

Editorial – Pearls for the ancestors

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... one of the things ... I learned from both my mother and my dad ... is that ... wanting to make the world a better place is (part of) ... a tradition that's probably been going on for as long as people have been around. And that is a wonderful thing for a young person to discover ... that he or she is not the beginning of a thing but somewhere in the middle of a long line of people It gives you the ability ... to ... that you don't have to finish a job within the space of a lifetime. It takes a lot of pressure off if you know that all you have to do is to link up to the future. That's the job of being a human ... to make the connection to the future and hold on to the connection to the past. (Arlo Guthrie, US National Public Radio, 20 April 1985)

What is the reason for the current truly enormous interest in tracing one's own and other people's ancestry? In this issue we print articles both about Morris's mother's lineage, and that of his father, about which, for the moment at least, rather less is known. Of course, genealogy is also a professional discipline, requiring considerable knowledge and skill, but visit any UK County Record Office on any day, and you will probably meet at least one person intent on tracing their ancestry: many of these offices have long geared themselves up for this enthusiasm. I must declare that some years ago, I too became interested in this very subject – there are, apparently, some thirty million people on this planet who can claim Irish ancestry – and although I am afraid I have left the overwhelming bulk of the work to my cousin, I continue to be fascinated by her findings.

One key factor is, of course, the Internet, which means that much of this kind of activity can now be conducted from home, and, in theory anyway, at a faster rate, although that may also be a myth. And then there are numerous courses in tracing ones ancestors – some of them run or advertised by the same Record Offices – and television programmes on the same subject, although, of course

these have soon become preoccupied with ‘celebrity’.

Beyond this, I believe that there may be in many of us (but not, I am assured by a colleague, *all* of us) some basic need to find out not just who we are, and where we are from – although modern preoccupation with the self may be important here – but also the sequence of historical events leading to where we are, and *who* we are, today – hence my reference above to Arlo Guthrie. Many of us find that the answers to such questions often involve our ancestors’ lives being touched by great events – Enclosure, the Highland Clearances. For example, our grandfather, a British soldier threatened in 1917 with assassination by Irish Republicans, decided to ‘hide out’ in Wiltshire, the home of his then regiment. Without that death threat, none of my immediate family would be who and where they are today. But it was not until I saw *The Plough and the Stars*, and realised that the same regiment (but not his battalion) was responsible for ‘mopping up’ in Dublin after the 1916 Easter Rising, that I realised just how dangerous our grandfather’s life must have been at that particular time.

Further beyond, I believe that interest in one’s origins – in some of us anyway – is an expression of unease at the rootless life which modernity has imposed upon us. A second important factor – it is mostly more mature people who are interested in such matters – may, in the UK, be the 1944 Education Act, which widened access, albeit selective, to secondary education, followed by the Robbins Report on Higher Education (1963) which did much the same for universities. Both of these major educational changes created a generation uprooted from their homes and sent to study, and then to work, in places they had not grown up in. While at first they also produced new kinds of films, and a new literature, both depicting aspects of life in Britain previously ignored by elite media (for example, ‘kitchen sink’ television plays), those of us who are not film directors, novelists or playwrights need some other means of expression. Hence the interest, I think, in tracing one’s ancestry.

And rootlessness is indeed both a modern phenomenon, and a phenomenon of modernity. For example, in his study of the Parliamentary Enclosures, Mark Overton (*The Agricultural Revolution in England. The transformation of the agrarian economy, 1500-1850*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 257 pp.), points out that in 1500, most people in England made their living by farming of some kind, and that most farmers assumed that their children and their grandchildren would continue to do so, in much the same way, and in the same place. By 1800 this was no longer the case. And in his wonderful study of the !Kung San of the Kalahari (*The !Kung San: Men, Women and Work in a Foraging Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 526 pp.), Richard Lee explained how the practise of ‘bride service’ (also found among ‘first nation’ Australians) meant that each member of the band was conceived on one location (the ‘little N!ore’), but raised in another (the ‘big N!ore’), a practice which served to spread

the impact of the population across the landscape during times of dearth. But what it also meant was that the !Kung San, like many forager people, felt themselves and their ancestors to be intimately connected to the land of both N!ores – hence their usual enormous reservations about being forced to die away from what was both figuratively, and for them literally, their ancestral home.

