

In conversation
Writing your family history?
The benefits of consulting an academic historian

With academic Dr George Regoukos and family historian Helen Parker-Drabble



Helen: Hello, George. Thank you for talking to me today.

George: It's good to be here.

Helen: I first reached out to you for help identifying the Serbian fiancé of a nurse for a short piece I was writing about a relative for the anniversary of the end of World War 1. It was July 2019.

George: Yes, it was my first experience of working with a family historian. I'd not had access to a private working-class family's papers before. It was intriguing.

Helen: Talking to you opened up a whole new world. I remember asking you where I might find more about the male working-class gay community, and you kindly pointed to resources I hadn't known existed.

George: I think after that you asked me about how you should confirm citations for a book.

Helen: Gosh, yes, that seems such a long time ago. Your help was so appreciated. I hadn't written anything on this scale before.

George: The idea of a Victorian's inheritance written by a family historian piqued my interest, and I asked if you would mind me reading the manuscript.

Helen: That was a pleasant surprise, because by this time most people's enthusiasm for my project had grown thin!

George: Was it hard to share?

Helen: It was. The last time I'd shared anything was with tutors at University, and that was a long time ago. I think I gave you the first quarter of the manuscript.

George: That was in midsummer, and by October I was giving you feedback on your penultimate draft.

Helen: Yes, you helped me focus my research and gave me a solid historical perspective. I learned so much, but it was incredibly validating hearing all that I had done 'right'.

George: You were astonished I had nothing damning to say!

Helen: Yes, I had been working on the project alone for so long that I'd forgotten a lot of what I was sharing would be new and intriguing to others. You helped me with the structure and pointed out the gaps.

George: I remember you had discounted some family stories and were amazed when I said whether factually accurate throughout or not, they are part of your family's story.

Helen: Yes, that was a pleasant shock.

George: In fact, what I needed to show you was that you could use oral and social history approaches. It also meant you thought more radically about the nature of 'truth' and what matters in history – getting at 'facts' or understanding meaning, subjectivities and emotions in the past.

Helen: I wish I'd started working with you at the planning stage of *A Victorian's Inheritance*. I would have finished it much quicker. I let my doubts slow me down and disappeared down some research rabbit holes!

George: That brings us to book two. I know you're calling it *A Victorian Migrates*, but when will we discuss your plan for that?

Helen: Yes, it's exciting to have got the first book to your e-book developer, but I'm looking forward to us working on the whole of the next one, from planning to publishing. Shall we meet via Skype on June 12?

George: Absolutely. I have developed a keen interest in family history projects.

Helen: Thanks for helping me crystalise how much you brought to my writing. Family history is apparently the second-most popular pastime (after gardening). I can see so much potential in bringing together academics working on any given topic and family historians who might just be researching similar themes. It feels good to value the expertise within families and communities as much as within the academic world.