians as Kinship Artisans across both 'Religious' and 'Secular' Contexts

Abstract: This paper considers two sets of amateur genealogists as specialized kinship artisans. My two sets of informants describe their projects in contrastive terms. Family historians in East Anglia (United Kingdom) explain that they are doing history (not 'religion'), while for American Latter-day Saints genealogy is an explicit religious duty that cannot be separated from their Church's salvific mission. Despite this difference of outlook, there are important overlaps in the way each group practices and experiences connections with related others across mortality. I argue that the rapid expansion of commercial DNA-tracing companies within genealogy appears to be affecting each group in different ways. English amateurs are currently capable of relativizing DNA-based information where it does not mesh with the narratives of family, local, and class history in which they are interested. Latter-day Saints' distinctive genealogical cultures may be less easy to defend against the priorities of DNA-genealogy companies, both because of internet linkages sanctioned by the Church leadership, and because the attempt to trace all souls who have ever lived is vulnerable to the unlimited ambitions of profit-driven logics.

Keywords: amateur history, genealogy, DNA, Latter-day Saints, England, America

Introduction: Ordinary genealogy across 'religious' and 'secular' contexts

In the course of fieldwork carried out in East Anglia, England, since 2013, one of my interlocutors remarked to me that the problem with genealogical DNA analysis is that it sometimes "gets in the way of history". This observation lingered in my mind, not least because in the town where we were working, Bury St. Edmunds, history is an important topic of conversation and field of practice in daily life for many people. The discussion presented in this paper is the result of thinking about this conversation and the context in which it occurred, which I describe in more detail below. The material speaks to the question of motivations for

DOI: 10.25365/rhy-2021-4



Accepted for publication after external peer review (double-blind).

Fenella Cannell, Department of Social Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK, F.Cannell@lse.ac.uk

conducting genealogy, and follows the interplay between those motivations and two different cultures of genealogical practice.

Family history is always also a form of imaginative labour which places the genealogist's own relatives within the wider social world and which therefore speaks, often implicitly, about changing views of the social order and social contract in which people are living. I have carried out research with distinct groups of family historians in both England¹ and America². In America, I have worked with members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (whose members are often referred to as LDS or as Mormons³), for whom genealogical work is explicitly enjoined as part of the central salvific teachings of their faith. In England, I have worked with amateur family historians in East Anglia; I met with further groups of family and local historians while conducting a second English project in East Anglian cathedral towns.⁴

Contemporary popular genealogy and family history are part of a wider process of relational work across registers of time; these activities are both 'kinship work' – which situates recognized social persons within acknowledged systems of relatedness – and at the same time are culturally-specific practices of history-making,⁵ which frame communities of reference for genealogical practitioners within a reading of the generative connection between past and present.

My previous writing on English genealogists has centred on the moral and social potential of ordinary family history, which in the U.K. I have described as a process of creating 'English ancestors'. My choice of terminology here was a deliberate one; I intend to suggest – against modern Western claims of exceptionalism – that one aspect of popular family history is the search to establish positive reciprocity between the living and the dead, even if this attempt can rarely be ideally realized. I argue that this aspect of family history has been commonly overlooked in social science analysis, which has tended to accept as fact, a strong distinction between Christianity and other world religions (and post-religious settings) and 'ancestral' practices. However, this distinction itself is artefactual, arising from developments in sociological theories of secularization on the one hand, and in Protestant claims of differentiation from Catholic practices on the other.

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- 1 Fenella Cannell, *English Ancestors: The Moral Possibilities of Popular Genealogy*, in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (NS)* 17/3 (2011), 462–480; ead., *Ghosts and Ancestors in the Modern West*, in: Janice Boddy/Michael Lambek (eds.), *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, Chichester/Oxford 2013, 202–222.
 - 2 Fenella Cannell, *The Christianity of Anthropology (The Malinowski Lecture, 2004)*, in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11/2 (2005), 335–356; ead., *The Re-Enchantment of Kinship?*, in: Susan McKinnon/Fenella Cannell (eds.), *Vital Relations: Modernity and the Persistent Life of Kinship*, Santa Fe 2013, 217–240; ead., *Kinship, World Religions, and the Nation-state*, in: Sandra Bamford (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Kinship*, Cambridge 2019, 700–728.
 - 3 As of 2018, the incoming Prophet and President of the Church, Russell M. Nelson, has discouraged use of the term "Mormon". The term remains more familiar to many of those outside the church than alternatives such as LDS, and church members also sometimes use the term "Mormon" in self-reference.
 - 4 Research in the United States was funded by ESRC in 2000–01, and by an LSE–STICERD grant in 2007–08 and while teaching at Johns Hopkins University. Research in East Anglian cathedral towns, some parts of which were conducted with Dr. Paola Filippucci, was funded by an SSRC fellowship for the *New Directions in the Study of Prayer* project and LSE staff research fund. Discussions with colleagues at the SAR senior seminar 2012 convened by myself and Susan McKinnon were immensely helpful to my thinking on all areas of kinship; all funding is gratefully acknowledged.
 - 5 On the multiplicity of cultures of historiography and their importance in anthropological work, see Charles Stewart/Stephan Palmié (eds.), *The Varieties of Historical Experience*, London 2019.

My English interlocutors seemed to have integrated these inherited distinctions. Some of those I spoke to were happy to say they had a religious faith, and most of these people said they were Church of England or Methodist. Other people described themselves as indifferent to religion, agnostic, atheist, or broadly spiritual not religious. Whatever their personal engagement with formal religious practices, they all tended to contrast family history with formal religion when asked directly. At the same time, my English interlocutors talked about the practice of family history in ways which detailed how they sought to create forms of reciprocity and relationality across mortality, including but not only in situations of bereavement. While attempting to honour my interlocutors' choice of words in my ethnography, because this also inflects their experience, I argued that these family history interactions are also a kind of 'ancestral religion' if we wish to consider them comparatively alongside other forms so labelled by anthropologists; the living and the dead are represented as affecting – and ideally supporting and sustaining – each others' social lives.⁶ The practice of family history in England thus has an interesting experiential quality and occupies complex ground in the way people discuss it; nominally a 'secular' not formally 'religious' activity, and often including aspects of ordinary entertainment, sociability, and the routine, it nevertheless also often brings up registers of deep feeling, reflections on the complexity of events unfolding in time, the mystery of life, suffering and death, themes of sacrifice, loss, and reconciliation, and puzzles about how to create and sustain meaning, or live with its absence or elusiveness.

For American Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, the connection between genealogy and religion is fundamental and absolutely explicit. As I discuss below, LDS doctrine envisages the resurrection and renewal of the world and the progression of humanity according to the divine plan, as being dependant in part on the completion of genealogical and ritual work for everyone who has ever lived on earth. The motivation for engaging in family history is therefore tied to the deepest salvific hopes and obligations of members of the Church. However, the LDS Church also asks a lot of the time and devotion of its members in other ways, while family history projects can also feel more or less urgent to people depending on their personal circumstances and the ways in which they view the needs of their recently deceased family members. Since the 2000s, in particular, it has been a theme of the leadership of the Church that as far as possible all members of the Church should be continuously engaged in genealogy and the ritual work which is linked to it. Participation is therefore both a way to heed

6 Jeannette Edwards, A Feel for Genealogy. 'Family-treeing' in the North of England, in: *Ethnos* 83/4 (2018), 724–743 agrees with the arguments of Cannell, *English Ancestors and Cannell, Ghosts and Ancestors* in concluding that family history cares for the living as well as the dead, and not only for kin. The regional comparison is interesting as Edwards's informants are strongly conscious of their industrial working-class background. Edwards reports little hesitation in linking genealogy with 'fate' in the North and describes how 'Altown' residents can root incomers into local family history and place. On mutuality, place, and temporality in English genealogy see also Jeannette Edwards, *Born and Bred: Idioms of Kinship and the New Reproductive Technologies in England*, Oxford 2000; ead., *Skipping a Generation and Assisting Conception*, in: Sandra Bamford/James Leach (eds.), *Kinship and Beyond: The Genealogical Model Reconsidered*, New York 2009, 138–159; Catherine Degnen, *On Vegetable Love: Gardening, Plants and People in the North of England*, in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (NS)* 15/1 (2009), 151–167; and Janet Carsten, "Knowing Where You've Come From": Ruptures and Continuities of Time and Kinship in Narratives of Adoption Reunions, in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (NS)* 6/4 (2008), 687–703. On place and ancestry in American kinship reckoning see especially Gillian Feeley-Harnik, *Placing the Dead: Kinship, Slavery and Free Labor in Pre- and Post-Civil War America*, in: McKinnon/Cannell (eds.), *Vital Relations*, 179–216.

the Prophet of the Church and is also – at least ideally – a shared activity within LDS families which can strengthen immediate relationships and affective bonds with personal ancestors.

