

# Barking up the Family Tree

Researching your family history on the internet is almost as popular as watching porn. Yes, really. Stacey Anyan delves into the heredity hype.



At five minutes to eight on Friday September 19 last year, as the main lights dimmed in the reception of the Auckland Central City Library and last-minute book borrowers scuttled out the door, a small group gathered on the second floor outside the research centre. There were about 40 people, mainly women in their forties or fifties, most from Auckland, but some were out-of-towners: Rotorua, Hamilton, Wellington, Whangarei, Turangi. Each of them was here to solve a mystery. A family-history mystery.

On hand to help were three library staff and five advisers from the New Zealand Society of Genealogists (NZSG). They were distinguishable by their black “Library Lock-In” T-shirts.

It was the fourth annual Family History Lock-In at the library – similar to the type of lock-in held by certain English pubs, where the doors of the establishment are locked so that a privileged few can secretly remain inside after hours, but different in that there was no alcohol. There was pizza, though,

delivered at midnight. After the advisers had declared their “countries of expertise” and a photograph was taken of the group, everyone streamed into the room, full-steam ahead into their 12-hour research marathon.

Family History librarian Karen Kalopulu borrowed the lock-in idea from America. “Most of the libraries that do a lock-in tend to do it until midnight. That’s wussy.”

Having worked in the bakery business, Ian Bushett of Rotorua felt staying up late wasn’t a problem. The 54-year-old saw the lock-in as a good opportunity to spend a whole evening on genealogy research “without annoying my family” (meaning the one he lives with now). He says discovering his Maori heritage has prompted him to learn te reo, including how to declare his pepeha (family background).

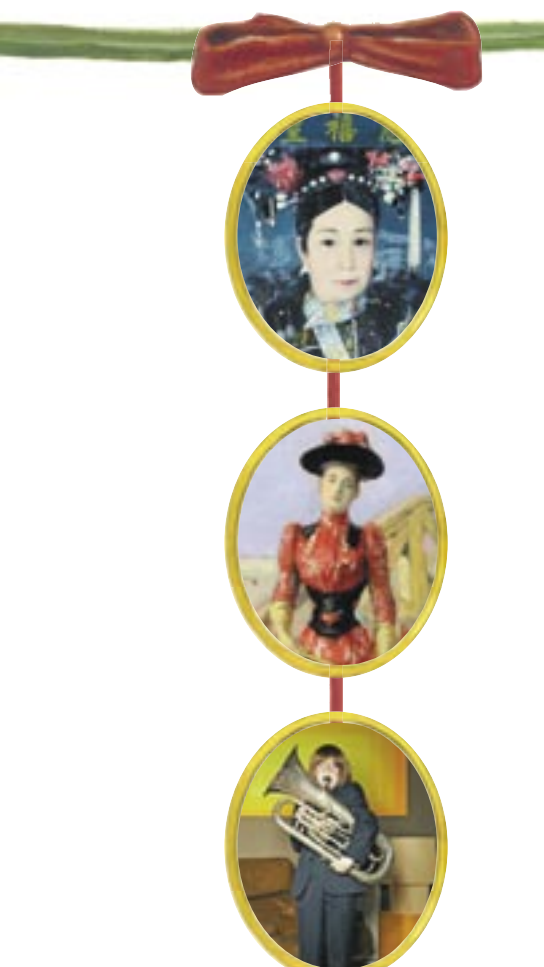
Bushett had some interesting tales to tell. The 1836 marriage of his great-great-great-grandparents Pourewa, the daughter of a Maori chief, and Charles Cossill was allegedly the first between a Maori and a Pakeha that was officially recorded and sanctioned

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STACEY ANYAN IS A NORTH & SOUTH STAFF WRITER. PAINTING BY DARON PARTON.







**Ian Bushett's great-great-grandmother, Mary Leslie (above right, pictured with her daughter Ida and Ida's half-sister Mary Jane Hill), was the daughter of a Maori princess and in her youth was charged with indecent exposure after she and her fiancé were sprung in the bushes at the Wellington Botanical Gardens. Mary Jane's father was Michael Buchet, who drowned in a logging accident in 1876.**



lapse until she was in her forties. Now she's the "family-history go-to" for her relations. "None of them is interested, so I get given all the information – photos, books, slides. I've had a ball doing this. All the people you meet..."

