

How to Write like a Historian.....Without being one. Part 1

By Laura Suchan

“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”

Rudyard Kipling (1865- 1936)

As part of the advanced memoir writing class I teach, one of the main assignments is for the participants to write a brief narrative linking their family history to historical events happening on a local, national or international scale.<sup>1</sup> As long as they place their family history into historical context they may choose whatever theme they wish. I must admit I enjoy the looks of confusion, and in some cases fear, on their faces as the writers wonder how to do this.

It takes me some time to convince the members of my class that by putting to paper family stories they are engaging in social history, the study of the lives of everyday, ordinary people. For most of us ordinary people would accurately describe our ancestors. Katherine Scott Sturdevant, a college history professor and author of *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History* defines social history as the study of history from the bottom up, not focusing on the lives and habits of the rich or elite, but rather on the ordinary citizens. “Having a social history perspective means that one sees historical events as they affected groups collectively, not just as they affected exceptional people individually.”<sup>2</sup> Sturdevant encourages her students to consider everything in their family history fits within a larger historical context of events. “Human nature follows patterns... Finding the appropriate context means understanding your family, its background, its motives, and its prejudices. It means telling a story rather than reciting facts.”<sup>3</sup> Family stories become richer when they

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<sup>1</sup> Narrative –is defined as a story or account of events, experiences, a message that tells the particulars of an act or occurrence or course of events; presented in writing or drama or cinema or as a radio or television program narrative.

Dictionary.com. *WordNet*® 2.1. Princeton University. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/narrative> (accessed: March 06, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Sturdevant, “Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History” ( Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000) pg 6

<sup>3</sup> Sturdevant, pg 198.

are told within a social history context. They no longer contain only names and dates but draw in historical events and experiences taking place on a wider scale.

As an example, the Oshawa Historical Society launched a project in 2003 to collect and present the personal memories of those living in Oshawa during the Second World War. The objective, apart from preserving these stories, was to illustrate how events in the national and international sphere played an important role in the lives of ordinary citizens. These personal reminiscences contributed to the historical record of Canada's role during, and in response to, the War. Project participants were proud to consider their memories becoming part of the historical record.

By following a few simple guidelines writers can learn to enrich their stories with social history concepts. These guidelines are useful for memoir writing, other nonfiction writing and will even lend a rich texture to historical based fiction writing.

1. Be prepared to do your research and always check and recheck your facts. It's good practice to always reference your material and cite a source. Completing this step as you go along will save you having to search out a reference at a later date. Be critical of your sources and their reliability. Keeping in mind the difference between primary and secondary research material will help you assess validity of your sources.

### Primary Material

In history primary material is first hand, original accounts of historical figures and events that tell a story of the past. These sources are generally owned or created by someone who witnessed the event. These sources may be unpublished and found in private collections, museums, archives and libraries. Examples include diaries, personal letters, newspapers, photographs, autobiographies, maps, speeches, interviews, reports of organizations, statistics and government documents.

### Secondary Material

Secondary material refers to second hand narrated reports or descriptions of the past. This material may contain an argument or bias and is interpretations of other texts, data and ideas. Secondary material is often created after the actual events of

the time. Examples include textbooks, historical movies, historical novels and biographies.

2. Ask yourself the 5 familiar questions, who, what, why, where and when (and how) but expand the focus of the questions to include the time your family lived, groups your family was a part of or the events you are writing about. A social history view would look something like the following;

Question	Traditional View	Social History View
Who	Name, usually of an individual	Refers to a group, class, community
What	What did the character do?	What happened around them, what events were taking place, what trends can you identify.
When	A date	Time period, an era based on a theme
Where	Place name	The character of a place, a community, region
Why	Individual reasons, causes	Group motives, exterior influences, motivating behaviours.
How	How did he do it?	How did everyone around him do it? What was typical? What was not?

In Part 2, I discuss ways to organize historical information and using historical context to make your writing more than just names and dates.