We could say, then, that these are examples of two kinds of modern, Western ancestral religious practice; one does not necessarily call itself religion but is centred on practices of familial and class care, filial piety and world-making within ‘history’; the other is eschatologically focused as are other forms of Christianity and salvationist religions, but progress towards salvation depends to an unusual if not unique extent on the work of connecting up the genealogy of all humanity to make a whole.

Both my American and my English interlocutors are very familiar with on-line genealogical resources including DNA-based resources. Everyone I spoke to uses internet searches and databases for family history, at least some of the time. Not everyone needs or chooses to use DNA testing for their own research, but they are aware that others are doing so. As the family historians I know are also well aware, the LDS Church is itself a crucial force in making mass on-line genealogical resources freely available to anyone with access to the internet, allowing the exponential expansion of amateur genealogical efforts, especially data-sharing. Some of the major commercial, private DNA-genealogy companies including Ancestry.com were started by Latter-day Saints,⁷ but are not directly owned by the Church itself, which runs its FamilySearch interface as a free resource.

As others have noted in practice these different resources (and others) are in many ways mutually supporting in the spread of the web-based and commercial genetic-genealogy industry – or “genealogical machines” as Abel and Pálsson call them. The immense informational, political, and economic power implied in the existence of expanding DNA databases can hardly be overstated,⁸ especially as these are increasingly and intentionally linked to web search engines for documentary records by the companies involved. But as Abel and Pálsson have pointed out, technologically-generated information about links of relationship often generates more questions than it answers; like adoption reunions, it may or may not create successful connections in practice between living relatives; finally

“the ‘authentic’ identity which the genetic-genealogical companies offer to their clients does not depend on the revelation of their [...] genetic matches, but on the feeling of mutual recognition and on reciprocal engagement, which are not guaranteed by ‘biological’ facts or by descent in itself.”⁹

The dangerous potentials of the rapid spread of genetic-genealogy has been clearly documented by colleagues including Catherine Nash, Stephan Palmié, and Abel and Pálsson, all of whom chart the tendency for the general public and first-time genetic-genealogy users to

7 Weil gives the evolution of Ancestry.com, noting that it started with a merger in 1997 between the firm Ancestry, Inc., then owned by John Sittner, publisher of *Ancestry Magazine* and an electronic publishing company, Infobases, then owned by “two young Mormon entrepreneurs, Paul Allen and Daniel Taggart.” See François Weil, *Family Trees: a history of genealogy in America*, Cambridge, MA/London 2013, 205.

8 Weil, *Family Trees*, 180–216.

9 Sarah Abel/Gísli Pálsson, *Dépister L’ancestralité: machines et technologies généalogiques dans la reconstruction des histoires de familles*, in: *Ethnologie Française* 178/2 (2020), 269–284, 283 (my translation); see also Gísli Pálsson, *The Web of Kin: An Online Genealogical Machine*, in: Bamford/Leach (eds.), *Kinship and Beyond*, 84–110.

over-estimate the level of scientific certainty offered by DNA testing. In addition to personal and medical privacy issues, widely described problems have included the risk of creating misleading perceptions about people's inherited 'ethnicity' and supposed geographic origin, the potential to promote racialized discourse, and the risks of personal destabilization which can occur when test results conflict with each other or contradict previously accepted and important elements in a person's sense of who they are.¹⁰

Abel and Pálsson primarily consider the first-person protagonists in the social 'experiment' in genetic and digital genealogy research, for whom immediate family ties, or their failure, or rejection, were most at stake. They, and other authors, also report that some working genealogists have expressed a fear that DNA testing will subvert the basis of family history, replacing 'the authority of the book' with the deceptive 'authority of the test'. If family history becomes populated by large numbers of naïve consumers, who mistake the probabilistic estimates of DNA genealogy for fixed scientific certainties, then its basis and methods could be undermined. Indeed, as one of Abel's interlocutors pointed out at an LDS Roots Tech conference, if a large number of inexperienced people treat DNA data including suggestions about ancestral origins as a 'starting point' and expect all documentary data to fit into that picture, then the logic of genealogical research would have been upended, but many DNA-test customers might not realize this.¹¹ Such misapprehensions would also, of course, play directly to the commercial interests of DNA testing companies.

In conversation with these observations, in this paper I consider the wider framing of genealogical research as it sits within different kinds of collective, social, and third-party projects of meaning-making. I take it that existing communities of family history practitioners are themselves crucially important brokers of the impact of computer-generated and DNA-driven genealogical technologies. Focusing particularly on established amateur family historians, I highlight the ways in which at least some of the problematic potentials of DNA analysis are an object of conscious reflection among these groups themselves, which may mediate their effects.

Here I see some grounds for optimism. The full range of difficulties with genetic genealogy were not always foregrounded by my interlocutors, and people may vary in their grasp of them. Nevertheless, most practicing genealogists in my fieldsites seemed quite able to sustain for themselves and disseminate in their own circles the view that DNA results, and computer-generated records which reveal surprise biological links are only one – incomplete – resource

10 Abel/Pálsson, *Dépister l'ancestralité*; Sarah Abel, *Of African Descent? Blackness and the Concept of Origins in Cultural Perspective*, in: *Genealogy* 2/11 (2018), DOI:10.3390/genealogy2010011, <https://www.mdpi.com/2313-5778/2/1/11> (14 July 2020); Stephan Palmié, *Genomics, Divination, 'Racecraft'*, in: *American Ethnologist* 34/2 (2007), 205–222; Catherine Nash, *Mitochondrial Eve and the Affective Politics of Human Ancestry*, in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40/3 (2015), 747–772; ead., *The Politics of Genealogical Incorporation: Ethnic Difference, Genetic Relatedness and National Belonging*, in: *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40/14 (2017), 2539–2557. For a recent World Service programme focused on these experiences, see "Why do we care where we come from?", producer Viv Jones, BBC World Service, *The Why Factor* (first broadcast Monday, 17 June 2019). For public-facing work on the risks of DNA testing in a public health and law context, see a range of contributions by Professor Timothy Caulfield of the University of Alberta at <https://www.ualberta.ca/law/faculty-and-research/health-law-institute/people/timothy-caulfield> (31 October 2021).

11 John Seabrook, *The Tree of Me*, in: *New Yorker*, 26 March 2001, 58–68. Also quoted in Weil, *Family Trees*, 212. Sarah Abel, *Pers. Comm.* 7 July 2020.

for the making of real family history. Like academic writers, family historians come to know through their practice that data are only a framework on which real relationships have to be socially made. The technical expertise they bring, helps regulate the potentially disruptive effects of new forms of big data as these solicit attention from the public at large. If anthropologists following Marilyn Strathern have seen Anglo-American kinship as a necessarily 'hybrid' or 'merographic' object, made of a conjuncture of the incommensurable realms of 'nature/biology' and 'society', we could think of family historians as one particular group of artisans of that conjuncture.¹²

It is hard to quantify how far levels of public understanding of DNA testing have changed since the 1990s, but experienced family history practice communities clearly work to help moderate expectations. This relativizes DNA testing, re-framing the overclaiming and unnuanced expectations which can characterize the sector and putting it back in its place as one kind of information among others.