Swann has even discovered her parents were blood relations – they shared a set of great-great-great-great-grandparents. She stumbled upon the link during her research after their deaths, when she recognised the name of her father's family's village on a marriage certificate from her mother's family.

Sitting near Swann at the library lock-in was Geoff Ashenden of Albany, North Shore City, who said he'd traced his family back to an impressive 800AD, and discovered in the process that his surname possibly originates from a reference to a clearing (where ash trees were felled) on the edge of the dense Weald Forest in Kent, mainly used for grazing swine.

Swann's ears pricked up. "Oh, whereabouts in Kent did you come from? I lived in Kent..."

**A**s genealogists are fond of saying, the third generation spend all their time trying to find out what the second generation tried to cover up about the first. (Genealogists are also fond of pointing out that family-tree searches are one of the most popular uses of the internet – second only to porn, they whisper with a wink.)

Kim Williams of Sandringham, Auckland, cracked a cover-up on her first lock-in. She found her great-great-grandfather's death certificate – from which she learned her grandfather wasn't an only child. She's since made contact with her "new" family, including first cousins of her late father.

Having milked her living relatives dry for memories, the busy mother-of-two says the lock-ins are a great opportunity to research further. "Every time you speak to one of the gurus here, you find out more.

"Sometimes your eyes glaze over from

by the church. Family lore has it that Hone Heke was a suitor of Pourewa; apparently he wasn't thrilled to be rejected in favour of a settler. When Heke began to rebel in the North in 1845, the couple and their children fled to Sydney.

Their daughter Mary eventually returned to Aotearoa and married a Belgian, Michael Buchet. However, they divorced within a decade and, in 1876, Buchet drowned when he was jammed between logs that became stuck as they were floated downstream at a logging camp at Orere Pt on the Firth of Thames.

Also that year, Mary was charged with indecent exposure after she and her new fiancé were sprung in the bushes at the Wellington Botanical Gardens. They were sentenced to a month in jail, but members of the public, including the mayor, protested against this harsh punishment and the

couple were pardoned.

At the library lock-in, Bushett discovered an 1854 record of Buchet's journey by ship from England to the Antipodes. Finding that piece of information made the whole evening worthwhile, he said.

Some genealogy buffs at the lock-in wanted to chart their family tree as far back as possible. Frances Swann of Woodhill, just northwest of Auckland, has traced her ancestors to the 16th century. Her mission has entailed brushing up on her schoolgirl Latin to read wills, backing up data meticulously with official records (census data; marriage, birth and death certificates) and by consulting relatives. "My great-aunt was marvellous – never proven wrong yet."

As a teen, Swann adored listening to her great-aunt's family tales and dutifully recorded them in a notebook, which she let

trying to understand everything..."

At this, her fourth lock-in, Williams hoped to find the birth certificate of her great-great-grandmother, allegedly born on the docks in London in 1863. Retrieving the original document is important for "getting to the next level", she explained, as it records parents' names.

A few skeletons tumbled out of the closet when Mike Moore of Massey started researching his family history (being told by his parents that it was none of his business only made him more inquisitive, he said).

He discovered his grandmother had left her first husband in Australia to emigrate with her lover to New Zealand. The couple then changed their names, making it tricky for Moore to find evidence of the tale he'd been told as a child: that his grandfather served in World War I and was an honour guard at the funeral of Baron Manfred Von Richthofen (flying ace The Red Baron).

Moore had come to the lock-in – his first – to find out where his grandfather's family had lived, and also which forebears he might have inherited his personality traits from. A former gang member who rediscovered his faith in God, Moore said he'd surprised himself with a hitherto-unknown ability to preach eloquently to his congregation; upon tracing his tree, he found Methodist stock, and an ancestor who was a preacher.

Moore reckons he got his creative streak from his grandfather. "My father was quite academic and I'm not, but my kids are. It's like every second generation, you get traits from the people before you."

