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Our Family Tree Revealed Many Things To My Kids, Including The Roles Women Have Historically Filled

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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Recently I got pulled into a website that allowed me to construct my family tree. Using digital archives I was able to trace my ancestry back to one Janet Keith and her husband Thomas Erskine, both born around 1355 on the east coast of Scotland. I unrolled my handwritten family tree and showed it to the kids. We counted back generations and determined that Thomas and Janet were their 24th great-grandparents.

"Not that rich."

The only records that stretch that far back are of the aristocracy, so there are a lot of lords, ladies, dukes and duchesses populating the chart.

“Were they rich?” asked Elizabeth, our middle daughter.

“I guess so,” I said not exactly sure what the titles mean.

“Like a king or a queen?” asked Sonia, our eldest.

“Not that rich,” I said.

A family tree can be an exciting project for the whole fam. But not everyone feels that way. Paula Schuck explains.

([https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/stop-assigning-adopted-kids-projects-about-family-tree-or-culture?](https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/stop-assigning-adopted-kids-projects-about-family-tree-or-culture?fbclid=IwAR2eddx2PLk4pa2GCLjNDQEE3QKD6xCblp2yTAUxllIsJ389jZorkmhRYIrA)

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A Joy For Kids

The names of their abodes are perfect fodder for young imaginations: Sanquhar Castle, Tallibardine, Beeston Castle, Cardross, Traquairs Land — they sound like they were taken straight from Narnia.

I read to them about “James Gordon, Lord of Lochinvar and his wife Margaret Crichton” who “died at the Battle of Pinkie Cleugh, Musselburgh, Inveresk in 1547.”

I don’t know what most of these words mean, but my kids seemed to think everyone was dressed in different shades of pink.

“Oooh, look there’s a knight!” says Elizabeth, pointing at Sir Knight Henry Fanshawe, aka “MP for Wilshire, Viscount of Ireland” and “Rememberancer of the Exchequer.”

I quickly Googled “Rememberancer” and told them it’s a kind of medieval bureaucrat. Some of the other occupations listed in the 19th-century census are easier to understand: bowling-green keeper; grocer; road surfaceman; shoemaker; bell porter; wine merchant.

Imagining their ancestors doing these jobs brings the family tree to life.

“This person made clothes!” said Sonia, pointing at a weaver.

“What, by hand?” asked Elizabeth. “That’s all they did?”

“He had to light every single lamp in [looks at the tree] Collyhurst?”

“They must have cost a lot,” said Sonia, doing some labour value calculations in her head.

“Look, a lamplighter,” I said.

They look at me blankly.

“You know the streetlights outside?” Nowadays, someone just flicks a switch and they all turn on, but back then someone had to go to every single lamp and light it.”

“Like in *Mary Poppins!*” said Elizabeth. “Did he sing?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe.”

“That sounds like a lot of work,” said Sonia, who was still considering the economics of the whole thing. “He had to light every single lamp in [looks at the tree] Collyhurst?”

Our youngest daughter, Mary, decided that her favourite is a picture frame-maker from Manchester. “He was a painter!” she said excitedly. “Not exactly,” I said, “he just made the frames.”

She looked at me like I’m missing the point entirely.

Tamara Schroeder has felt disconnected from her culture and heritage. But she wants to reconnect so she can pass it down to her kids.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/learning-how-to-reconnect-with-my-ukrainian-culture-pass-down-to-kids>)

Connecting The Branches

Finally, I showed them their own names at the bottom of the tree. “If you have children, it will keep going,” I said.

“I’m going to have one,” said Sonia with conviction.

“I haven’t decided yet,” said Elizabeth.

“Me, no way,” said Mary. “Mom says it hurts.”

When the kids went to bed I crept into Sonia’s room to share with her some of the more grown-up material.

I pointed to a guy named John Ensor.

“He took another man to court because he insulted him by saying, ‘thou art a whoremaster rascal.’”

“‘Hmm,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘I’m going to be more than that.’”

Her eyes widened. “What does it mean?” she asked.

“Rascal is like saying ‘naughty,’ but it was way worse back then,” I said. The same man was also accused of saying “thy wife is an arrand whore,” which I explain as “kind of like the B-word but way worse,” knowing full-well that she’s heard a lot at school





(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/there-is-an-art-to-swearing-and-im-sharing-that-with-my-kids>).

She was pleased to see the outcome of the case listed as “sentenced,” although she did seem a little worried that people could get sent to jail for swearing.

The fact that there is no further information on John Ensor’s wife (she’s just listed as “Dorothy”) is not lost on Sonia. “What did she do for a living?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, “for women, occupations, if they’re included at all, are listed as ‘homemaker’ or ‘mother.’”

“SHARE,” she said thoughtfully. “I’m going to be more than that.”

She put her head on her pillow and I imagined her falling asleep dreaming of being a knight or a rememberancer or even a singing lamplighter.     

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