Beyond issues of the public education on what DNA tests can tell you about kinship or even ethnicity, however, an even more challenging set of difficulties arises from the commercial interests of genetic-genealogy companies, as they amass vast potential value for biotechnology research. As critical observers have pointed out, millions of users are unaware that they have handed over rights in the use of their genetic data when applying for genealogical information via a saliva test.¹³ These massive, subterranean commercial interests may then be expected to exert pressures driven by their own priorities, on any projects that come into contact or alliance with them. Unless the issues are made explicit, it will be difficult to see what effects these pressures create on genealogical practice. Reflecting on the two family history cultures with which I am familiar within this context, I ask whether these pressures may more or less disruptive for different communities, depending on the wider histories with which their projects are already engaged.

“Find me please!” – LDS rescued relatives and missing persons

From a Latter-day Saint perspective, all genealogical work carried out anywhere in the world is prompted by the 'Spirit of Elijah', referring to the Prophet Elijah whose mission is described in the Old Testament as restoring the bonds between fathers and children so as to avoid the wrath of God (Malachi, 4:6).

Mormons consider the recent and continuing worldwide spread of popular genealogy to be a result of the increasing influence of the Spirit of the Elijah, and a sign of the readying

12 Marilyn Strathern, *After Nature: English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 1992; Sarah Franklin, *Analogic Return: The Reproductive Life of Conceptuality*, in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 31/2–3 (2014), 1–19.

13 See for example, Thilo Weichert's winning nomination of "The company Ancestry.com and its Munich subsidiary" for the (negative) Big Brother award 2018, "category Biotechnology", "for exploiting an interest in genealogy to entice people into submitting saliva samples", https://bigbrotherawards.de/en/2019/biotechnology-ancestry_com (31 May 2021). On the commercial model of invisible data-mining in dominant internet and social media companies including Google, Facebook, and Amazon see Shoshanna Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, London 2019.

of the world for the return of Christ, the redemption and resurrection of creation, and the fulfilment of teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith Jr.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are systematically required and enabled by their Church to carry out genealogical work and depending on personal circumstances, should engage in genealogy throughout the course of their lives. LDS genealogy has an explicit doctrinal and salvific motivation; deceased persons who did not join the Church in their lifetimes are to be in effect offered the opportunity of doing so post-mortem.¹⁴ The LDS Church teaches that its missionaries continue to be active in the spirit world, and that the deceased may hear their teaching in the life beyond and freely choose to join the Church. Spiritual acceptance of the Church by the deceased, however, requires ritual completion, which can only be carried out in the mortal realm. These necessary rituals, or ordinances, are carried out by living persons in LDS temples, where the names of the deceased are taken so that they may participate vicariously, with the living acting as their proxies.

Proxy baptism, which confirms members of the LDS Church, is the first of these rituals, but not the only one. Mormons are distinctive among Christian churches in making a goal of collective, familial salvation their highest good. While each individual is said to be responsible for his or her own actions, Latter-day Saints emphasize ways in which families (as well as church communities) can strengthen and support each other in their efforts to lead a good life. Family prayer and fasting, in particular, is often undertaken to support someone at a difficult time. Latter-day Saints may also experience the presence of their own ancestors assisting them through dreams and signs, or sometimes in other encounters.

This sense of being supported by the wider family, on both sides of the veil of mortality, is of a piece with the ultimate goals and hopes of Mormon salvation, which are to save families and not just individuals within those families; that is, relational links themselves, as well as persons, are what people work to save.¹⁵ Observant Mormon individuals are regarded as linked together by a covenant that perpetuates family relationships after death, and this is sacramentally enhanced by temple rituals for the living including Mormon marriage in the LDS temple. These rituals can also be offered by proxy to the deceased where names have been recovered through genealogical work; thus dead persons who have undergone proxy baptism can be ritually reunited in eternity with their spouse, through the proxy work of Mormon temples. A third temple ritual makes the bonds between parents and children efficacious for all time post-mortally. Persons who have been both genealogically and ritually linked according to Church precepts are referred to as sealed; ordinances and sealings are recorded on digitized (or paper) genealogical records which are accessible to members of the Church

14 Like many issues in the LDS Church, the teaching on post-mortem missionization has evolved over time, and generally an increasingly expansive definition has been offered, especially since the time of President Joseph F. Smith (President of the Church 1901–1918).

15 This is not quite how Mormons themselves would phrase it if asked; since they are keen to avoid any hint of antinomianism, and stress the duty of an individual to lead a good life in the Church and avoid sin. Jan Shipp, *Mormonism. The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, Champaign 1987, remarked that the unit of salvation is the individual, but the object of salvation is the family, which correctly reflects explicit Mormon teaching. Nevertheless, in practice and in contextual statements of doctrine (as well as in some esoteric events discussed by historians), it is my observation that there is always an underlying tension with the hope that we might work to save others who we love.

only, whereas the genealogy-only records held or traced by church members are widely made available on genealogical databases.

Latter-day Saints carry out genealogy primarily with the view of being able to complete this temple ritual work, which can make families eternal. In the first instance, first-generation Mormons and those who for some reason do not have existing family histories already completed, are asked by the Church to research and record their own bilateral ancestors, starting with three generations of ascending ancestors (parents, grandparents, great-grandparents) on both their mother's and the father's side of the family historian concerned. The Church issues Pedigree Charts¹⁶ to guide and assist new genealogists. As one can see from the document as well as biographical data the chart asks the LDS genealogist to record the progress of temple ritual work, which is done by proxy for each person named on the record. Once complete, the effect will be to bind all the persons named together as family for eternity, as long as each person freely accepts the offer of LDS salvation in the spirit world. Larger and more ambitious pedigree charts, with space for ten generations or more, are also available as people become more advanced in their family history work. In addition, Latter-day Saints are taught that the researching and writing of family history and genealogy in itself has a spiritually beneficial effect, assisting the work of Christ and of the prophet Elijah in the world and contributing towards the restoration of all things.

Beyond work on one's own family, Mormons are also asked, once this has been performed, to assist in researching other families and completing their genealogical and then proxy ritual work for salvation. Latter-day Saint doctrine explains that every person who has ever lived on earth must have this work completed for them, before the end of the world, which in Mormonism will be followed by complex forms of human and planetary resurrection and deification, and by further eternizations of family forms.¹⁷ With respect to periods of human history for which genealogical records are lost, LDS teaching is that resurrected beings with knowledge of past times will eventually return to assist mortals in completing the record of all mankind. In the meantime, there is immense scope for ordinary members' contributions to this vast genealogical and salvific project. The Church not only invests money and time in collecting and preserving parish and other biographical records from all over the world, and making them available on-line, but has also for many decades distributed bundles of records to members with free time, so that the genealogical and eventually ritual work can be done for the countless people named in these records.

Commentators on the Church have long noted that while cultivating spirituality among the membership is one aspect of mass LDS genealogy, another is providing a sufficient and continuous stream of names to keep the LDS temples worldwide provided with candidates for proxy sacraments. Widespread or universal participation in temple activity is itself defined as the hallmark of modern-era LDS Church membership, and one of the pillars of the Church leaderships' project of sustaining orthodoxy in a global missionary church. From the point of view of critics of the Church, persons in genealogical records are sometimes portrayed as mere 'temple fodder', keeping the whole machine spinning; from the point of view of faithful members, working on the genealogical records of unknown persons is a privilege which

16 https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/shared/content/images/gospel-library/manual/31384/31384_000_044_01-pedigree.pdf (10 March 2020).

17 Cannell, *Christianity of Anthropology*.

permits joyful reunions beyond the grave, and constitutes co-participation in the saving work of Jesus Christ in the world.

