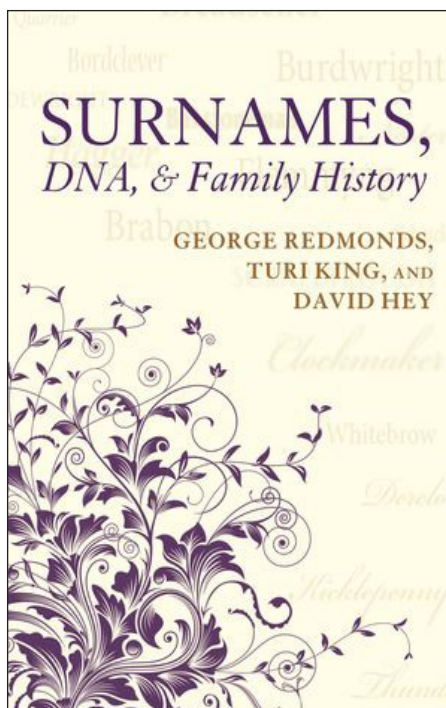


Reviews Reviews

New genealogy books and CDs



It is now over ten years since the first Y-chromosome DNA tests became available on a commercial basis. DNA testing is now well established as an important tool for the surname researcher. Although a number of books about DNA testing have been written by family historians, *Surnames, DNA and Family History* is the first book to look at the subject from the academic viewpoint. It has, therefore, attracted considerable interest and has already been the subject of a lively debate on the Guild Forum.

The book aims to “assess the evidence for the origins and spread of surnames in a far more rigorous way and to argue the need for an approach that combines linguistics with genealogy, local history and genetics”. The first six chapters, comprising almost three quarters of the book, are devoted to discussions on various aspects of surname research. There is an excellent chapter on bynames - second names in earlier centuries that never became hereditary - and the challenge of establishing whether or not a name found in early records is hereditary. Surname mapping is now a key tool for investigating the origins and

spread of surnames. The authors make extensive use of Steve Archer’s *British Nineteenth Century Surname Atlas CD*, and particularly in their chapter on the expansion and decline of surnames. They note “the striking fact is that most British surnames are not prolific”, and “very many surnames, even some that are common, are still found mostly in one area”.

The final three chapters, presumably largely written by Turi King, focus on DNA, and provide a useful summary of the findings from the academic studies of the last decade, many of which have been carried out at the University of Leicester where King works in the Department of Genetics alongside Professor Mark Jobling. The closing chapter looks at the wider picture and discusses the offerings of the commercial testing companies and the contributions made by family historians, citing the DNA findings of the Herrick Family Association in America and the work of Guild member Susan Meates on the surnames Meates, Mates and Myatt.

It is, however, somewhat disappointing that little attempt has been made to integrate the findings from DNA studies into the first six chapters of the book. The text is instead peppered with comments that DNA evidence might eventually throw light on particular surnames, yet Redmonds and Hey are seemingly unaware of the many DNA studies that are under way. For example, they devote two lengthy paragraphs to the presumed single origin of the high-frequency surname Metcalfe but make no mention of the Metcalfe Society and their large DNA project at Family Tree DNA, which has already found six distinct genetic clusters.

John Plant was one of the first few Guild members to start a DNA project. He has done extensive research in medieval records and has published two papers on the Plant surname in the peer-reviewed journal *Nomina*, yet his research receives

Surnames, DNA and Family History

By George Redmonds, Turi King and David Hey

Oxford University Press, 2011, 242pp

only an oblique reference in the chapter on bynames. Chris Pomeroy’s books on DNA testing and his two papers on the Pomeroy surname in the *Journal of Genetic Genealogy* do not even get a mention. The only DNA research which Redmonds and Hey comment on is the very early research by Bryan Sykes. They uncritically accept his finding of a single origin for the Dyson surname, yet only low-resolution tests were used, the sample size was very small and the research was never published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

It is perhaps difficult for academics to comment on the findings of individual DNA studies, especially when there are no common standards, the projects vary so much in quality, and very few projects have published their results. Surname historians will always be concerned with the bigger picture and cannot be expected to research individual surnames in great detail. Both sides can however learn a lot from each other. The challenge for Guild members is to find a way to make the academics aware of our work so that we can find a common ground.

Nevertheless, the book is well worth reading, and it provides an excellent overview of the state-of-the-art methodology of surname research. It will be of great interest to all Guild members, regardless of whether or not they are interested in pursuing a DNA project.

Debbie Kennett

Notes

1. The Forum thread on “Surname Dictionaries, Surnames, DNA & Family History, and more thorough one-name studies” can be read in the GOONS-L Archives at <http://tinyurl.com/RedmondsKingHey>.



2. The papers published by Chris Pomeroy in JOGG and John Plant in *Nomina* can be accessed in the Guild Wiki at: <http://tinyurl.com/PomeryPlant>.