

GENEALOGICAL ADVICE FROM SHERLOCK HOLMES

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

During a recent bout of insomnia (I was worrying about all my unfinished and overdue genealogical projects), I scanned my bookshelves for something nongenealogical to read. “The Oxford Book of English Detective Stories” seemed to be just what I sought. It was on the second page of Arthur Conan Doyle’s classic Sherlock Holmes mystery “Silver Blaize” that I found an outstanding piece of genealogical advice. Holmes says to Dr. Watson:

“It is one of those cases where the art of the reasoner should be used rather for the shifting of details than for the acquiring of fresh evidence . . . we are suffering from a plethora of surmise, conjecture, and hypothesis. The difficulty is to detach the framework of fact—of absolute, undeniable fact—from the embellishments of theorists . . . Then, having established ourselves upon this sound basis, it is our duty to see what inferences may be drawn, and which are the special points upon which the whole mystery turns.”

Holmes could have been reading my mail! I’ve seen far too many student papers, proposed articles, and letters from potential clients that are filled with, as he says, “surmise, conjecture, and hypothesis.” The worst, of course, are almost entirely that. I’m often amazed at how many people seek the father of their great-grandfather, about whom they know nothing, although they claim to know the story of *his* great-grandfather (the one who was kidnapped and sold to pirates so the family fortune could go to an undeserving cousin).

Another common trait is geographical hopscotch. When I see a problem statement that mentions three or more states, it automatically starts to make me nervous. Only rarely does the writer offer evidence for the migrations.

More experienced researchers simply fall into the trap of failing to follow Holmes’s advice. As I peruse the papers, articles, and letters looking for facts, I am perturbed that the ink devoted to “surmise, conjecture, and hypothesis” and “the embellishments of theorists” is far greater than that devoted to “absolute, undeniable fact.”

There is nothing wrong with hypothesis. It is how we tackle our research. We form a hypothesis, and then we try to prove or disprove it. What I see, however, is that researchers have not taken the process one step at a time. One document prompts a hypothesis, as does the next, and the next. Soon, they are required to form additional hypotheses based on earlier ones. Often they must rationalize in order to make sense of what they’ve got. (See “Red Flags and Rationalization.”)

They then begin “acquiring of fresh evidence” based on these conjectures. Their time would be better spent, as Holmes suggests, if they made themselves “detach the framework of fact—of absolute, undeniable fact—from the embellishments of theorists.”

A few paragraphs later, Holmes offers another piece of brilliant genealogical advice. He says to Watson “I have a grip of the essential facts of the case. I shall enumerate them to you, for nothing clears up a case so much as stating it to another person.” Ah, yes. He’s been listening to my replies to authors, students, and clients.

If you present the essential facts—in written format—often the weak links and omissions jump out of the text at you. Your next steps are glaringly obvious.

It seems that my message is rarely heard when I say “Write up your problem. Focus on what is known, not what you think.” Maybe now—with Sherlock Holmes giving the same message—researchers will try this important genealogical technique!