The ideal and doctrinal qualities of genealogical work could therefore scarcely be more explicitly and powerfully delineated than they are in LDS contexts. Church leaders through the medium of talks, broadcasts, and Church literature also make widely known what the ideal response of the faithful is, as they engage in sacred genealogy. LDS ideals involve a high regard for perseverance and a fundamental expectation that human beings will be tested during mortal life, so the fact that genealogy can be frustrating, boring, or repetitive is understood as part of its intrinsic teaching value. At the same time, LDS leaders also encourage positivity when it comes to the performance of orthodox duties in the Church, so people are expected to report spiritual rewards despite the challenges that genealogy may present.

Many keen LDS genealogists do indeed report experiences that confirm these expectations. For instance, members may feel a range of spiritual promptings which suggest that a person or persons deceased is waiting anxiously to be found and, through the membership of the LDS Church, reunited with their loved ones in the eternities.¹⁸ Amateur LDS genealogists I knew, told me stories of (for instance) returning for one last look in a large public archive, although common sense suggested that they would be unsuccessful, and, against all odds, being able to locate a key piece of biographical information on a particular person, especially a record of a birth, marriage, or death. Indeed, the idiom of genealogy as a form of ‘rescue’ of the otherwise lost operates powerfully in LDS official and personal discourse alike:

“I often feel a great sorrow in my heart for all of the lost children of the world. A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to digitize records from the Mesa City Cemetery in Mesa, Arizona.

As I digitized records such as the one depicted above, I was overcome with the feeling that this piece of paper may be the only earthly record for many of these children who died. It is extremely likely that there is no formal death certificate for this baby. Absent some family record, this may be the only record. I could hear them crying out to me and saying, keep looking! find me please.

If we are truly seeking after our dead and listening to the Spirit, we will feel and sometimes hear, these promptings, pleading with us to find our ancestors. Quoting from the *The Family, A Proclamation to the World* [...].¹⁹

Powerful as these experiences are, Latter-day Saint genealogists are also aware of the complications of spiritual genealogy, which are not necessarily highlighted in these official or exemplary narratives, but are discussed in more informal ways, including on chat forums and threads, among friends, and by those attending and using local family history centres. Large family history centres are independent buildings, but smaller local centres may be located in the ward meeting house where Latter-day Saints gather for regular Sunday services, and where member genealogists can be assisted by the volunteer helper or helpers who run the centre.

18 See Cannell, *Christianity of Anthropology and ead.*, *World Religions*.

19 James L. Tanner, “Keep looking! Find me please!” *Spiritual Guidance in LDS Family History Work*, <https://ldsgenealogy.com/Keep-Looking-Find-Me-Please.htm> n.d. (10 March 2020).

A correlate of the idea of the importance of genealogical rescue is that, as in the example given above, there are many people in the spirit world eagerly waiting to be found and assisted. Conversely, church members informally agree that some people sought by genealogists do not wish to be found. The agency of the deceased who take this view also expresses itself in these negative ways; just as promptings and assistance come from those who long to be rescued. So those who wish to conceal themselves may account for some of the innumerable informational blocks, brick-walls, and gaps in records against which even skilled genealogists may find it difficult to prevail. Such deceased persons are not so much lost and waiting for rescue; rather they are like ‘missing persons’ among the living, those who have absented themselves from their family and friends for reasons yet unexplained.

These missing persons are usually considered as not being ready to receive the help the LDS genealogist wants to bring. A known person from one’s own family who cannot be found might for instance be someone who had emotional problems in their lifetime, was alienated from their family, or struggled with addictions. People reflect that the missing individual may simply need more time and assistance for spiritual growth before connection is possible; it is also possible that they may never be willing to make that connection before the end of this world, when earthly genealogy will first be completed and will then cease.

The corresponding problem also occurs, when a church member is not ready or willing to look for a deceased relative, even one whose temple work falls into the categories the Church defines as their responsibility. Several genealogists I met counselled against members researching deceased persons with whom they had a painful or troubled relationship too soon; if a deceased relative has done you wrong, they pointed out; if a now-dead father had abandoned you and your siblings to a childhood of poverty, or a grandparent had rejected your mother (and you) when she joined the Church, then the prospect of eternal connection could become oppressive, and even traumatic. Despite the constant encouragement of the Church to press on with making all earthly ties eternal, many close to an enquirer recommended waiting; forgiveness, they noted, can be supported but not forced; both parties need to be ready for the re-connection of kinship ties.

The Church’s policy about who can and should submit names for temple ritual aims to address another area of complexity, balancing the urgency one person may feel to complete temple work for deceased relatives, with the rights and wishes of other close family who may want to wait, or who may be uncomfortable with LDS practice. Church members are advised that they are “responsible” for submitting the names of their immediate family and direct-line ancestors; they may also submit the names of other close family including collateral relatives, presumptive ancestors where records may be lacking, and “biological, adoptive, step and foster family lines connected to your family”. Members may do the work for their own deceased spouses, parents, children or siblings without specific permission, but otherwise need a close relative’s consent. Names may be submitted without permission in the case of people born 110 years ago or more.²⁰

The issuance of policy by the LDS Church can never dispense with complex decision-making or eliminate ambiguity in these areas of practice. Church members anxious to do

20 LDS policy is available at https://broadcast.lds.org/elearning/FHD/Local_Support/Consultant/Temple_Policy-Name_Submissions/resources/assets/file/z00001w00000000000a0/Name-Policies-lesson-handout.pdf (12 July 2020).

temple work for non-member relatives may need to navigate complex discussions with other close family outside the Church. Families with adopted and/or foster children, divorce, and re-marriage, which create stepfamilies, can also create related puzzles about who belongs with whom. While the Church permits some degree of latitude in sealings among deceased persons, sealings involving persons still living – including between living and deceased persons – are strictly regulated and often force choices which people find painful. For example, LDS single parents are advised that they cannot have their children sealed to them for eternity because in the case of living people, children can only be sealed to two married, heterosexual parents. Families in this position are advised that, while the Church encourages single parents to find a suitable marriage partner if possible, those unfortunate enough to remain single will have their family situation regularized on the other side of the veil by Heavenly Father.²¹ Given the emphasis placed on the duty, comfort, and virtue of performing temple sealings on earth, however, this ruling leaves many single parent families and their children in a difficult limbo.²²

The deep meaning of this genealogical work is underwritten by the widely shared Mormon apprehension of a “Book of Life” in heaven, in which a faultless record is kept by divine and resurrected beings.²³ To Mormon ways of thinking, to write a record of a life, and to inscribe a person in the order of things so that they inherit resurrected life in the world to come, are closely identified salvific acts. Church members experience temple ritual as powerfully efficacious, and the work of genealogy as solemn, and leadership and doctrine affirm these beliefs. While LDS leaders constantly reassure members that Heavenly Father will put right all errors beyond the veil, it is therefore unsurprising that Latter-day Saints continue to experience anxiety about anomalies in family history and temple sealings.

The LDS Church has a large body of regulations, which until 2020 were not fully available to all church members; even experienced family historians therefore have had to navigate many genealogy questions with the background sense, “I’d need to check the rules on that.”

Take for example a question posted 25 May 2013 on an LDS tech forum, headed “Sealing child to non biological father”.

“A brother in our ward is in a second marriage to a sister who has two children from a previous marriage. He is, therefore, not the biological father and he has not adopted them. They recently went to the temple and had the two children sealed to them. This brother would like the children’s names listed on his membership record, but when I tried to add them, MLS stated that children can only be added ‘if the child is either a biological or a legally adopted child.’ Question #1: Is there any way to show on the brother’s membership record that these children are sealed to him?

Meanwhile, the children’s membership records show the accurate date when they were ‘Sealed to Parents’. But when clicking the ‘Parents’ tab in the children’s membership

21 See, for example, the online genealogy problem page “Ask Gramps”, on which Clay Gorton answers problems relating to LDS family history. “Is it possible to be sealed to just my mother?” (4 Dec 2013), represents a common type of enquiry from the teenage child of a single mother who also has several half-siblings. <https://askgramps.org/possible-sealed-just-mother/> (5 July 2020).

