Genealogy from a distance: the media of correspondence and the Mormon church, 1910–45*

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Abstract

This article adopts a media historical approach to studying the modern history of genealogy, suggesting an alternative to both the dominant methodologies and periodization of the field. Empirically, it focuses on the ways in which correspondence was adopted as a tool for long-distance research by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1910–45, examining in particular its research networks in Sweden. The article demonstrates that letter-writing was a research method dependent on record accessibility and interpersonal reliability. It also had the benefit of becoming its own resource, sustaining its relevance into the twenty-first century.

Millions of people across the world are today accustomed to accessing genealogical resources at their fingertips, made available on online databases run by state archives, small businesses or multibillion-dollar companies. Digital technologies and the internet have, together with direct-to-consumer D.N.A. tests, drastically changed the practice of genealogy, making it accessible, fast and affordable. The ready access to resources, and the ways that they are promoted by the genealogical industry, undergirds the genealogical craze currently experienced in most of Europe and North America. As long as you have digital access, you can conduct much genealogical research regardless of where you live. For most of the modern history of genealogy, however, individual location had a profound significance. Most genealogical sources were stored in archives, and these archives were generally located at remote locations. For those who could not afford to take leave from work and to pay for travel, be it to the next town or across the ocean, it was necessary to find other ways to conduct genealogical research.

Genealogy has since the nineteenth century been occupied with the problem of distance. Between the 1820s and 1950s, thirty-four million Europeans immigrated to the United States, stretching family connections from local communities and across the Atlantic.[1] Popular genealogy in the United States first began to grow among bourgeois New Englanders in the antebellum era. In the face of urbanization, industrialization and large-scale immigration, ancestry provided a means to demonstrate Anglo–Saxon racial privilege. Since few New Englanders had the knowledge or means to travel to Europe to do research themselves, there had by the 1840s developed a network of professional genealogists in Great Britain that could perform research for hire. During the late

1 J. Bodnar, *The Transplanted: a History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), p. 217.

nineteenth century, this system began to be implemented by some American ethnic communities.[2] Recognizing that the history of migration and the local nature of archives created the genealogical problem of spatial distance, it might not be a coincidence that the major businesses of international genealogy have come from the United States.

Until the large-scale introduction of microfilm in the post-Second World War era, the most important means for long-distance genealogy was correspondence. Mail dominated transatlantic genealogy from the nineteenth to the mid twentieth century and it still continues to be an important medium in the genealogical landscape. We tend to think of D.N.A. tests as a cutting-edge technology, but few test kits would reach consumers without postal services. Correspondence is a cog in the current genealogical machinery. Not long ago, it was a vital method of genealogical research.[3]

This article discusses the functions of correspondence for genealogical research and how the culture of correspondence, and the very practices of letter-writing itself, has shaped the genealogical landscape. By doing so, the article also argues for the centring of media in the history of genealogy. There are two overarching benefits of this approach: it engages the organizations, institutions and individuals that have exerted an outsize power on the development of genealogy as a research practice, and it provides a new way of historicizing the development of genealogy into a popular movement. This point will be further elaborated in the first section of the article, which discusses current scholarship in the field and outlines the benefits of a media studies approach to the study of genealogy. It also offers a periodization of the history of popular genealogy, from the mid nineteenth century to today, grounded not in its existential or societal functions but in the ways in which it has been practised.

The second section looks at the organization that, in a global perspective and for over a century, has spent the most time, energy and resources on developing transatlantic genealogy: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the L.D.S. Church or the Mormon Church. The Church owns the massive non-profit organization FamilySearch.org, operates the world's largest genealogical repository, the Family History Library, and arranges annual RootsTech conferences in Salt Lake City and (since 2019) in London. The Mormon demand for genealogy has made Utah an incubator for several for-profit genealogy companies, most notably Ancestry.com. But the genealogical work of the Church is not new. Beginning in 1894, the Church directed an increasing amount of attention on developing efficient, reliable and comprehensive tools for genealogical research. Since most Mormons in the United States had immigrant ancestry, the Church became an early champion of correspondence as a way to facilitate and popularize the search for ancestry in foreign lands. Drawing on studies of the journal of the church-financed Utah Genealogical Society, the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, the section explores how L.D.S. leaders promoted and envisioned genealogical correspondence in the 1910s and 1920s.[4]

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[2] F. Weil, *Family Trees: a History of Genealogy in America* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 75–6, 145–8; F. Morgan, 'Lineage as capital: genealogy in antebellum New England', *New England Quarterly*, lxxxii (2010), pp. 250–82; F. Morgan, 'A noble pursuit? bourgeois America's use of lineage', in *The American Bourgeois: Distinction and Identity in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. S. Beckert and J. B. Rosenbaum (New York, 2010), pp. 135–51; K. Hering, '"We are all makers of history": people and publics in the practice of Pennsylvania-German family history, 1891–1966' (unpublished George Mason University Ph.D. thesis. 2009), pp. 226–7, 257.

