

Article

# Hidden from Family History: The Ethics of Remembering

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**Abstract:** This article draws on case studies or ‘microhistories’ from the author’s own research to explore the ethical responsibility of family historians to represent the experiences of those whose lives have been ‘hidden from history’, and in particular the lives of one’s female ancestors, as a way of correcting the omissions and erasures of official histories. It also discusses the ethical dilemmas posed by the discovery that one’s ancestors were involved in activities that are now regarded as morally suspect, such as profiting from the ownership of slaves. Finally, the article debates ethical arguments about respecting the rights of the dead to privacy.

**Keywords:** family history; feminist history; memory; women’s lives; slavery; ethics

## 1. Introduction

I have been researching and writing about my family’s history for nearly two decades, though my introduction to genealogy came much earlier, when I was a teenager. A New Zealand relative visiting Britain in search of her roots discovered a document that included extracts from a family Bible, which raised the tantalising possibility that our ordinary East London family might have aristocratic Scottish ancestors. I spent many hours poring over the document and even managed to construct a rudimentary family tree. However, it was only some years later, with the coming of the internet, that my passion for family history truly ignited. I created a more extensive family tree at [ancestry.co.uk](https://ancestry.co.uk) and in time managed to trace the history of our family back to the Middle Ages. I also took the decision to publish my findings in a series of blogs, partly as a means of making contact with other researchers, but primarily as a way of making my findings known to a wider audience. Researching and publishing my family’s history in this way has presented me with a number of ethical challenges, and in this article I explore some of them, drawing on case studies from my own genealogical research.

My family history research and writing has been inspired, at least in part, by a similar motivation to that which drove the historian E.P. Thompson in his writing of *The Making of the English Working Class* to ‘rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver, the “utopian” artisan . . . from the enormous condescension of posterity’ (Thompson 1968, p. 13). In my case, it was the servants, shoemakers, laundresses and law clerks in my family tree whose lives I wanted to reclaim from historical oblivion. Most of my ancestors left no written records, but the outlines of their lives could be reconstructed through official records such as birth, marriage and burial certificates, census returns, and in some case wills and probate records.

Although I am not a trained historian, I have always been fascinated by history and continue to be excited by the possibilities that family history research opens up for creating ‘microhistories’ (Ginzburg et al. 1993) that in some way enable one imaginatively to re-enter the past. My genealogical research is a part-time pursuit, mostly disconnected from my ‘day job’ as an educator and researcher on issues related to gender and care. However, on occasion I have found ways of connecting the two interests. For example, in 2020 I edited a special issue of *Genealogy* on ‘Fathers and forefathers: men and their children in genealogical perspective’, which included my own article drawing on my great grandfather’s letters to



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his son during the First World War (Robb 2020) and I referred to the same letters in a book chapter on masculinity and care (Robb 2022). More broadly, the commitment to gender equality that has framed my academic research has also influenced the focus in my family history research on making the lives, particularly of my female ancestors, better known and in using their stories in a micro-historical way to highlight facts about women's lives, and about gendered injustice more generally.

Working-class and feminist historians have long argued that there is an ethical duty to recover the 'hidden histories', to adapt the title of Sheila Rowbotham's landmark book of feminist history (Rowbotham 1992), of those marginalised by official histories. In her book *The Memory Factory* about the forgotten women artists of early twentieth-century Vienna, Julie M. Johnson writes about 'the silencing of women's history' and states that her book's title 'refers not only to the process of creating memory, but also to its erasure' (Johnson 2012, p. 6). Johnson quotes historian Joan W. Scott, who writes that any official historical account 'rests on—contains—repressed or negated material and is unstable, not unified' and she argues that 'all history writing depends on . . . a selective delving into the past' (in Johnson 2012, p. 4). Johnson advocates a critical approach to the question of historical memory, drawing on the 'critical memory theory' of Heidimarie Uhl, who writes: 'It is the task of critical memory theory to investigate and deal with questions as to which narrations are included in this process and, thence, as to which political, ethnic, social, and religious groups have been barred from "collective memory" knowledge' (in Johnson 2012, p. 364).