22 The famous institution of religious polygamy in the nineteenth-century Church was a command given in revelation; however, Church members often point out that it ensured that all widows and orphans could be provided for on earth and in the life to come.

23 Fenella Cannell, *Book of Life: Mormon Sacred Kinship in Modern America* (in preparation).

records it shows the biological father, not the brother they were sealed to. So, the membership record gives the impression that these children are sealed to their biological father. Question #2: Is there any way to show on the children's membership records that they are sealed to their non biological father?"

Within an hour someone had replied:

"I think the short answer to both questions is 'no', simply because the system is not designed that way.

I'd suggest you pull Handbook 1²⁴ and read that appropriate section on sealings. That may or may not answer the question.

Someone else might have a better answer, but you may need to talk to Local Unit Support and/or the temple president if you have any further questions."²⁵

The range of human situations which come up against the limitations of what the rules cover is extremely wide; for instance, the same LDS peer forum in 2012 addressed the enquiry of an older adult member who wished to be unsealed from her adoptive parents and sealed to her biological parents instead; as the enquirer commented "I have never done an un-adoption, especially where the parents are deceased."²⁶ Notably, many of these threads recommend or consider referring the enquiry to a higher level of the Church, including the Temple Department and First Presidency in Salt Lake City. The decision of the Church to make the handbook available online from 2020 is a major shift; presented as a pastoral response to the needs of diverse LDS wards worldwide, it is surely also an attempt to establish the Church's transparency and concede the difficulty of restricting the handbook in the internet age. It remains to be seen what effect this will have on family history practice, but it is already clear that all the answers to church members' questions can never be contained in it; regulations will continue to need interpretation. The constitutive tension of authority within the Church also remains, since Church members understand leadership to be inspired, while also understanding that they have access to personal revelation.

The availability of the Handbook is one of a number of recent changes in the Church affecting family history. Always a pioneer in digitalizing genealogical records,²⁷ the Church and its historians have for decades used computer access in combination with physical records

24 "Handbook 1" refers to one of the two forms of handbook previously available for reference to Church regulations. Until recently, Handbook 1 was for bishops (local congregation or ward leaders) and stake presidents (regional leaders) and Handbook 2 was for all other ranks of the LDS leadership. The Handbooks were not universally available to all members, which for some decades was a cause of concern and speculation in relation to contentious issues of policy, as well as to questioning over the changes which were made from time to time in these policies. As of February 2020, the LDS leadership announced a new edition online handbook, which will be accessible to all and is intended to be adaptable to congregations of different kinds and sizes around the world. The move towards greater transparency is understood as part of the Church's changes since 2018 apparently aimed at retaining the adherence of younger members and global converts. <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/new-general-handbook#summary> (31 May 2021).

25 <https://tech.churchofjesuschrist.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=15663> (5 July 2020).

26 <https://tech.churchofjesuschrist.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=12086> (10 July 2020).

27 James B. Allen/Jesse L. Embry/Kahlile B. Mehr, *Hearts Turned to the Fathers: A History of the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1894–1994*, Salt Lake City 1995.

including a huge collection of microfilm, which could be ordered from Utah depositories and accessed at local Family History Libraries. Names for temple ritual were submitted first on paper records, and later via the digital portal known as “TempleReady™”. However, since 2011, the Church has been engaged in an extensive reorganization of its systems. The imposing Utah Genealogical Society and its physical archives are now almost a subsidiary to its digital face, FamilySearch, which has been given a seamlessly approachable rebranding. FamilySearch continues to be run by the Church as a charitable and spiritual enterprise, made available free to the public. Church members now compile and submit records for temple ritual on the app Ordinances Ready;²⁸ this is inside FamilySearch Family Tree, and is not accessible to non-members. The invisibility of temple submissions has been modified however, since online guides demonstrating how to submit names from a computer, phone app or tablet are now readily viewable.²⁹

From 2013, the Church announced a new online format, which for the first time allowed non-members as well as members to build their own genealogies directly, on the Family Tree section of LDS FamilySearch. Church members and non-members could now collaborate directly online. While either party could set their Family Tree to ‘private’, the default setting would be ‘public’, encouraging sharing (except for ordinance records). The Church anticipated that FamilySearch trees would become “the best-sourced genealogy in the world”.³⁰ In 2014, the Church announced collaborations with the commercial genealogy and DNA testing company Ancestry.com as well as FindMyPast and MyHeritage; church members receive free accounts with these companies. In 2019, the Utah newspaper *Deseret News* reported that FamilySearch now contains 7.24 billion searchable names.³¹ The Church also added features allowing church members to access their family pedigrees and temple ordinance records from inside their Ancestry.com accounts, syncing account details from their LDS Family Tree accounts.³² Perhaps one of the most striking changes to LDS family history has been the completion of new features in FamilySearch in 2019 (announced 2017), which allow users to represent same-sex family relationships including marriages in their family trees.

“FamilySearch CEO Steve Rockwood announced the new function at the organization’s annual RootsTech event in 2017, Nauta said.

“The goal of FamilySearch is to enable individuals to discover themselves and their families,” Nauta added. “We do that by continuing to add new services and functions that enable individuals and families to create ongoing connections and discoveries in a very fun way.”

The new function allows FamilySearch to capture accurate genealogy “that represents past, present and future families of the world.”³³

28 <https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/temple-ordinances-familysearch/> (3 July 2020).

29 <https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/submit-names-temple-ancestrycom/> (7 July 2020).

30 <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/familytree-new-familysearch-service-promotes-collaboration?lang=eng> (10 March 2020).

31 <https://www.deseret.com/utah/2019/12/10/21004733/familysearch-same-sex-family-trees-lgbtq-genealogy> (5 July 2020).

32 <https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/temple-ordinances-familysearch/> (5 July 2020).

33 <https://www.deseret.com/utah/2019/12/10/21004733/familysearch-same-sex-family-trees-lgbtq-genealogy> (5 July 2020).

Since non-members now also use Family Tree, it can be argued that the Church is simply accommodating social reality, and it has affirmed that the Church's teaching that heterosexual marriage is necessary for eternal kinship is unchanged. Given the Church's reluctance to discuss and recognise LGBTQO lives and relationships in recent decades, however, this is still a major shift.³⁴ It is also now open to church members to record multiple forms of parentage in their FamilySearch Family Tree; including, biological, adoptive, step, foster, and guardianship. However, as noted, eternal sealing relationships involving living persons are still much more restricted. As the new technology encourages members to switch rapidly back and forth between their temple-sealing records and their normative family trees, it is interesting to consider what Latter-day Saints will make of the continued disparities and lacunae between the two versions of their 'pedigree'.

While some members love the technical features or welcome the ability to share genealogy with non-member relatives, other LDS users are circumspect about the new interfaces; threads mention the tendency to create more duplicate records, or, conversely, to accidentally erase stored ordinance records when someone tries to tidy up a duplicate record on the new system. The withdrawal of microfilm caused members to point out a series of problems in digital coverage and indexing.

Church leadership is placing renewed emphasis on the speed of traffic and the throughput of names for the temple, sometimes in subtle ways; FamilySearch temple apps now encourage genealogists to share names for temple work, and not to reserve them for long periods of time; some ordinance reservations may be cancelled by the app after 90 days, and the names made available to others. There is a work-around (don't submit the full details until you are ready to do the temple ritual), but this attempt to manage the temporal relation of genealogical research to temple ritual could reduce the discretion of individual researchers who may wish to pause before eternizing certain relationships. It is interesting to note member thread comments often feature reminders that every name taken to the temple is to be treated as a person, acquiring the means to eternal relationships, and not just an item on a list.