[3] On the significance of correspondence for early modern genealogy, see M. Friedrich, 'How an early modern genealogist got his information', in *Genealogical Knowledge in the Making: Tools, Practices and Evidence in Early Modern Europe*, ed. J. Eickmeyer, M. Friedrich and V. Bauer (Berlin, 2019), pp. 69–98.

[4] The article thus also contributed to Mormon studies, where scholars have pointed out that the early 20th century development of genealogy within Mormonism has been underexplored. See A. Harris, 'A genealogical turn: possibilities for Mormon studies and genealogical scholarship', *Mormon Studies Review*, v (2018), 73–88, at pp. 80–1.

The third section investigates how the culture of correspondence worked from 1917 to the Second World War through the case of the L.D.S. Church's genealogical research in Sweden. It studies the Ella Heckscher Genealogical Bureau that researched Swedish ancestry for Mormon clients. Since most of the records of the Ella Heckscher Genealogical Bureau were lost for several years – only to be rediscovered during the publication of this article, as will be discussed in the final section – the study makes use of several other collections to trace the bureau's work. Except for available records in the bureau's own archive the analysis is based on letters and documents in the archive of Ella Heckscher's brother, the economist Eli Heckscher, the archive of one of the bureau's employees, the genealogist Ludolf Häusler, as well as the Swedish Genealogical Committee in Salt Lake City, which worked closely with Ella Heckscher from the 1920s to the 1940s. Through these records, the section traces the transatlantic networks and interpersonal characteristics that genealogical correspondence relied on.

Correspondence is, however, not only a research method but also a materiality. Challenging the notion that old eras of genealogy are past, the fourth section of the article follows the trajectory of letters, forms and sheets within the contemporary archive system, analysing the long temporalities of genealogical correspondence. It pays particular attention to the unfortunate fate of the archival collection of the Ella Heckscher Genealogical Bureau. Drawing on archival research in the United States and Sweden, the article empirically focuses on the first half of the twentieth century – a period so far studied by relatively few historians – but seeks to make a broader methodological and conceptual contribution to the historical study of genealogy.

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Genealogy is commonly considered an individual endeavour associated with a search for identity and belonging, and with deeply personal engagements and existential feelings. It is often described as a passion, a hobby and an obsession. According to sociologist Jackie Hogan, genealogists are generally motivated by the mystery of the puzzle-solving research, by a sense of duty to their family (living, dead and unborn), by a search for deeper self-knowledge and identity, and by a desire for new and stronger social and spiritual connections.[5] It is clear, as Eviatar Zerubavel pointed out, that 'who we are still depends at least partly on whom we descend from'. It informs both our sense of self and, since ancestry signifies socio–cultural capital, how others see us.[6] The social dimension of ancestry, signifying 'degrees of connection and collective relationships – familial, national, [and] ethnic', makes genealogy one of the most powerful means for community-making in modern society.[7]

Considering the proliferation and importance of genealogy in recent decades, and its explosive development since the turn of the millennium, we still know remarkably little about its past. In his history of genealogy in the United States, from the seventeenth century to today, historian François Weil claimed that 'genealogy is arguably the element of contemporary American culture about which we know the least'.[8] Most historians that have contributed to our knowledge of genealogy have promoted an assumption that the driving force behind its development are the individuals doing genealogical research, sometimes professionals but often amateurs. David Lowenthal has argued that the

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[5] J. Hogan, *Roots Quest: Inside America's Genealogy Boom* (Lanham, Md., 2019), pp. 3, 12–20.
[6] E. Zerubavel, *Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity, and Community* (Oxford, 2012), p. 5.
[7] C. Nash, *Of Irish Descent: Origin Stories, Genealogy, and the Politics of Belonging* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2008), p. 18.
[8] Weil, *Family Trees*, p. 2.

genealogical interests of the late-twentieth century have been a response to the 'trauma' caused by migration, refugeeism and displacement, both on a global scale and due to domestic mobility and urbanization.[9] In line with this way of thinking, historians have described the history of genealogy as a process of 'democratization'. Weil, for example, has argued that 'in the three decades after World War II, the sense of loss of the past experienced by many Americans and the democratisation of tradition stimulated change'.[10] This focus on individual agency is shared by anthropological, cultural geographical and sociological research, which – looking at the field at large – are the disciplines that in recent years have produced most scholarship on genealogy. It is within this tradition that the majority of studies on transatlantic genealogy have been written, for example addressing notions of origin, homeland and practices of homecoming and 'roots tourism'.[11]