In what follows, I attempt to follow a similarly critical approach to questions of historical memory as they relate to family history, firstly addressing the ways in which genealogical research can respond to that 'silencing' of women's experience in particular, and then exploring the ethical dilemmas involved in making judgements on the past from a modern perspective, and ending with a challenge to the notion that this kind of remembering is always an ethically simple activity.

## 2. 'Don't Let Them Be Forgotten'

An advertisement for the genealogy website *Findmypast*, marking International Women's Day 2024, stated: 'We've found that a shocking 39 million women might be lost to time. Don't let them be forgotten' and provided a link to their site under the heading 'Find the women that made your family', with suggestions as to how one might 'grow your family tree to discover, preserve and share women's stories'. As my own family history research developed, I came to have a particular interest in telling the lost or forgotten stories of the women in my family, whom I increasingly felt were in danger of being regarded as mere appendages to the supposedly more interesting men in the family tree. In fact, it could be argued that genealogy, as currently practised, is an inherently sexist enterprise. Firstly, researchers tend to follow surnames through history, names that, in the Anglophone context at least, have been those of men, since their female partners have tended to lose their own names upon marriage. It is easy for family historians to fall into the trap (and I have done it myself) of tracing one's family back solely through the male line. Secondly, in attempting to understand the wider socio-economic status of one's ancestors, there is a natural tendency to focus on facts such as occupation, which usually means the occupation of the male 'head' of the household, even if female members of the same household were also employed.

Prompted by a desire to correct this sexist bias in family history, I have seen it as a particular duty, as a family historian, to piece together and share the stories of my female ancestors, and especially those whose life stories exemplified the disadvantages and prejudices suffered by women in past generations. In what follows, I share the stories of two of those female forbears whose life histories I have managed to reconstruct from the available records, and discuss the ethical issues that researching their lives has highlighted.

### 3. Anne Wane: Scenes from a Clerical Life

The title of George Eliot's novel, slightly adapted in the above heading, seems singularly appropriate to the life of my maternal ninth great-grandmother, Anne Wane, who spent her whole life in the rectory of Clayton in Sussex, firstly as the daughter of a Church of England rector and then as the wife, in turn, of three of his successors. Anne's life coincided with a period of dramatic change in English history. Born in 1611 in the eighth year of the reign of James I, she was a young woman when Charles I was king, brought up her children during the tumult of the English Civil War, and died a year after the restoration of the monarchy. Anne was the daughter of William Wane, who was already rector of Clayton when she was born, and his wife Joan. When William died in 1626, it would appear that Joan was already dead, which meant that Anne was left an orphan at the age of 15. William Wane was succeeded as rector by John Bantnor, and in 1628, two years after his arrival in Clayton, he married 17-year-old Anne. They would have two children, a son and daughter, before John's death in 1638. The next incumbent of Clayton, William Chowne, waited only four months after his arrival to marry the widowed Anne. They would have a son of their own in the following year, shortly before William's death in 1640 left Anne a widow for the second time. Her third and final husband was the next rector of Clayton, Magnus Byne, my ninth great-grandfather, with whom she would have five children over the course of a decade, including my eighth great-grandfather John. Anne Byne, formerly Chowne, formerly Bantnor, née Wane, died in 1662 at the age of 50.