FamilySearch offers a series of curated blogs and magazine pieces by professional church genealogists,³⁵ which suggest to members approved ways to manage and approach these problems. An article in *LDS Living* by Sunny Morton, a genetic genealogist who was adopted, and later traced her birth parents, gives a sense of the nuanced-but-positive messaging on DNA testing. "Don't test", says Sunny, unless you are ready for the possibility of finding out secrets about your family tree. Remember that surprises may follow long after your own test, because of the unprecedented rate at which others are joining up. She concedes that sometimes there is something "awful" that comes up, but most "surprises" hold positive potential.

"Finally, if you discover that your family tree goes a different direction than you thought, it's not as if you have to chop off other beloved branches. Family trees can have multiple lines of ancestors. In the FamilySearch Family Tree, you can designate several different kinds of parent relationships: adopted, biological, foster, guardian

34 Reiss notes that the church seems caught in an "odd give and take over LGBT issues": Jana Reiss, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church*, Oxford 2020, 234.

35 <https://thegenealogyreporter.com/accessing-digital-records/>; <https://www.deseret.com/utah/2019/12/10/21004733/familysearch-same-sex-family-trees-lgbtq-genealogy> (31 May 2021).

and step. This is all about adding more relatives, not subtracting. Just scoot over and add another chair at your family table.”³⁶

Of course, this sidesteps the question of ordinances and sealings, which this article does not explicitly address. Instead, the author’s take on DNA and the Church is a focus on the horizon of the universal genealogy of all mankind and the spirit of the millennium.

“To me this is another manifestation of the Lord doing his work in the latter days. We cannot be exalted without a family. We all have to be linked to each other. The Lord is committed to helping us find every single person who has ever lived and giving them back their family trees. So many family relationships are being revealed and confirmed through DNA testing that just could not have been found any other way.”³⁷

The Church routinely supplies balanced information on DNA testing within FamilySearch FAQs and other LDS website locations;³⁸ they note some members may need to protect privacy and recommend always reading the small print. The potential difficulty, however, is that this advice pushes in a different direction to the partnerships entered into with commercial DNA testing companies. This is particularly the case because since 2006 the Church’s traditional reliance on volunteer genealogists has been enhanced by the call for members and non-members to help with the immense task of reliably indexing the universe of digital records now amassed. This work is offered as mutual help among genealogists, with spiritual overtones. An article published on the partnerships in 2014 acknowledges the enormous financial costs of the LDS genealogical project as it grows exponentially in size, while remaining free to the public, as well as noting the contribution made by LDS member tithes.³⁹ Offering clear answers to a number of questions,⁴⁰ it explains that the LDS Church does not sell the genealogical work of volunteers to commercial companies; however, it sidesteps the issue of the general financial model on which all data-harvesting companies are premised. It also does not make clear to what extent LDS FamilySearch may now or in the future come to depend on commercial companies for sustainability.

“Q. Will FamilySearch continue to form these kinds of partnerships with commercial vendors?

A. Yes. This collaboration is one of the many ways we will accelerate the delivery of family history resources and make them accessible to the world. As long as we can continue to create a win-win situation for the other players in the family history community, we will continue to invite them to join with us, not just to exchange records,

36 Sunny Morton, Genetic Genealogist Answers 9 Common Questions about DNA Testing, 17 July 2019, <https://www.ldsliving.com/What-You-Need-to-Know-About-DNA-Testing/s/91206> (7 July 2020).

37 Ibid.

38 For example, <https://www.familysearch.org/dna-testing/faq> (7 July 2020).

39 Dennis Brimhall, FamilySearch Partnerships: Some Questions and Answers, FamilySearch Blog, 26 Feb 2014, <https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/questions-answers-familysearch-partners/> (7 July 2020).

40 DNA research in itself is not opposed by Latter-day Saints, who view medical research positively; about 50 per cent of members support stem cell research.

but to continue to innovate and develop the next generation of tools to search, organize, and present these records as well.⁴¹

The LDS millennial horizon envisages the joining-up of the genealogy of all mankind, before resurrection and theogony. In contemplating the ways in which this vision overlaps with that of ventures like AncestryDNA, LDS writers tend to slide towards an accommodationist view of the capacity of such companies to make known genetic connections whether or not those involved are ready to make them into kinship. Sunny Morton advises: “You may need to point out (gently) that because of DNA testing, the situation may eventually become known anyway, and that it may be best to take control of that knowledge and relationship now.” At the same time, LDS genealogy sites offer promotions for paid, commercial services including DNA tests on affiliated sites. The Genealogy Reporter for June 12 2020, for example, highlights (with no apparent sense of irony) “Father’s Day Deals for DNA testing and more!” and notes that “Clicking on links provided in this post may result in a commission being paid to The Genealogy Reporter at no additional cost to you”.⁴² What the cost may be to the LDS genealogical project remains to be seen.

“Ordinary, working people” – kinship and class in English framings

The practice of family history in England inevitably is also class history. This is despite the fact that amateur genealogy rarely presents itself as a politicized enterprise, and class per se may or may not be an explicit topic of discussion among practitioners. The democratization of genealogy, which Weil and others have noted for America, has also taken place in the UK. Genealogy was once most associated with claims to aristocracy, with heraldry and other elite concerns; family history has become a widespread hobby and interest, which is viewed as available to everyone and which engages people from a wide range of working-class and middle-class backgrounds.

What is less often noted is that English family historians themselves are active commentators on these developments, and will readily offer a kind of informal historiography of their pursuit. Everyone I spoke to agreed that the take-off of interest in English family history predated the explosion of internet research, although that had fuelled it. Most people mentioned the impact of the popular TV series *Roots* and the book from which it was adapted and which appealed to English as well as American audiences, conveying the idea that everyone has a history and that ‘ancestors’ have a social and ethical value in themselves.

As I have previously noted, the immediate triggers for people in England to take up family history research are often to do with a sense of personal obligation or intention to research a particular family member, for instance, after a bereavement. The framing of this relationship-making research, however, is to do with thinking about history and usually involves setting

41 Brimhall, FamilySearch Partnerships: Some Questions and Answers.

42 Amie Bowser Tennant, Father’s Day Deals on DNA Testing and More!, in: The Genealogy Reporter, 12 June 2020, <https://thegenealogyreporter.com/fathers-day-deals-on-dna-testing-and-more/> (31 May 2021).

the genealogical lines researched within a sense of their social context. For most people, what felt relevant was to understand connections with kin – or the fracture, rejection, or loss of those connections – in relation to the times and places in which they happened, including the kinds of social pressures which weighed on deceased kin. In my view, therefore, the rise of English family history has to be understood as part of the broader post-war expansion of further education, adult education, and higher education, which increased opportunities for people to engage with the idea of history as an object of study. In academic history, interest in social history and oral history increased. In the same period, national TV and the expanding membership of the National Trust and other heritage institutions offered a broadly compatible view of history (as well as nature) as the possession, endowment, or inheritance of the whole population. To say this is not to suggest that actual access to education and other measures of equality were ideal in this period; they of course were not, and there were profound regional differences of experience and policy inequalities, notably the economic and social devastation of the mining communities under Margaret Thatcher. Until the post-2008 austerity years, however, it was still possible for many people to feel that the post-war settlement, which promised a commitment to greater opportunity and reduced class inequality for the whole nation, was still available as an ideal if not as a fact. To tell a family history story might mean, then, to place one's own family background within a national framing, which promised a progressive movement from a less inclusive to a more inclusive society. Stories about class, which were often critical accounts of painful circumstances, were at the same time usually placed in relation to the sense that present conditions were better for the teller and that the living owed either gratitude to past ancestors for what they had achieved, or recognition of their suffering that had been ignored at the time they lived. Even stories of conflict are recounted within this national imaginary of reconciliation and social progress, although this may be a selective view of the facts.⁴³ Since 2008, many people still feel a deep attachment to and hope for restoration of this narrative, which appeals to supporters of different political parties in different ways, but it has become more difficult to sustain against sharply rising levels of economic inequality.⁴⁴

The relationship between family history, history, and class in England was strikingly illuminated for me by one of my interlocutors, Alys.⁴⁵ For Alys, the sense that family history had become the possession of 'ordinary people' was crucial. She drew a strong distinction between two forms of genealogical society; on the one hand, she said, there are "one-name societies" dedicated to tracing back a particular surname through time and focused on its elite associations and the concept of lineage. Alys herself had experience of these groups, as she

43 See for example a BBC news item and documentary on the twentieth anniversary of the miners' strike, 24 Sept. 2004: "Inside Out; the Miners' Strikes Revisited" which concludes: "The scars of the Miners' Strike remain deep ones, but at least some of the men who once went underground have now found new lives above ground", http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/eastmidlands/series5/miners_strike_coal.shtml (12 July 2020).