Neolithic peoples also possess cosmologies which express intimate links between living and dead, time and place. For example, in *Pigs for the Ancestors. Ritual in the ecology of a New Guinea people* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, 502 pp.) Roy Rappaport explains how the Tsembaga Maring of modern Papua New Guinea conceive the entire valley in which they live to consist of a ‘cool, damp’ lower zone possessed by the ‘wet spirits’ (or the ‘spirits of rot’; those who govern the lower body, and diseases of the gut) to which wastes can (and should) be conveyed, a middle zone inhabited by the living devoted to horticulture, and a hot, dry upper region which is the home of the ‘Red Spirits’ (those who control the upper body and respiratory disease; the ancestors) from where nothing can be taken without their express permission. Similar cosmologies expressing the essential role of water in connecting people, food production and pollution also exist on Bali. And it is also said that on Morris’s beloved Iceland, many people can recite their ancestry back to initial Norse arrival in 874 CE.

Morris’s concept of history is, of course, explained in *A Dream of John Ball*:

... I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name ...

but his vision was not a ‘progressive’ one, and he did not subscribe to what he termed the ‘Whig’ version of history. Instead what Morris saw in history was a continual struggle on the part of ordinary people to protect their livelihood, and the land which supported them, especially from the landlord. Indeed, one of the rebels’ demands in the same Peasants Revolt of 1381 depicted in *John Ball* was that all church lands should be released and given over to cultivation by the common people. The UK Miner’s Strike of 1984–1985 can also be seen as an attempt to protect both livelihoods and a way of life from ‘modernisation’.

Given discussions last year concerning the history curriculum in UK secondary schools, and current debates regarding the causes and the conduct of what my parents’ generation always called ‘The Great War’, it is to Orwell, and to 1984 and one of the slogans of Ingsoc that I would turn for another possible explanation as to why so many people are today so keen to learn about their origins:

Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past

to which we could add 'Whoever controls the past controls the present'. This last is a key policy component of the current UK Secretary of State for Education, who has sought to control both the present and the future by purging the history curriculum of 'irrelevant' topics, and replacing them first with 'Fergusonism' – an emphasis on 'greatness' and Empire – and a parallel trend toward what we might term 'Starkeyism' (or indeed 'Mantelism') – a preoccupation with the doings of royalty and its lackeys. But the way was paved for this exercise by the 'modernising' project of 'New Labour', in which, as in *The Glittering Plain* (as explained by Terence Hoagwood, *JWMS*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, Winter 2008, p. 11) in a 'land of lies', the past was forgotten in pursuit of 'pleasure without cease', and 'no dream but the end of dreams' – almost a perfect description of Tony Blair's Britain.

I therefore see 'tracing ones ancestors' as one sign of what I would regard as a healthy refusal to adopt two of the key tenets of modernity – that history is progress, and that the past is therefore at best as 'quaint' as Flora Post would have regarded it, or at worst, 'irrelevant'. As such it is part of a complex of 'greening' issues explored some years ago now by Jan Marsh in *Back to the Land*.

In addition to Dorothy Coles and Barbara Lawrence's study of Morris's paternal ancestry, and David Everett's monumental investigation into Morris's mother's Worcester origins, we also publish articles by Roger Simpson on Morris's unpublished Arthurian translations, by Peter Faulkner on Jane Morris and her male correspondents, and the second part of Stephen Williams's study of Georgiana Burne-Jones in Rottingdean, this time for the period 1904-1920. We also print reviews of a new edition of what has long been key work for Morris scholars – Linda Parry's beautifully authoritative study of *William Morris Textiles*, and of further books on W.G Collingwood's *Travels in Iceland 1897*; on the memoirs of Gary Sargeant regarding the group of artists who helped found the William Morris Gallery; two separate publications on the Arts and Crafts Movement in Yorkshire, and in the North East of England, and a further book on the same movement in Scotland; on Arts and Crafts embroidery; on *Victoria's Madmen* (a title whose explanation I leave to the reviewer); on the life of Penelope Fitzgerald, whose book on Burne-Jones is still greatly relied on by contributors to this *Journal*; of the life, times and thought of the anarchist writer and activist Colin Ward, and of a comparative study of three very different nineteenth-century authors – Jules Verne, Morris and Robert Louis Stevenson.

We also welcome to the Editorial Advisory Board John Purkis, who has long given great service to the Society, and to this editor in particular, and Dr Anna Vaninskaya, who, as a younger scholar than many of us, represents the future. I am grateful to both of them for agreeing to give up their time in order to assist the editorial process.