What are we to make of the peculiar circumstances of Anne's life? The fact that she was married to three successive rectors of Clayton seems to suggest that in the seventeenth century, women were regarded as a superior kind of property, and Anne was viewed as someone who 'came with the territory' when a succession of men were appointed to the post of rector. Nor does Anne's seem to have been a unique case. Adrian Tinniswood's book about the Verneys, another seventeenth-century family, includes the story of the newly appointed rector of a Buckinghamshire parish, who was unable to take possession of the rectory because the former incumbent's widow refused to move out. After protracted but unsuccessful negotiations, he solved the problem by marrying her (Tinniswood 2008). Did something similar happen in the case of my ancestor Anne Wane? We may never know. Anne's third and last husband, my ninth great-grandfather Magnus Byne, was a published author who wrote a notorious attack on the Quakers (Byne [1656] 2010). However, in common with countless other women across the centuries, his wife's voice is silent, her opinions lost to history.

### 4. Eliza Holdsworth: A Life in Service

Anne Wane's direct descendant Eliza Holdsworth, my third great-grandmother, also spent much of her life in the homes of clergymen. However, in her case, it was not as a family member but as a hired servant, since by the time she was born, the family had slipped a few rungs down the social scale. Eliza's life spanned much of the nineteenth century: she was born in 1801, in the 41st year of the reign of George III, and died in 1885, in the 48th year of Victoria's long reign. She was born in Stepney, then a semi-rural suburb on the edge of London. Eliza was the fourth of six children born to William Holdsworth, a shoemaker, and his wife. They were keen Baptists, and Eliza Holdsworth's arrival in the world was recorded in the Nonconformist Register held at Dr. Williams's library.

I am unsure why or when Eliza Holdsworth moved from London to Bedfordshire, but she was certainly there by 1825, when she was married in the parish church of Blunham. Given her later occupation, and that of many other young women in her family, there is a strong possibility that she left London to take up a post as a domestic servant. Very few alternative employment opportunities existed for unmarried women in early nineteenth-century England (Clarke 2015), and as the daughter of a respectable but poor tradesman, Eliza would have been expected to earn her keep as soon as she reached her teenage years. On 25 April 1825, a few days after her 24th birthday, Eliza Holdsworth married Daniel Roe, a Baptist shoemaker with a shop in nearby Biggleswade, which is where the couple would

live and bring up their children. Daniel died in about 1836, leaving Eliza as a relatively young widow to provide for five young children, which she seems to have done by starting (or returning) to work as a domestic servant to members of the local gentry. Eliza must have been distraught when her eldest daughter, Anna Maria, died in 1844, at the age of 18, and shortly afterwards, Eliza and most of her surviving children left Biggleswade, drawn back to the shelter of Eliza's family in Stepney.

It was in Stepney that in 1845 the widowed Eliza Roe married John Sharp, himself a widower. John was a carpenter in the village of Barkway, on the borders of Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire, and it seems almost certain that he had been married previously to Martha, the sister of Eliza's late husband Daniel Roe. As with Anne Wane's story, it is likely that Eliza, as a widow with children and without a home or steady income of her own, had few choices open to her, and that her brother-in-law John at least offered some form of security. However, Eliza and John do not seem to have spent much time together. The 1851 census finds her working as a nursery servant in the home of the Walbey family, wealthy farmers in the village of Nuthampstead, while her husband John was living and working a couple of miles away in Barkway. Eliza was nearly 60 years old when the next census was taken in 1861, but she was still living away from home and working as a domestic servant, by now in the household of Rev. Robert Merry, the vicar of Guilden Morden, just across the county border in Cambridgeshire.

Ten years later, Eliza was still with the Merry family, but by now Rev. Merry had died and his widow had moved with her children to Torquay in Devon, taking Eliza with her as a housekeeper. What is most striking here is that Eliza was still working as a domestic servant at the age of 69. As a working-class woman with no other means of support, I suspect she had little choice. Curiously, according to the 1871 census record, Eliza had reverted to her previous married name of Roe, although I have discovered that John Sharp was still alive and living in the workhouse at Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire, evidence of the narrow dividing line between poverty and penury in Victorian England. He died there later that year.