44 For a trenchant summary of the effects of austerity policies, see the report of Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, who visited the UK 2018–19. Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, Alston noted that "[a]lthough the United Kingdom is the world's fifth largest economy, one fifth of its population (14 million people) live in poverty, and 1.5 million of them experienced destitution in 2017. Policies of austerity introduced in 2010 continue largely unabated, despite the tragic social consequences", <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/poverty-institute/news/2019/un-rapporteur-final-report.html> (12 July 2020).

45 See Cannell, *Ghosts and Ancestors*, for another discussion.

had assisted with their administration and research. They typically met in exclusive locations, including historic buildings such as Cambridge college rooms. On the other hand, there is family history, which is aligned with local history; people meet informally, in the pub or a village hall or the gym of the local elementary school. They discuss their own family research, and also the history of the area in which they live. They form an audience and also offer lectures, tours, and outings, and often engage with local media such as regional newspapers and local radio stations. They also often raise money together to sustain their local society activities, for example by transcribing hand-written parish archives and offering these digitized records for sale for a modest sum, as CDs and downloads. Family history societies therefore are active and collective agents within the genealogy scene, who may produce, consume, and sustain a particular sense of local history and the place of their own relatives within it.

Family history societies base their community relationships largely on locality but use permeable boundaries. Holding themselves in contrast to the exclusionary outlook of elite one-name groups, they also recognize that people may come to 'belong' locally in different ways. A member of one Yorkshire Family History Society I spoke to at a family history show, for example, explained that he was an active contributing member of his own local society despite having no ancestors of his own who came from the area. His wife had family locally but was not herself so much involved in the society; his own ancestors came from a different region of the country, but he researched them alongside his Yorkshire friends and neighbours whose roots were local. He had also got involved in researching and producing local Yorkshire records for other people to use, although these were not immediately contributing to his own natal family tree.

For active researchers like my Cambridgeshire interlocutor Alys, the commitment to local history can become a passion. Alys emphasized that she felt her research into her own ancestors was part of her work on the past of 'ordinary, working people' in the area. Like several other amateurs, Alys had taught herself to read and transcribe historic handwriting so that she could research archives. She had also acquired a lot of knowledge of the local past and local people's lives. Stories from her own family resonated with the stories of people from different periods of history who were not her own relatives. Like many people, Alys encountered a story of illegitimacy in her own family, which was directly linked to class inequality in recent times; one of her great-aunts, who had worked as a domestic servant on a landed estate, had an illegitimate child, whose father was the local squire. The stigma attached to this event had destructive effects, which played out in her own family over three generations and which her father had made efforts to repair. To think through these personal stories is, at the same time, to reflect on widespread patterns of class and social inequality in English history, and often to do this together with other people; family history then becomes a collective possession.

Family and local historians include people with higher educational and professional degrees in different areas and those with qualifications in academic history and genealogy. They also include many people who are self-taught, keen amateurs, genealogists who have learnt on the job, and people who have acquired a lifetime of expertise about their locality. As their stories indicate, for some people these are milieux in which people themselves acquire skills and find a community that recognizes this. For a significant number of my English interlocutors, this success may be in contrast with experiences of school education, which were disappointing and in which their potential was not fully realized, or life-stories that

cut them off from university education when they were younger. For these constituencies, genealogy is one terrain on which people can themselves become transmitters of knowledge, adding to the ways in which the past is known and interpreted as history. Alys, for example, had created items for local radio on the working past, as well as working on written accounts relating to both her own ancestors and other, unrelated local figures she encountered in the archives and who she felt were speaking to and through her.⁴⁶

It is this shared ground consisting of English genealogy and local history that frames the quotation with which I began this paper. The East Anglian town of Bury St. Edmunds is the sort of place where many people say they would like to live; people who grow up in the area indeed may move away to make careers in London or elsewhere, but many current residents also describe making deliberate decisions to return, to bring up children, or to situate a career change, or perhaps to take early retirement. It is a small market town, site of a major Benedictine monastery and once worldwide pilgrimage site housing the bones and shrine of the miracle working saint and king, Edmund. The remains of the monastery dissolved in the Reformation now frame extensive public gardens set amidst the atmospheric ruins, as well as the present-day cathedral, which – despite looking entirely traditional – is in fact made up of recent extensions in period style to what was once a modest sixteenth-century church. An open, sloping square with a mixture of medieval and Georgian frontages links the gardens to the main streets (also medieval in plan) of a small hill and great variety of quaint shops, cafes, and other amenities, as well as a market square with a lively twice-weekly market.

The town is also home to many civic organizations and local activity groups, including both family historians and local historians, who often carry out some of their research work in the Suffolk Public Records Office, also situated in Bury St. Edmunds. Indeed, residents invest a lot of time, energy, and interest thinking and talking about history through the prism of their own town and region. This is perhaps easier because Bury St Edmunds and its environs, although now relatively speaking a backwater, were significant actors in many of the defining events of English history, including the Reformation, the Civil War, and the First and Second World Wars. Suffolk however was not one of the key areas that was urbanized during the Industrial Revolution; rather, East Anglia, having in earlier periods often been rich from wool, textiles, and agriculture, became an area providing reserve labour to the new factories of the Midlands and the North. Bury St. Edmunds shares the sense of having a lot of history available to consider, in a town that is liveable and not overcrowded.⁴⁷ In addition to the local Family History Society, Bury St. Edmunds is an important hub for a very active circle of amateur, semi-professional, and professional writers of local and regional history. The town's bookshops contain well-stocked local-interest sections with a regular turnover of new titles on Suffolk. Talks and tours by local experts are popular and routinely enjoyed by residents and people from the wider locality. There are some out-of-area tourists in Bury St. Edmunds, especially summer visitors, but this is not a major national or international tourist

46 On the capacities of another kind of English amateur society for social and agentive self-construction, see Adam Reed, *Literature and Agency in English Fiction Reading: A Study of the Henry Williamson Society*, Toronto 2011.

47 Alexandra Goss, *What It's Like to Live in Bury St Edmunds. The Suffolk Town Has Period Character and a Vibrant Social Scene*, 13 October 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/what-its-like-to-live-in-bury-st-edmunds-lmd76m6dw> (13 July 2020).

destination; rather, the town often seems to be enjoying producing and consuming its own history as a communal pleasure.

The town also contains a small local museum, Moyses Hall, housed in part in what was once a debtor's prison. While chatting to one of the museum volunteers there one day, I mentioned one of the sculptures that can be seen in the gardens of the cathedral: a simple, modernist depiction of figures in a stylized boat making their way across a line of undulating waves. It is situated outside the cathedral café, known as the Pilgrims' Refectory, which seems an appropriate link. However, for local residents who take an interest, the boat sculpture is also one token of the many links between Bury St Edmunds and America. The museum staff member recalled that the sculpture (by Suffolk-born artist Jonathan Clarke⁴⁸) supposedly depicts one of the several boats of early Suffolk settlers, many of them Puritans, who left England for America. Specifically, she thought, the boat might refer to the *Godspeed*, in which Bartholomew Gosnold sailed to establish Jamestown in Virginia in 1607. On an earlier trip, where an attempted settlement had ended in failure, Gosnold had already reached Cape Cod and named Martha's Vineyard for his daughter, who had died aged two and is buried in the Great Churchyard in Bury St. Edmunds.⁴⁹

Some members of the Gosnold family, she added, had visited Bury St. Edmunds and she recalled that they had tried to establish their links with local descendants through genetic testing, but the results had come back unexpectedly negative, causing a lot of puzzlement and frustration to all concerned. DNA testing, she remarked, was not the solution to every question; rather, "it sort of gets in the way of history sometimes, doesn't it?"