Rather than being a source of shame, convictions are coveted by genealogists. That's because their every move was well-documented, says NZSG adviser Vivienne Parker. Like Swann, the former *NZ Genealogist* editor was also a youngster when she was wooed by the family lore of a great-aunt. But Parker began archiving in earnest only when her son, then seven, had to take his family tree to school. "We're still doing his homework 30 years later."

The expat Brit has returned home several times to visit family and do some family-tree research on the side. Nowadays, though, the reach of the internet nearly negates the need for overseas travel.

Getting a name for the tree isn't the main objective in genealogy, Parker said. "It's about finding out what happened in your ancestors' lives, how they reacted to the conditions in the country at the time, why they migrated, who was on the throne, what wars were going on..."



**Frances Swann was transfixed by family tales told by her great-aunt, Ada Ward (above), which Swann dutifully recorded in a notebook. When it came to facts about her family history, "Ada was marvellous – never proven wrong yet."**



**P**eter Persson had brought along a cushion to the lock-in in case he needed a kip. But he didn't. "You get on a roll and by morning you feel you could spend another 12 hours researching."

He admitted that he was having trouble getting back further than the 1880s because of a language barrier – his ancestors are Polish and Swedish.

Persson is a Mormon, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Mormons' belief in the value of family

is at the thrust of the church's owning and operating the mother of all genealogical resources, the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, USA. The library and an accompanying website ([www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)) provide the general public access to the Mormons' numerous records and computerised indexes. More than 957 million names feature in the library's searchable databases and 30,000 volunteers worldwide help to build up the indexes by entering information from original documents using their home computers. (The library aims eventually to





**1)** Buy an A5 hard-back notebook. Leave 12 pages for an index. Count the remaining pages and divide into four. Choose your four families (your four grandparents; your parents and spouse's parents). Allocate one-quarter to each family. Take this notebook with you as you talk to family members. Write any stories, hints, tips, possible dates, places, occupations, etc in the family quarter.

**2)** Download a pedigree chart from ([http://genealogy.about.com/library/free\\_charts/bl\\_pedigree.htm](http://genealogy.about.com/library/free_charts/bl_pedigree.htm)). Add birth, marriage, death dates and places. You will soon see your gaps for further family questions and research.

**3)** Keep filling in your pedigree charts and use a genealogy computer program to record as you find: [legacyfamilytree.com](http://legacyfamilytree.com) – standard version is free.

**4)** Go to [bdmrecords.dia.govt.nz](http://bdmrecords.dia.govt.nz) for the indexes of New Zealand births, deaths and marriages and the Mormons' [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org) for pre-1900 births, marriages worldwide.

**5)** Visit your local library. It may have [ancestry.com.au](http://ancestry.com.au) (includes UK) or [findmypast.com](http://findmypast.com) to research census, etc.

**6)** Go to [genealogy.org.nz](http://genealogy.org.nz). Click on About, and find a NZ Society of Genealogists branch meeting near you. Attend the meetings to meet genealogists and learn what to do and how to do it.

**7)** Check your local community education school and attend family-history classes.

**8)** Go to [netguide.co.nz](http://netguide.co.nz). Search for genealogy to find tutorials, etc.

**9)** Check world phone books for your unusual surnames, [teldir.com](http://teldir.com).

**10)** Look for your places. Use [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org), [wiki.familysearch.org](http://wiki.familysearch.org) and [genuki.org.uk](http://genuki.org.uk). Enter what you find, check your gaps, and start searching again!

NZSG ADVISER JAN GOW

South Auckland – the first time in 12 years that the three-yearly event had been held in New Zealand.

In attendance were some of the international rock stars, as it were, of genealogy. One of them was Megan Smolenyak, a half-Slavic, half-Irish American who has the curious distinction of being a Smolenyak by birth and by marriage. DNA testing shows she and her husband don't share a Smolenyak ancestor. "I don't know what's stranger – that I found another Smolenyak to marry or that I managed to find one who's not related."