Death never seemed to be far away from poor families in the Victorian era. Eliza's daughter-in-law Mary Ann Roe died of tuberculosis in 1870, and it would seem that her son Daniel (my second great-grandfather) also died around the same time, leaving Mary Ann's mother (Eliza's cousin), Keziah Blanch, to look after most of their orphaned children. At some point between 1871 and 1881, Eliza finally retired from working as a domestic servant and went to live with her daughter, also named Eliza, and her family in Camberwell. However, her retirement was all too brief, and she died in 1885 at the age of 84.

Eliza had spent the better part of her life in the service of the families of the Victorian middle class. The fact that she was retained by families like the Walbeys and the Merrys for so long and trusted with their children and with managing their household affairs, suggests that she had a reputation for reliability and hard work. But the stability and continuity of her employment came at a high price. By the time she retired, Eliza had seen two husbands and two of her children die and another child emigrate to the other side of the world. She had only enjoyed 11 years of married life with her first husband, Daniel, before his early death, during which time she was preoccupied with giving birth to and caring for five children.

Eliza Holdsworth's life story undermines the stereotypical view of Victorian women as homemakers who did not work outside the home and depended on a husband to provide for them. This may have been true of middle-class women, but from her youth, Eliza had no choice but to work, and for only a few precious years was she able to depend on a husband's income. After her first husband Daniel's death, she barely lived at home, since as a domestic servant she was fated to spend most of her remaining years in the houses of others, at the beck and call of other people's children, rather than spending precious time with her own children and grandchildren.

## 5. Ethical Questions Raised by Anne's and Eliza's Stories

The stories of Anne Wane's and Eliza Holdsworth's lives, at least as far as I have been able to reconstruct them, exemplify some of the ethical issues raised by family history research, including feminist research. Firstly, as I have argued, they highlight for me the ethical responsibility of family history researchers to recover and make visible the lives of those who have been hidden from history, whether because of disadvantages related to inequalities of gender or class, or (as in Eliza's case) both.

However, reflecting on these same stories also raises a number of ethical dilemmas. One's first instinct, as a twenty-first century researcher with modern beliefs about gender equality, is to assume that these life histories simply illustrate the social disadvantages suffered by women, and especially by poor, working-class women, in previous centuries. However, to what extent can we assume that our twenty-first century attitudes, inspired by centuries of social change and the more recent influence of feminist thinking, are at all useful in understanding women's lives in the past? What if Anne Wane was actually a willing participant in her three marriages, possibly out of a sense of Christian duty that a modern researcher might find alien? It is conceivable that the marriages were actually her idea, and rather than being the passive object of men's plans and intentions, she was an active agent, planning these successive liaisons in order to secure a home for herself and her children at a time when women had few economic choices and a widow without a home or an income risked destitution. Might it be a mistake to impose twenty-first century categories on a period in which marriages were typically contracted for social or economic reasons, rather than for love?

Similar ethical questions suggest themselves in Eliza Holdsworth's case. As a probably illiterate woman who, as far as we know, left no written records, we cannot pretend to know how Eliza viewed her own experience. Where a modern reader of her story might see oppression and discrimination, she, as a respectable working-class Baptist, probably with socially conservative views, might have been proud of her service to her social 'betters' and of being able to provide economically for her family.

In the face of these ethical doubts, one is tempted to adopt a position of epistemic humility and to conclude that, because we cannot know the complete story of our ancestors' lives (assuming that such a thing would ever be possible), it might be for the best to remain silent and not impose our own contemporary interpretations on their experiences. It can certainly be tempting as a family historian to appoint oneself the guardian of an ancestor's memory, and as a result to feel a sense of ownership of their story, as perhaps the first and only person to have pieced that story together. But how 'ethical' is it for us, as twenty-first century family historians, to assume that we can speak for ancestors whose opinions and motives we can never know? To what extent can I, someone living perhaps hundreds of years later, claim to faithfully represent the life of someone whose story can only be pieced together through the disparate fragments of official documents?

