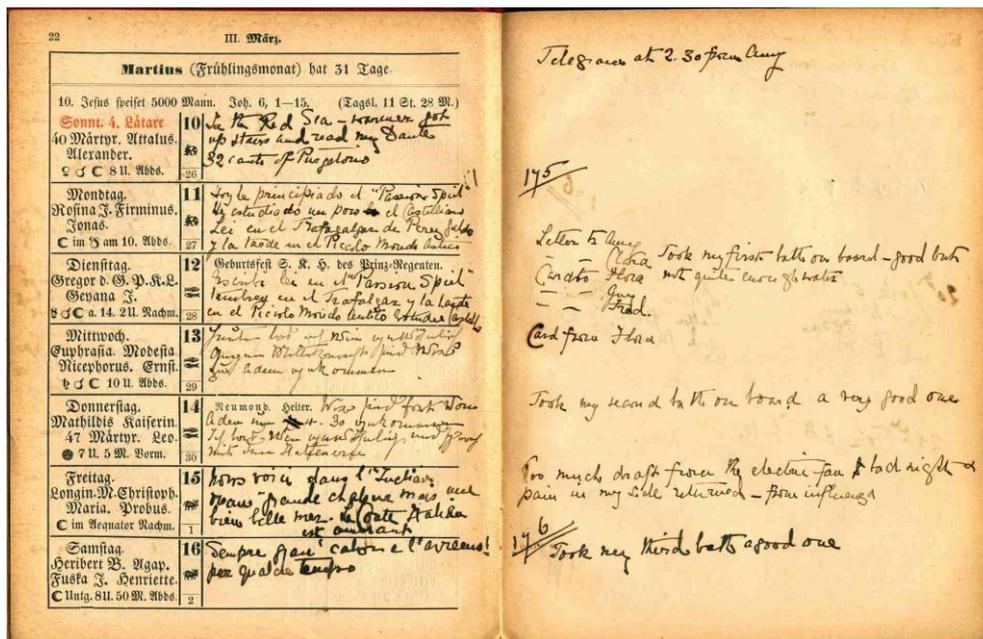


USING DIARIES IN FAMILY HISTORY

DANIELLE LAUTREC

Diaries offer a tantalising vision into the lives of our ancestors, but do we know how to get the most out of them in family history? They appear to provide us with direct evidence about what the author did and thought, a private look into their lives and the type of person they were. They seem to provide an insight into the past from the perspective of an individual. It is of course, not that simple.

Most diaries describe personal experiences and observations. Some focus on the external environment such as the weather, or describe historical events. As original and contemporary sources, diaries contain details that are rarely documented in other types of sources such as history books or vital records, and this is what makes them so valuable in family history.



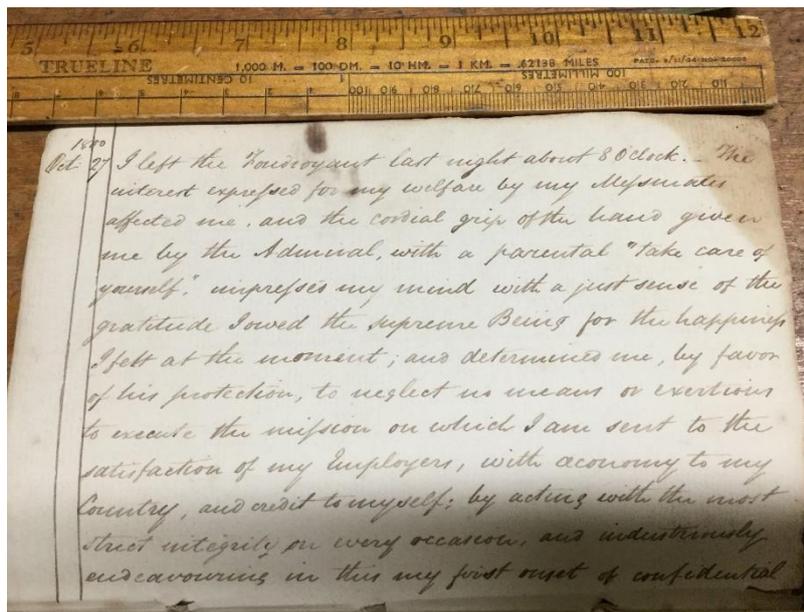
Journal of Eliza Susannah Armstrong (nee Malet), dated 1907, held by Society of Australian Genealogists, Armstrong Papers, Item 04/028306

Diaries can contribute to family history research by providing information about family members, their friends and associates, and the nature of the relationships between them. They may also provide information about events, activities and daily life that add colour to stories of the family, and provide insights into social aspects of their lives, such as work and leisure.



