

Selling Ancestry: Family Directories and the Commodification of Genealogy in Eighteenth Century Britain, by Stéphane Jettot, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, 386pp., £100.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780192865960

Studies of primary sources are often very useful to students and historians working with those types of source material but lack the bite of more weighty studies. Stéphane Jettot's volume manages to be both useful and engaging, adding to our knowledge of both the directories and of eighteenth-century Britain. Family directories are, as he rightly asserts, fascinating and important volumes, containing a wealth of information on elite families and, as he shows convincingly, a wider scope of history. He is also surely justified in suggesting that we know so very little about these documents because historians have sought to distance themselves from genealogical research. *Family Directories* shows that we should take far more notice of them. The directories of this period between the end of heraldic visitations in late seventeenth century and the development of nineteenth century genealogies, such as *Burke's* and *Debrett's* are even less well known. Yet it was in this period that family histories were published at a national level for the first time, allowing for a wider dissemination and engagement with them than functioned through the College of Arms. We are introduced to the varied uses that directories were put to in the past, the changing market for these volumes from the families with entries in them to middling sort antiquarians, the way in which directories cut across family belonging and relationships and the important political and satirical role that directories could have.

The scope and range of different types of volumes is surprising, from the pocket editions carried on the person to the very expensive folios with long and detailed genealogies of only the most noble families. The publishers of the more detailed volumes aspired to have their directories sit alongside the more prestigious general histories of England, thereby situating the families included in them within those histories. The listing of elites in directories published at a national level, and the booksellers that marketed them in London, were part of the urban renaissance and the rise of politeness in the eighteenth century. Bookshops were centres for polite sociability and directories included advice on addressing and engaging the gentry and aristocracy in polite conversation. Jettot argues that directories and genealogies were highly political documents. Directories, and those that produced them, were (unsurprisingly) generally conservative and anti-revolutionary in outlook, seeking to emphasise the value of longevity and permanence in the social structure and to valorise the role of the landed nobility and gentry at key points in the national story.

However, they could have unintended consequences, being re-purposed for radical or reformist purposes. This took various forms. Some, such as Rev. Robert Smyth Rev Robert Smyth of Woodston annotated the margins of their volumes for particular individuals or families with 'eulogy and blame', noting their wrongdoings and misadventures as well as their, sometimes, false claims to nobility. He based his judgements on the history of the family, the extent of their lands, their confessional practices, the contributions they'd made to art, literature or science, their commitment to charity and philanthropy. These notes were gossipy, often dwelling on wayward aristocratic women and sexual misadventures, and they expressed both moral disapproval and the pleasure derived from telling salacious stories about the rich and famous. As Jettot notes, 'Smyth shared a growing belief among the public that many titled families did not live up to their honorific status.' These annotations belonged to the radical and reformist critiques of aristocracy unleashed during the later eighteenth

century. Some even published gossip about families in their directories, focussing on corruption, the moral shortcomings of elites, concerns about particular peers, sexual scandals and wrongdoings. There were also 'satirical' volumes of genealogies, falsified for political and humorous effect, such as Frederic Barlow's *Peerage* in which he questioned the moral value of nobility, lampooned their mottos, and blamed the, especially Lord North, for the loss of the American Wars.

The most interesting material, certainly for this reader, concerns the correspondence between the families and the publishers. Often these concerned errors in the genealogies, or complaints about the order of precedence that was lost in the alphabetisation of family names. It is also clear from the letters that aristocratic families used the volumes to navigate elite society, particularly families new to the landed orders. But the letters covered a very broad range of themes and intentions, and a range of family members including women and collateral branches. Correspondents tended to pick and choose particular examples of how ancestors that contributed to British history often citing their role in the Civil War but rarely mentioning the Glorious Revolution. Professional and mercantile origins were more likely to be revealed than any industrial heritage. The Colonial gentry and planters, with slave estates in the West Indies, claimed Norman ancestors or some level of longevity to mask their colonial background but hid their links to slavery. Genealogies were, like country houses, methods of erasing the past for these families.

Jettot has found that many correspondents knew each other and were linked in family networks, making collective decisions to respond to phishing letters for family histories. As he notes 'these correspondents were organised in clusters and they collectively mobilised their networks and their archives to give a common image of themselves.' For their part the editors' decisions about including or excluding families in relation to landownership, the length of time they had been in residence on their estates and their wealth levels, were part of a co-creation of social boundaries, reproduced through the directories. Women played a very important part in this, as the correspondence shows. For example, Etheldred Wake, provided the lineage for her family and corresponded with the editors about the finer details. This contribution by elite women was rarely acknowledged in printed editions because genealogy and the keeping of the family history were 'a man's business.'

Selling Ancestry is a fascinating read and well worth a visit for historians of the eighteenth century, intersecting as it does with so many of the key developments in the century.

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