However, this argument is surely double-edged. What if we were to discover that some of our ancestors were themselves engaged in unjust or oppressive practices, or could be seen as exemplifying particular historical injustices? In that case, would it not be wrong to refrain from passing judgement? These questions were certainly raised for me by the discovery that some of my ancestors had profited financially from the iniquitous trade in African slaves, which I explore in the next section.

## 6. My Ancestors and the 'Opportunities of Empire'

In the course of my research into the history of my father's family, I discovered that some of our ancestors had owned slaves. My father was born into a working-class family in the East End of London, but a few generations earlier, his forebears had arrived in the capital from Scotland. My third great-grandfather, Charles Edward Stuart Robb, his given names reflecting the family's Jacobite sympathies, was born in Aberdeenshire, married in Glasgow, and then moved with his wife and children, firstly around Scotland and then to different towns in Yorkshire, where he seems to have been employed variously as a

schoolmaster, accountant, and legal clerk, before arriving in London in the early decades of the nineteenth century, by which time the family appears to have descended into genteel poverty. By contrast, Charles's Scottish family of origin was comfortably middle class. Charles's brother William was an Episcopalian clergyman and chaplain to an aristocratic family in Fife, as well as being a published poet (Robb [1809] 2010). Another brother, George, became a wealthy merchant in Glasgow, and it is his family who were implicated in the transatlantic slave trade.

In the process of exploring the lives of George Robb and his family, I searched for information about his son-in-law Archibald Graham Lang, another Glasgow merchant, and was shocked to find both his name and that of his wife Jane in a list of Scottish slave-owners who applied for compensation following the abolition of the slave trade. Scrolling further down the list of claimants, I found the names of all four of George Robb's children associated with the same claim. The list was on the website of the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery at University College London, where it is explained that, following the abolition of slavery in 1807 and the final emancipation of the slaves in the British colonies in 1833, Parliament 'granted £20 million in compensation, to be paid by British taxpayers to the former slave-owners' (Centre for the Study of the Legacies of Slavery n.d.; see also Hall et al. 2014).

The claim involving my ancestors related to the parish of Manchester in Jamaica and to the ownership of 66 slaves. Compensation was set at £1299 14s 6d (equivalent to approximately £186,000 or \$230,000 USD at the time of writing). By the time the claim was made, George Robb himself had died and his wife Penelope had remarried, to John Young, described in the records as a 'West India merchant' and a former receiver in Jamaica. Given these connections with colonial trade, it is perhaps not surprising that this branch of the Robb family was implicated in the ownership of African slaves. According to the Legacies of British Slavery website:

It has long been understood that Scots had a disproportionate presence in Caribbean slavery as part of the participation in the 'opportunities of Empire'. One dimension of this was Scottish slave-ownership . . . One of the largest single groups receiving compensation were Glasgow merchants, despite the prior absence of a significant direct participation in the slave trade.

How should one respond as a family historian to a discovery of this kind? One's instinctual reaction, from a twenty-first century perspective, is horror and revulsion that people with whom one has a genetic connection and who bore the same surname were involved in activities that are now regarded as morally beyond the pale. One feels tainted, even somehow (and perhaps illogically) ashamed on one's ancestors' behalf. It is the opposite of discovering that an ancestor was a hero, or a moral exemplar, or an artist of some kind. For example, on learning that Rev. William Robb, mentioned above, was a published poet, even if not a very good one, I felt a sense of pride and (again, somewhat illogically) personally dignified by association with him.