Tips for using diaries in family history

Firstly, gather all the information you can about the diary. Learn as much as you can about the author and their background, then put them into context with information about the times they lived and their extended family. This will help you understand the diary as you read it and identify the people referred to, as diaries rarely refer to people using full names and may even use nicknames. Not all diary writers put their own names in their diary, but you can still gather clues to their identity. The Society of Australian Genealogists has a historically significant diary written by a man responsible for provisioning on the HMS Cameleon, a brig in the British Royal Navy in 1800. He didn't feel the need to write his own name in it, but by comparing the events and dates in the diary to the family history of the diary's last owner and to other documents donated with the diary, the diarist has been narrowed down to two possibilities.



Unidentified author, Leather bound ship journal, dated 27 October 1800 to 9 March 1801, dealing with trade and supply of provisions to British Navy and colonies during French Revolutionary Wars. Author may have been Sir James Meek (1778-1856) or John Marsh (1747-1823). Held by Society of Australian Genealogists, Harrison Collection, Item 2/297

Next, identify when and where the diary was written. Knowing this helps to set it into the context of both historical events and family events. This helps you interpret the events being discussed.

Now think about why the author may have written the diary. The author may state this, but if not you may get clues from the content and language. Motivations can vary. Diaries may be written to record daily activities, as self-expression or self-reflection, as a gift to pass on to their descendants, or just for the pleasure of writing. The purpose of the diary is important in determining the reliability of the content. It is unwise to accept diaries at face value. All authors make choices about the information to include and how to present it, even in a diary which they do not imagine anyone else reading. Diarists are subject to biases and in diaries they may be more frank about their opinions on events and perhaps less concerned with accuracy.

'I never met with a parcle of more discontent fellows in my life the[y] only want more Provisions to give it to the damed whores the Convict Women of whome the[y] are very fond Since they brock throu the Bulk head and had connection with them - I never could have thought that there wair So many abandond wreches in England, the[y] are ten



thousand time worse than the men Convicts, and I am affraid that we will have a great dele more trouble with them'

Transcribed extract from Ralph Clark, Journal kept on the Friendship during a voyage to Botany Bay and Norfolk Island 1787 – 1792, unpublished, held by the State Library of New South Wales

Examine the format and condition of the diary. Is the original version, or has it been copied or transcribed? Diaries are often edited when transcribed or published, to omit content considered private or controversial. They may also have content added. Check whether spelling and place names have been changed, and if pages are missing. Consider whether the volume is the complete diary or if there may be other volumes.

Perhaps the most important step when analysing a diary is to search for and examine associated material, either in the same collection or elsewhere. Family history collections often have associated materials such as photos, family trees, letters and other diaries which provide provenance and context. They can help you date the diary, identify people referred to in the diary, clarify events and corroborate the information. You may also be able to use the diary to do the same for the associated materials. If there are no associated family materials, search for unconnected materials from the same location and time period.

If you have access to an original diary, you should transcribe it as part of your analysis even if someone else has already done so. This process is a good way to view the content critically. If you are working with a transcription, try to get a copy of the original so that you can analyse the handwriting. The type of writing and ink can help to date the diary, and help determine whether the diary had a single author or whether someone has added content at a later date. Comparing the handwriting to other family documents may help identify the author of the diary or those other documents.

All mentions of people, places and events should be recorded and followed up. This enhances the stories in the diary, but it also informs the family history. Information in diaries can be fragmentary and confusing, so consider compiling a spreadsheet of names, dates, locations and notes to help you bring the information together into a structured format. It is also a good idea to incorporate as much of the information as possible into your family tree. If you are using family history software, you can add the diarist's friends and associates to your tree, either in the Events/Facts section of the diarist or as unconnected individuals. Extracts from diaries can be incorporated into your family history as images, full or partial transcriptions, quotations or paraphrasing.

Citing diaries

Unpublished – Author's name, dates covered, where the diary is held or the current private owner

e.g. Ralph Clark, Journal kept on the Friendship during a voyage to Botany Bay and Norfolk Island 1787 – 1792, unpublished, held by the State Library of New South Wales

Published – use the citation format for a book



Tips on caring for diaries

If you have an original diary or journal, it should be stored using archival materials and techniques. Acid free wrap is a good idea, as it will keep the pages together and reduce the risk of damage to the cover or spine. Diaries are best stored flat in an archival box in a humidity controlled environment. Digitise them so that you can work with the images and minimise handling of the original.

Where to find them

Here are just some places to look for diaries (primarily Australian). Remember to use a variety of terms when searching catalogues - diary, journal, notebook, logbook.

Diaries may be published or unpublished manuscripts, so be sure to check both archives and libraries. The Society of Australian Genealogists has over 200 in its library and hundreds more in the archives.

Other examples: the [National Library of Australia's immigrant diaries](#), the [State Library of South Australia](#), the [State Library of Victoria](#) and the [State Library of New South Wales](#), the [Library of Congress](#) and the [British Library](#). Museums may also have diaries. For example, the Vaughan Evans library in the [National Maritime Museum of Australia](#).

Search for diaries in online book repositories such as the Internet Archive, university collections and online projects such as <https://www.thegreatdiaryproject.co.uk/>



Generations Genealogy

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