Scholars have produced knowledge about general patterns of culture, behaviour, needs and strategies of individuals engaged in genealogical work. Zerubavel, for example, has studied the 'cognitive underpinnings' and the 'transcultural as well as transhistorical … principles' of genealogy, while Hogan has examined the ways that 'our increasingly rootless society fuels the quest for authenticity, for deep history, and for an elemental sense of belonging'.[12] This scholarship circulates around the implicit question 'what makes genealogists tick?' Though the question is imperative to comprehend a prominent dimension of genealogy, this scholarship has had a decisively contemporary outlook that makes it susceptible to ahistorical analyses. As a consequence, it risks reifying the notion that genealogical work is indeed, as Zerubavel put it, a 'transhistorical' and thus a culturally *natural* phenomenon. It also runs the risk of overemphasizing the agency and power of individual genealogists, and thus of missing the significant influence of the interests and ideologies that throughout modern history have sought to make genealogy profitable for its own vested interests. Moreover, it also downplays the singular importance of the media and infrastructures without which genealogy could never have become an internationally popular phenomenon.

There are some scholars who have highlighted the importance of genealogical media, infrastructures and technologies, asking how (and not only what) genealogical knowledge has been produced.[13] Julia Creet has studied 'the new technologies that allow us to indulge' in genealogical research, examining the development of databases and D.N.A. technologies – including by the L.D.S. Church and Ancestry.com – and tracing

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[9] D. Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 9–10.

[10] Weil, *Family Trees*, p. 183. While some scholars date democratization of genealogy to the early 18th century, others situate it in the late 20th century. Cf. Weil, *Family Trees*, pp. 43, 76–77; Morgan, 'Lineage as capital', p. 282; T. K. Hareven, 'The search for generational memory: tribal rites in industrial society', *Daedalus*, cvii (1978), 137–49, at p. 138; J. De Groot, 'On genealogy', *The Public Historian*, xxxvii (2015), 102–27.

[11] P. Basu, *Highland Homecomings: Genealogy and Heritage Tourism in the Scottish Diaspora* (London, 2007); Nash, *Of Irish Descent*; D. J. Timothy, 'Genealogical mobility: tourism and the search for a personal past', in *Geography and Genealogy: Locating Personal Pasts*, ed. D. J. Timothy and J. Kay Guelke (Hampshire, 2008), pp. 115–36; K. Schramm, *African Homecomings: Pan-African Ideology and Contested Heritage* (Walnut Creek, 2010); A. Reed, *Pilgrimage Tourism of Diaspora Africans to Ghana* (New York, 2015). An exception is Hering, '"We are all makers of history"', and the scholarship relating to the impact of Alex Haley's *Roots: the Saga of an American Family* from 1976, such as *Reconsidering Roots: Race, Politics, and Memory*, ed. E. L. Ball and K. Carter Jackson (Athens, Ohio, 2017); and D. Chioni Moore, 'Routes: Alex Haley's *Roots* and the rhetoric of genealogy', *Transition*, lxvii (1994), 4–21.

[12] Zerubavel, *Ancestors and Relatives*, p. 11; Hogan, *Roots Quest*, p. 3.

[13] M. Friedrich, 'Genealogy and the history of knowledge', in Eickmeyer, Friedrich and Bauer, *Genealogical Knowledge in the Making*. See also Nash, *Of Irish Descent*, pp. 16–17. Stephen B. Hatton has in a recent article argued that genealogy is a *technē*, defined by the ways, methods and know-how through which genealogy is practised. See S. B. Hatton, 'History, kinship, identity, and technology: toward answering the question "what is (family) genealogy?"', *Genealogy*, iii (2019) <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3010002> [accessed 20 March 2020].

the 'sublime desire to gather all of the world's genealogical records'.[14] As Noah Lenstra aptly pointed out, doing genealogy requires resources that 'do not emerge naturally, but rather come to exist as part of ever-evolving information structures'.[15] The technological perspective on genealogy was promoted in the 1980s by John Patrick DuLong in a study of the work of genealogical organizations. 'Detailed knowledge about ancestors is not created spontaneously', he asserted, 'rather, it is the result of processes that involve the genealogical sector'. It was technology that according to DuLong had 'pushed the genealogical organizations' forward: 'One reason is that there has been no real cost to the genealogical sector in the introduction of technological innovations. In fact, it made genealogy's tremendous growth possible'.[16] To understand how genealogy works, and the ways in which genealogical resources, media and practices have functioned, we need to understand how it has been configured.

The history of genealogy can be studied through the history of its media, and its modern development can be divided into four epochs: the era of paper, the era of microfilm, the digital era and the era of D.N.A. Although they are exemplified below with a focus on the United States and within the realm of Euro-American genealogy, these eras are relevant to the broader history of genealogy. They are defined by the adaptation of different resources, practices, methodologies and technologies for the production of knowledge about ancestry. They originated at different points in time, but it is important to point out that the eras overlap chronologically and that they all in different ways still remain in the genealogical landscape.