But what of the ethical dimension of a discovery of this kind? One certainly has a sense as a family historian that one has a moral responsibility to publish such stories. Just as the 'microhistories' of my female ancestors' lives have the power to make real the abstract fact of women's past oppression, so the very personal nature of my ancestors' involvement in the slave trade can bring home with awful immediacy the horrific injustice of slavery. There is a parallel here with the capacity that accounts describing the involvement of 'ordinary' Germans in the Holocaust, such as Martin Amis's novel *Zone of Interest* (Amis 2014) and the Oscar-winning film based on it, have to personalise what the philosopher Hannah Arendt termed the 'banality of evil' (Arendt 1963). On the other hand, just as with those accounts, there is also the risk that associating familiar names—in my case, those of my ancestors—with terrible historical events might make them somehow more understandable, even forgivable. This is a danger, I would argue, that family historians must be permanently wary of resisting, precisely by continuing to view the actions of one's ancestors within a

definitive framework of moral values, even if it is a framework that those ancestors would have found alien and incomprehensible.

## 7. The Ethics of Remembering and Forgetting

I have argued that there is a moral or ethical duty on the family historian to preserve the memory, both of those whose lives have been hidden from history by oppression and of those activities of one's ancestors that with historical hindsight were oppressive or unjust. However, in this final section, I want to question whether the issue is quite so simple. In the process of researching this article, I came across a book with the title *The Ethics of Remembering and The Consequences of Forgetting* (O'Loughlin 2014), which addresses issues that arise at the intersection of trauma, memory, and history. While the argument of that book is that historians have an ethical duty to remember, at the same time highlighting the dangers of forgetting certain historical events, such as the Holocaust, it made me wonder whether in some cases 'forgetting' might actually be an ethical option for family historians.

In the case of relatives who are recently dead, and especially those with relatives still living, most family historians would agree that there is an ethical duty not to share their stories publicly, at least not without the active consent of other family members. However, might it not be argued that this duty should also be extended to ancestors who are long dead? The duties that the living owe to the dead are the focus of a lively debate among philosophers. Drawing on the ethical thought of Immanuel Kant, the political philosopher Michael Rosen has argued that treating the dead with dignity both confirms our own humanity and reflects a moral obligation to treat the other person, whether they are alive or dead, as an end and not as a means (Rosen 2012; see also Liosi 2018, and for alternative views, see Wisnewski 2009 and Ott 2012). Might it not be argued that using one's ancestors' lives as raw material for our own family history publications (even an article like this one), or even as the basis of a hobby or pastime, is treating those individuals as means and not ends? As well as an ethical duty to remember, is there not also in some circumstances a responsibility to forget, or to use a popular phrase, to let sleeping dogs lie?

One might argue that as family historians, we do not have the right to bring lives that were private into the public domain. Of course, the counter-argument is that certain facts about one's ancestors' lives are already in the public domain in the form of readily accessible official records and documents. However, as family history practitioners, we are the ones responsible for bringing those often-overlooked pieces of information to light and for combining them into a coherent narrative. Not only that, but we then expose those hidden stories to public scrutiny, whether by writing for publication or simply placing them on a public online family tree. In some instances, as in the case of my slave-owning forbears, we may be publicising unsavoury facts that our ancestors, and perhaps their living descendants, would prefer not to be made known. (A counter-argument to this might be that respecting the rights of dead ancestors who engaged in oppressive practices, such as slave ownership, risks erasing the experiences of those they oppressed.) Even if our ancestors' lives were blameless, would they have wanted us to share their life histories with the world? To put it simply, and as a final challenging thought: do the dead not have a right to privacy, and might our ancestors actually have a right to be forgotten?

## 8. Conclusions

In this article, I have used case studies from my own family history research to argue, firstly, that family history researchers have an ethical responsibility to remember and represent the lives of those of their ancestors who have been 'hidden from history', particularly as the result of past injustices, and as a corrective to official histories that have silenced their voices and experiences. Secondly, I have suggested that there is also a moral duty to honestly represent the involvement of one's ancestors in historical injustices, even if this means imposing a modern ethical framework on those activities that those ancestors did not share. Thirdly, however, I have posed the question as to whether family historians might have a duty in some circumstances to respect the privacy of the dead. Since these

are difficult ethical questions to which there are no easy or straightforward answers, I have argued that family history researchers should adopt a position of epistemic humility towards their findings.

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