Smolenyak, who saved her allowance when she was a teen to buy death certificates and couldn't wait to turn 16 so she could go to America's national archives, also has the distinction of being one of the few people who've turned a life-long obsession with genealogy into a career. She is chief historian and spokeswoman for Ancestry.com, the largest genealogical company in the world, a co-founder of the Roots Television website ("YouTube for genealogists") and a consultant to the US Army's Repatriation project to trace families of servicemen killed or missing in action in World War II, Korea and Vietnam.

Smolenyak loves the "crazy oddball stuff" she's done for ancestry-themed TV shows, such as finding a pair of related people whose lifespans crossed four centuries. She's also set up a group of volunteers who solve cases involving people who die and whose bodies remain unclaimed ("a national epidemic in the US").

She says there have been dual revolutions in genealogy over the past decade or so; first the internet and then DNA testing. Home DNA test kits (usually a cheek swab) can be ordered over the internet for around \$US100-200. While it can't tell you who your ancestors were, DNA testing can determine if two people are related or descend from the same ancestor; it can find out if you're related to others with the same surname and provide clues about your ethnic origins.

Getting youngsters hooked into genealogy is American internet entrepreneur Paul Allen's aim, and he's doing it at an exponential rate. In just over a year, Allen's new company, World Vital Records, has signed up 19 million users of its free family-history application, "We're Related", on Facebook. The application helps people to find relations, construct family trees and share photos online.

Allen, the founder of Ancestry.com and a sixth-generation Mormon, says it's satisfying to be in a business that builds family

use the internet." Accordingly, she's moved with the times, writing a genealogy column for *NetGuide* and buying the URL "www.worldwidegenealogy.com" for \$US10 in the hopes of selling it for thousands.

She also teaches genealogy classes through community education. One of her students, she recalled, had been told by relatives that he had a connection to the Queen Mother's Bowes-Lyon family. "Turned out Bowes-Lyon was the name of the ship his ancestors came over to New Zealand on."

Gow is often found at the NZSG headquarters, a well-stocked family-research centre in suburban East Auckland.

Membership is "booming", according to CEO Peter Nash, who says that every week, 20 newbies join the 9000-strong society, which has 80 branches nationwide.

Along with its popularity, the credibility of genealogy has increased too. "Librarians have realised we're a valuable part of their audience and we uncover material historians don't get access to – the precious old diaries and photographs kept in family homes."

Kiwi genealogists are better than their foreign counterparts, says Nash, "because in the early days a handful of good ones nationwide drummed into their students the basics of good research skills, which are still relevant 30 years on. Kiwis have to be experts – we don't have a long history in this country and we're all immigrants."

The internet makes family-history research "too easy", he says. "I had 20 minutes spare the other day and within that time I added another 20 people to my family tree. Five years ago that would've taken five years to do."

Nash theorises that there are three levels of genealogy: "Collecting dead people; putting flesh on bones; and total nutter stage, when you volunteer for NZSG, do indexing..." He reveals that a genealogy acquaintance of his unwittingly frittered away more than \$1000 in one weekend using a pay-per-view genealogy website.

Kiwi genealogists have been a bit spoiled of late. As well as the lock-in, the National Library had a family-history month, a fourth series of the BBC's celebrity ancestry programme *Who Do You Think You Are?* screened on Prime, and the Department of Internal Affairs launched its Birth, Death and Marriage Historical Records website.

And, in January, the NZSG hosted the 12th Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations congress at King's College in

have scanned images of original documents on the website.)

NZSG adviser Jan Gow visited the Mormons' library on a whim in 1981 when she won a trip to the US. Four days later, she was hooked on genealogy, and since 1992 she's returned annually as a tour guide for Kiwi genealogists. "Immediacy is the reason to go. If you get a lead, you can instantly check other original documents."

In the eighties, Gow, an accountant by day, bought a genealogy book business too. "But nobody buys books any more, they



Robert Barnes created an online genealogy repository ([nzgdb.co.nz](http://nzgdb.co.nz)) to preserve family stories, including those about his wife Mary's father, John Alfred Pym (pictured above). "I really wanted to ensure my kids and grandkids knew about him." Pym joined the Royal Garrison Artillery in 1911 and served in major WWI battles, including the Somme. After the war, he emigrated to New Zealand "because they played good rugby and grew good apples", Mary says.