

Family History Projects

By Julian C Walton, Sutton Park School

As genealogy has been a hobby of mine since boyhood, I suppose it was inevitable that when I took over the teaching of history at Sutton Park two years ago I would soon have my pupils tracing their family histories. At any rate, I launched my First Year of 1984 into a genealogical project, and repeated the process in 1985.

These were classes of twelve-year-old boys and girls of very mixed ability and background: middle class, mainly suburban, sometimes non-national. There were several reasons for choosing the young children for this exercise. Principally, I hoped that the eagerness and lack of inhibition associated with that age-group would overcome barriers that might, get in the way of older pupils. One quakes at the idea of a family history project foisted onto a mid- teenager who may already have enough problems in dealing with his relations.

To expect children of this age to use standard ,genealogical sources would require more planning and experience than I had at my command, though I have no doubt it can be done. Instead, I expected them to extract the material from their relatives (hopefully most. pupils could produce at least one grandparent) and such documents as the home could provide. In point of fact, it has been my experience that even the most unexpected homes can produce a surprising amount of documentation.

It may well be asked what is the value of doing a family history at all. I would give three reasons. In the first place, it is an activity which can generate much enthusiasm- among most pupils, despite their initial misgivings; furthermore, it is something with which parents can help the children, indeed they are essential to it. Secondly, it leads pupils back to the rock from which they were hewn' and helps them to find an aspect of their identity in a world of bewildering change. Thirdly, it relates national and even world history to the pupil's own environment: by discovering how the events of history affected members of his family, and how they helped to shape those events, a youngster finds in an unexpectedly direct way that history is about real people after all.

I started them'on the work by asking them to f ind out the answers to a number of questions, such as: What part of Ireland (or elsewhere) did your ancestors come from? What were their occupations? What kind of lives did they led? How did they experience the historic events of their time? Events which had occured in the pupils own lifetime were cited for comparison. Did any of

your relatives emigrate, and if so to where? Pupils were asked to compile their family trees, and show how to do so, with a couple of pupils being taken as examples.

The reaction of parents was usually favourable, sometimes enthusiastic. However, not surprisingly, there were objections. 'Our family affairs are not business of Mr. Walton's,' was one reported reaction. Moreover, any teacher who knows his pupils' backgrounds will feel that there are some things it might be best for the child not to know, or at least not yet or in this manner.

To foist a compulsory genealogical project upon such unwilling participants is obviously out of the question. There *must* be an alternative which, while preserving to some extent the family aspect of the project, does not intrude upon people's privacy. One possibility is the title 'The years 1900-1985 as experienced by my family', which allows a greater stress on national events, and a greater use of secondary sources. Alternatively, a report could be compiled on the origins of the family name and on famous people associated with it. With the help of MacLysaght's *Irish Families*, the pupil could find the coats of arms associated with his surname and could reproduce them; however, it needs to be explained that a coat of arms is granted to an individual person and should only be borne by him and his descendants - not by other bearers of the same name.

Some pupils professed themselves unequal to the work. Usually, however, their inability proved to be caused by lethargy or inexperience of any form of project work, and could be overcome by either firmness or further advice. A more serious form of objection was voiced by a small boy who said: 'My grandfather comes from a farm in County Clare and we have no family papers. What can I write about?' My reply was: 'Go home and ask your grandfather to tell you what his life was like when he was your age. I think you'll find it was a bit different from yours.' The project that resulted gave a vivid picture of life on a small Co. Clare farm in the early years of the century, and was one of the best in the class.

In fact, the projects produced many surprises, not least in the number of interesting ancestors the pupils turned out to have. An American boy had written assiduously to relatives in the States and produced an elaborate pedigree, all compiled by himself, tracing the family back to its 18th century European roots. An American girl turned out to have had two great-aunts on board the *Titanic*, and she made good use of the letters they had written after the shipwreck. A Dublin boy wrote of his grandfather's participation in the Easter Week rising and subsequent internment in Frongoch, where he wrote 'Wrap the Green Flag round me'.

Not all the projects were good, of course. One lesson I learned was that an interesting background does not mean an interesting project: some pupils who I knew had the materials for a first-class project produced only mediocre work. But the converse is also true: keen pupils produced excellent work from what at first sight had appeared to be only meagre resources.

We should end on a warning note: the sources upon which such projects are based are in danger. The massive destruction of documents by some public authorities is a scandal which needs to be better known; but similar though smaller scale damage is often caused when a family or a business moves house, or even has a spring clean. Even more serious is the fate of the wealth of oral material preserved by the older generation of today, the last to have lived in 'traditional' Ireland. When they die, their lore dies with them, unless it is recorded. To return to the boy who wrote the project on his grandfather's childhood in Co. Clare. A few weeks after handing in his project, he was missing from school for a few days. 'Where were you, Michael?' I asked when he returned. 'Oh,' he replied dolefully, my granddad is after dying ... I got my project finished just in time, didn't I?" He had learned a valuable lesson.

(Based on a talk given to the HTAI in Waterford on 12 October 1985)