



Help! Historical and Genealogical Truth: How do I separate fact from fiction?

Carol Baxter

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We sit at our computer searching for information about our ancestors and ... click ... we find something new and intriguing. But wait: it contradicts something else we've found. Clearly, both pieces of information can't be true. So which is true and which isn't? Or are both untrue? HELP! Most family historians are more adept at gathering information than determining if it is accurate. An error can prove disastrous, gobbling up our precious time and money as we search in the wrong place – or worse, as we pursue the wrong ancestral line. So how do we ensure that our conclusions are accurate? "Help! Historical and Genealogical Truth: How do I separate fact from fiction?" is a 'must-read' for family history detectives wishing to accurately trace their ancestry. Written in Carol Baxter's easy-to-read style, it explains how to evaluate our ancestral information so as to determine which is reliable and which is like a virus that corrupts our efforts. After reading this book, you too will be able to separate fact from fiction, truth from mistruth. Your ancestors will thank you!

Abridged review from 'The Ancestral Searcher' (HAGSOC) written by Eleanor Vardanega: The purpose of this book is to assist family historians to develop skills in accurately interpreting the information they have collected about their ancestors. Many people spend considerable time and money gathering information, so it makes sense you would want to be confident that this information actually relates to the correct (usually your) family and the conclusions that are drawn are accurate and defensible. This book provides a rigorous and systematic approach to getting at the truth. As set out in the book, this process of getting at the truth is divided into 'principles' - the foundations of evidence analysis, and 'practices' - typical strategies which may be used to put the principles into practice aided by the use of conflict resolution skills. These strategies are illustrated through a series of case studies involving family identity, family lore and how misinformation can take on a life of its own ... The 'principles' chapters cover the key concepts, the nature of their systematic application and the reliability of various types of evidence, including family stories. The diagrams illustrate and emphasise the key points of several important concepts ... In terms of the 'practices', each chapter illustrates typical complications of evidence and an appropriate strategy to deal with it. For example, the author refers to Ockham's Razor (p.73) in the context of developing theories to explain inconsistencies, glitches and oddities in family history records. Basically, this means that among competing theories, first go for simplicity. By way of simple explanations of record oddities, people make mistakes because they are tired or distracted, or have protected a reputation, or put too much faith in someone else's recollections. Chapter 15 struck me as a particularly interesting coverage of people's unmovable belief in a certain historical result or outcome which is virtually impossible to shift regardless of the weight of evidence to the contrary ... The two page Summary Check at the end of the book is useful for historians at all levels of skills and experience. I found it a useful device to run over a recent article that I thought was just about finished. It really helped the tidy-up pre publication ... Overall, this book is easy to read, with short chapters broken up with diagrams and case studies. The case studies are detailed enough to illustrate the lesson and very interesting in themselves ... There are plenty of books and websites out there to assist people with the accumulation phase, roadblocks and brick walls. This book fills an important need around the quality control of your information, write-up and conclusions, by providing theoretical principles, practical exercises and lessons in understanding historical context and human motivation.

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