The volunteer did not offer a specific or technical theory about why the anomalous genetic result had been returned. What came to mind most easily was that the genetic connection between the American and the English Gosnolds had somehow been interrupted – for example by some long-past instance of illegitimacy or adoption in the intervening generations, or some unknown twist to the story involving a branch of the family or a migration of names. DNA testing had produced a disappointment for a wider historical narrative, just as it often produces a jarring result for more immediate family relationality. This, however, was not the central element of interest in the story for the teller, and nor did it figure as a concern for anyone else that I spoke to. In fact, what struck me about this small incident was that at least in this case, the immense reach and claims of commercial genetic genealogy had been downgraded to the status of an entirely familiar sort of glitch in kinship, which, like the previous means by which such glitches could have come to light, had got in the way of history temporarily. One kind of evidence that was expected to help structure the story had instead yielded a disappointment, but history itself remained; the connections between this part of East Anglia and the Puritan Eastern seaboard remained, as did the link via the Gosnolds; it was just that this link turned out to be more complicated and less fully knowable than people had hoped.

Handling twists and turns that complicate a story, and facing setbacks in seemingly promising lines of evidence, are skills that are the stock-in-trade of dedicated family historians. These skills are not only employed in genealogy; rather English family historians tended also to be interested and take part in a range of other history activities and events. History making

48 <http://jonathanclarke.co.uk/gallery/by-type/> (30 May 2021).

49 http://www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/dont_miss/usa/gosnold/gosnold.shtml (30 May 2021).

of this kind is at the interface between different domains and institutions – commercial tours, (promoted for tourism but often locally attended), amateur performances, public heritage, informal involvement with publicly owned buildings and monuments (for instance, regular family trips, or acting as a volunteer gardener), and personal and sometimes speculative reading and special interests.

While individuals might pursue any number of topics of interest, including complex and contentious issues, the wide framing of this civic and amateur history remains a broadly consensual narrative of history as progress towards a more democratic present and away from a less democratic past. Two often-used themes may illustrate this; the Red Barn Murder and sightings of the monks who had formerly inhabited the Benedictine abbey.

The notorious murder of Maria Marten by William Corder is linked to Bury St Edmunds because Corder was eventually tried and hanged there in 1827; many thousands watched him hang. His body was dissected as an anatomy demonstration, and various macabre artefacts were made from his remains, including his skin, which was used to bind a copy of a book detailing his crimes. Marten, from a poor family, had been seduced by wealthier local men ending with Corder, who promised to marry her when she became pregnant with his child, but murdered her instead. The story is often told in local tours of the town and re-told for example in the *East Anglian Daily Times*, to exemplify the newspaper's support for and relationship with the local community and to solicit subscriptions.⁵⁰ While this kind of story might have a commercial pull, it is noticeable that it features in situations where tourist income is not at issue, but local audience consumption is. It stands as one famous instance among the thousands of stories like that of Alys's aunt, where the exploitation of women from poor families and the stigma of illegitimacy go unpunished. These stories had been a source of pain and shame to families, and the work of family historians in recognizing the patterns of common experience, which renders the story as history, helps remove that shame.

Bury St. Edmunds is said to be full of ghosts, and several of them involve the monks of the former abbey, who move about the town in its former geography, including through underground passages believed to have linked ancient buildings.⁵¹ The monks recall to residents a shared version of their town's past, in which ordinary lay people progressively liberated themselves from the abbey, which was a major feudal landlord. This story is intertwined with the idea that the town is a Protestant place, which was critical of the Catholic Church at the Reformation.⁵² These and other presences animate a mapping of the town according to its history, which many residents will refer to in conversation. Strikingly, many residents have memorized the mental image of the former abbey,⁵³ so that they can easily say where in the medieval plan they are standing, or even offer alternative readings of the archaeology and ruins. History as a narrative and an activity is therefore strongly emplaced, and local family historians move through it daily, as well as reading and writing about it. Bury St. Edmunds's sense of itself as a town 'with history' is not new; it was one of the English towns that had the ambition and the budget to mount a historical pageant at the height of the fashionability

50 Stacia Briggs/Siofra Connor, *Weird Suffolk: The Red Barn Murder*, *East Anglian Daily Times*, 18 May 2018, <https://www.eadt.co.uk/news/have-you-heard-of-the-suffolk-red-barn-murder-1-5524681> (12 July 2020).

51 <https://www.paranormaldatabase.com/hotspots/burystedmunds.php> (13 July 2020).

52 Nevertheless, the ghostly monks also allow a kind of access to former religious charisma. On this, and on kinship in place, see Fenella Cannell, *Cathedrals in the Blood, or Why Protestant Places Matter* (in preparation).

53 Artists' impressions are readily available as postcards and books and in the cathedral.

of these enterprises, in 1907, and it held another in 1959; many of the players from the latter pageant are still active in town societies. Although the two pageants were quite different, both emphasized the link between the town and Magna Carta, and so with the traditional account of the origins of English Parliament.⁵⁴

More broadly, English family history has developed as a series of regional groups for the exploration of genealogy together with locality, by residents. Although people can join these groups from elsewhere, a central interest is in investigating antecedents who lived in the same region as their descendants, the researchers. Interest is focused on aspects of collective experience, for which documentary evidence is often plentiful. These forms of practice will encounter genetic genealogy rather differently⁵⁵ compared to certain diasporic projects, in which DNA may figure as the only means to recover undocumented relationality.⁵⁶

Coda

Neither of the two family history practices I have described here are at first sight particularly aligned to genetic genealogy, when compared to arenas such as research into prehistory or inherited medical conditions. Neither American LDS nor English amateur family historians consider biological connection to be sufficient on its own, without complex social practices of person-making and relation-making. LDS doctrine in fact teaches that all persons and relationships originate in a premortal existence prior to the physical body.⁵⁷ One might expect that this religious view of relatedness would therefore be underdetermined by the role of DNA. Since 2014, however, the affiliation between LDS FamilySearch and commercial companies including AncestryDNA seems to have weakened the distinction between millennial universalism and commercial universalism. English citizens are no less vulnerable to data harvesting, and idioms of English history are certainly vulnerable to nationalistic distortions.⁵⁸ However, regional family history practices, at present, seem less open to existential reconfiguration by the hyper-valuation of genetic evidence of belonging.

54 The barons met at Bury St. Edmunds in 1214 to discuss their rebellion against King John. Some photographs of the 1907 pageant and text describing it are digitised at <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk/featured-pageants/pageant-bury-st-edmunds-1907/> as part of the project “The Redress of the past; historical pageants in Britain”.

55 The site Family Tree DNA East Anglia, running since 2006, lists 524 members at time of writing, and does not appear very active. The site aims to recruit regional DNA submissions to supplement traditional genealogy (for instance, where surnames are lost or altered) and, secondarily, to enquire into prehistoric haplogroups. <https://www.familytreedna.com/groups/east-anglia/about> (13 July 2020).

56 Although, as Abel has shown, among populations historically affected by slavery, DNA research has been taken up much more enthusiastically in the United States than is the case elsewhere. Abel, *Of African Descent?*, 11.

57 See Cannell, *The Re-Enchantment of Kinship*.

58 As evidenced in the politics of Brexit, in which, again, data mining appears to have played a key role: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jul/30/cambridge-analytica-did-work-for-leave-eu-emails-confirm> (14 July 2020).