

Carol Baxter, *Help! Historical and Genealogical Truth: How do I separate fact from fiction?*, History Detective Enterprises, Sydney, 2015, ISBN: 978 0 9807046 2 4, \$22.00 plus postage, 133pp, paperback

Carol Baxter, *Help! Why Can't I Find My Ancestor's Surname?*, History Detective Enterprises, Sydney, 2015, ISBN: 978 0 9807046 3 1, \$27.50 plus postage, 301pp, paperback with two cheat sheets:

- *Common English Female Given Names: 1750-1830 and Common English Male Given Names: 1750-1830*
- *Letters and Sounds of British and Irish Surnames - Table 1 Vowel sounds and spellings in British and Irish surnames and Table 2 Letters and consonant sounds of British and Irish surnames*

I have personally known Carol Baxter for many years and we have both participated in a number of [Unlock the Past](#) (UTP) seminars and genealogy cruises. Therefore I am pleased to have the opportunity to review her two latest *Help!* publications for family historians.

Help! Historical and Genealogical Truth: How do I separate fact from fiction? consists of two parts. Part 1 looks at Principles, Part 2 examines Practices with a summary check list, endnotes, acknowledgements, bibliography and index.

Principles looks at evidence analysis - are we accurately interpreting the evidence we obtain on our families? There are 13 principles discussed in this first part and while some are obvious, others are not. They are:

- historical detection 101
- begin at the beginning
- leave no stone unturned
- unsubstantiated history is mythology
- evidence analysis models
- start with the source, of course
- authored works
- the horse's mouth
- rotten teeth
- evidence
- objectivity
- proof of the truth
- the world won't end

Most readers will have come across some of these principles in their own research and will be able to think of examples based on their own experience. The use of case studies from Baxter's other books also help to show specific examples of each principle.

There are 14 practices discussed in Part 2 and again some are obvious with case studies used to illustrate what is meant. The practices are:

- the simplest strategy of all

- everyone is entitled to their beliefs
- building a theory
- copycat history
- assess the evidence trend
- reverse engineer other's research
- bridge the gap
- knowledge is power
- making sense of common sense
- seek the source
- what's in it for me?
- warning bells
- and round and round we go
- where to from here?

We probably all currently do and or have done one or more of these practices but it is a good refresher to read about a practice in someone else's words. It makes us stop and rethink what we are doing and do we need to change something.

The summary check list is exactly that - a two page summary of the 13 principles and 14 practices. But it would be a mistake to simply look at that and not read the rest of the book as there are lots more tips and lessons scattered throughout the book.

The endnotes refer to genealogical text books as well as publications mentioned in the case studies. There are a few books that I will be tracking down to read myself. These works are also included in the bibliography along with all of Baxter's publications which are the basis for many of her case studies.

I find Baxter's style of writing very similar to her speaking style - very easy and quick to read. Sometimes I find it useful to slow down and reread a section to make sure I have totally understood her point. With lots of good ideas and habits for beginners it is also useful for more experienced researchers to read as a refresher publication.

Help! Why Can't I Find My Ancestor's Surname? was not as easy a read as the previous book but I found it much more useful for my own family history research. This book is also a series of parts following a general introduction. Part 1 is Surnames with 22 sub parts on all aspects of surnames and why surnames may be recorded wrongly. Part 2 is all about Surname Letters and these are listed from A to Z. Part 3 looks at Surname Vowel Sounds.

Finally there is an Appendix, Glossary, Endnotes, Bibliography and Index. The latter is subdivided into general terms, letters, capital letter exchanges, lower case letter exchanges, vowel sounds in b..d form and vowel sounds/letters.

I have no familiarity with phonetics or linguistics and I did struggle with some of these concepts. The use of many examples helped me to visualise what was meant and to see how some surnames could totally change just by being pronounced differently. Substituting letters that sound the same is one example.

This is probably more of a reference book that you refer back to on a regular basis than one that you read from cover to cover , although you do need to do that in the first instance to get a total overview of the book. The cheat sheet on *Letters and Sounds of British and Irish Surnames - Table 1 Vowel sounds and spellings in British and Irish surnames and Table 2 Letters and consonant sounds of British and Irish surnames* condenses this information and has direct page references for further information.

The second cheat sheet *Common English Female Given Names: 1750-1830 and Common English Male Given Names: 1750-1830* includes variant spellings and abbreviations. Some I was familiar with but others I had not seen before so again a useful tool to refer to if someone is not showing up in a database or index.

Both publications are a useful addition to a home library or ready reference in a local genealogy or family history society library collection. The next time I am stuck on how to think of another way to spell someone's name I will be reaching for *Help! Why Can't I Find My Ancestor's Surname?* to get more ideas. I will certainly be referring other researchers to both books in my own presentations and publications.

What didn't I like? With *Help! Historical and Genealogical Truth: How do I separate fact from fiction?*, I would have liked to see more varied case studies. Many related to Thunderbolt and Mary Ann Bugg and examples from other families would have given the book a wider context. With *Help! Why Can't I Find My Ancestor's Surname?* I could not quite get my head around all the phonetics and linguistics which I did find confusing. Fortunately this does not stop you from grasping the different name variants.

Baxter has five other popular history/true crime thrillers - *Breaking the Bank: an extraordinary colonial robbery*; *An Irresistible Temptation: the true story of Jane New and a colonial scandal* ; *Captain Thunderbolt & His Lady : the true story of bushrangers Frederick Ward and Mary Ann Bugg*; *The Peculiar Case of the Electric Constable: a true tale of passion, poison and pursuit*; and *Black Widow: the true story of Australia's first female serial killer*.

More detailed information is available on [Carol Baxter's website](http://www.carolbaxter.com.au) and the books can be ordered online.

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