

Book Reviews

Common People: The History of an English Family

ALISON LIGHT

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Any book endorsed on its front cover by Margaret Drabble as ‘a worthy successor to E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*’ promises to be remarkable. And she is not wrong. Alison Light, grammar school girl, Cambridge graduate, independent writer and critic, itinerant academic, and life-long socialist has written a great work of social history, a family history of the best kind; and because it is the story of her own family it is also an intensely personal journey of self-discovery. Yet at the same time, for those of ordinary English descent, it is the story of us all. More generally still, it is an extended reflection on the nature of family memory.

To begin with, Light, without any idea of where her family came from, had little to go on. Some family recollections relating to her grandparents, a few copies of birth certificates, but no letters, diaries or memoirs, not even a family Bible, and only a single photo album were all she had to help her. Only one grandmother, Lillian, was part of her childhood. Initially, she imagined tracing her antecedents would lead her back to a single home area; the truth, as she subsequently discovered, was very different.

Starting with her father’s mother, Evelyn, who died when her father was a child, Light, using all the available resources familiar to the modern genealogist, systematically traces back her origins five generations along all lines, maternal as well as paternal, in some cases back to the seventeenth century – thirty families all told (two were untraceable). But the great majority of the people in her story are from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As she observes, there is a crucial difference between family history and academic writing. Family research easily leaps decades and generations in great bounds but is seldom seamless, whereas academic studies are typically more circumscribed. At the same time, that family history need lack nothing in rigour or sense of context, Light shows in spades. She writes:

At its best ... family history is a trespasser, disregarding the boundaries between local and national, private and public, and ignoring the hedges around fields of academic study; taking us by surprise into unknown worlds. (p.xxviii)

She does, however, caution:

None of that makes it automatically democratic or radical in outlook. It can be profoundly conservative, upholding the idea that blood must always be thicker than the more fluid bonds of a civil society where strangers work out how to live together. (As above)

The skill and imagination with which Light deploys all available records, particularly but by no means exclusively the English censuses from 1841, enabled her to create a vast social panorama that illuminates English society at its lowest levels over three centuries. For what Light discovers about herself is that she is irretrievably English and, like practically all of us, from the poorer classes: in 1900 85% of people were of that kind. More precisely, Light finds that her family is southern English; however, not from a single area as she first imagined, but with ancestors variously from Berkshire, Birmingham, Cheltenham, London, Norwich, Poole, and most recently Portsmouth where she had her own childhood. A single outlier is Haverfordwest in Wales, but hardly less English. Their occupations included Baptist minister, bricklayer, builder, dockyard worker, farm labourer, footman, innkeeper, mariner, needle maker, paraffin seller, pawnbroker, rag picker, saddler, stays maker, and servant. In a newly urbanized, industrial England, they mostly led precarious and migratory lives, constantly on the move in search of better prospects, which nevertheless could and sometimes did end in the poorhouse or the asylum, or more frequently an impoverished old age. Insecure and poor accommodation, indifferent health and irregular wages, all bedfellows of poverty, were the norm. Great-grandmother Sarah was born 1858 in the Cheltenham poorhouse, of father unknown, and died 1911 in an asylum. Only one branch of the family, the Lights of Portsmouth, building contractors (distantly related but not previously known to Alison) rose to prosperity.

In the course of the story's telling, fascinating vignettes emerge of the needle making industry in Warwickshire, rural non-conformity in Wiltshire, social life of the Portsmouth dockyards, the development and operation of the poor law at the Cheltenham workhouse, the bricklaying industry, the North Atlantic fishery out of Poole, naval life, the Women's

Forage Corps during World War One, and the Netherne county asylum, part of a Surrey cluster.

As well as the English censuses, a sore reminder of what we have lost here in New Zealand, the author makes careful use of wide range of other relevant sources, official and private, mostly to be found in local county record offices, including workhouse and asylum records, church archives, rate books, and assize records. Equally impressive is her use of contemporary published sources and command of more recent academic writing.

In New Zealand, we need family histories like this. While, alas, we do not have the census records, we do have many other sources, including our excellent BMD, church and school records, that would go a long way to making good the gap. The published results of the Caversham project show what is possible when a multiplicity of sources is brought to bear on a single area. Family history research in New Zealand is far more rigorous, sophisticated and context aware than it was forty years ago, but it still tends to be selective in the lines investigated and the preserve of those families who have largely succeeded in life. Not least amongst the merits of Light's history is its democratic approach, non-selective as she can make it, and equally attentive to failure as success. Further, her perceptions of the human condition are extraordinarily acute in their reach and colour. What does it mean to have ancestors? What do we owe them? What can they give us? Light has her own answers, as well as questions, for herself. In doing so, she leads us to ask our own questions.

The back cover has a final endorsement by Jerry White, author of *London in the Nineteenth Century*, 'Beautifully written and exhaustively researched Alison Light makes her family speak for England.' So she does, but also for the poor everywhere. This book doesn't just deserve to become a classic. It already is.

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