The era of paper has shaped most of the history of popular genealogy – that is, genealogical research among a public that was not associated with royal courts or the nobility. Ancestral consciousness had been significant in the North American colonies already in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and many colonists spent considerable energy on tracing their European lineages. These were, however, individual endeavours made for the sake of personal family trees.[17] The first effort at creating an institutional resource for the benefit of a broader public was the New England Historic Genealogical Society (N.E.H.G.S.) founded in Boston in 1845. The N.E.H.G.S. focused much of their early activities on amassing a genealogical library and, in 1847, launching a quarterly periodical, the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*. Since the New Englanders in the society had British ancestors, the N.E.H.G.S. was likewise the first organization to tackle the genealogical problem of distance. They largely did so through the work of genealogical agents stationed in Britain who performed research and gathered sources on behalf of the Society and of New England clients.[18]

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[14] J. Creet, *The Genealogical Sublime* (Amherst, Mass., 2020), p. 4.

[15] N. Lenstra, '"Democratizing" genealogy and family heritage practices: the view from Urbana, Illinois', in *Encounters with Popular Pasts: Cultural Heritage and Popular Culture*, ed. M. Robinson and H. Silverman (Cham, 2015), pp. 203–18, at p. 204.

[16] J. P. DuLong, 'Genealogical groups in a changing organizational environment: from lineage to heritage' (Wayne State University Ph.D. thesis, 1986), pp. 7, 276.

[17] Weil, *Family Trees*, pp. 8–41; L. DeWitt Bockstruck, 'Four centuries of genealogy: a historical overview', *RQ*, xxiii (1983), 162–70; F. Weil, 'John Farmer and the making of American genealogy', *New England Quarterly*, lxxx (2007), 408–34; Morgan, 'Lineage as capital'; K. Wulf, 'Bible, king, and common law: genealogical literacies and family history practices in British America', *Early American Studies*, x (2012), 467–502.

[18] In 1883 the Society established the 'Committee on English Research' and dispatched a genealogist to England (see 'Report of the committee on English research', *Proceedings of the New England Historic Genealogical Society at the Annual Meeting, January 2, 1884* (Boston, Mass., 1884)). A collection of excerpts from the London-based genealogist was published by the Society in 1901, together with an index of names to facilitate research (see H. F. Waters, *Genealogical Gleanings in England* (Boston, Mass., 1901)).

The N.E.H.G.S. epitomizes how transatlantic genealogical research was practised in the era of paper. It applied four general strategies to enable and facilitate long-distance research: it collected resources in a genealogical library, it contracted overseas genealogists to do research on-demand, it sought to create new resources by excerpting and publishing primary sources in books and journals, and it produced substantial indices of personal names and place names. It was a work centred on printed publications, index card catalogues and the writing of letters. While letters had been key to ancestral consciousness and the nurturing of kinship in the American colonies, it would only develop as a popular genealogical technique in the twentieth century.

The strategy of excerpting records was developed in the 1930s through the technology of microfilming. While large-scale microfilming first appears to have been used for genealogical purposes in Nazi Germany as part of the regime's efforts of making Germans trace their racial ancestry, the most forceful proponent of the microfilm technology became the L.D.S. Church. Through the Utah Genealogical Society, in 1938 the Church began a microfilm programme intended to grow the collection of records in Salt Lake City. After a hiatus during the war, the programme grew explosively after 1945. From having twelve rolls of microfilm in 1938, by the end of the 1970s the Church owned over a million rolls including records from every U.S. state and more than forty nations.[19] By making the films available at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, by circulating microfilms to their international branch libraries, by the structure of their microfilm deals – where the foreign archive received a 'free' copy of each microfilm roll – and by providing a model for microfilm programmes of other institutions, the L.D.S. Church led the way in establishing the era of microfilm.[20] While for archives this had the benefit of lessening the wear and tear on fragile documents, microfilm also enabled genealogists to access remediated copies of primary sources from across the globe at nearby libraries and institutions.

Microfilm continued to be the primary means of accessing genealogical records until the development of Internet-based digital imaging at turn of the millennium. The L.D.S. Church had already experimented with computers in 1962, and began to computerize genealogical data on a large scale in 1969. Their initial focus was on the creation of digital databases, such as the massive International Genealogical Index (I.G.I.) launched in 1973 which at the time of its cancellation in 2008 contained over one billion names. The development of databases accelerated considerably with the introduction of desktop computers in the 1970s and CD-ROM discs in the mid 1980s.[21] In the late 1990s, the Internet opened new opportunities for individuals to connect through email lists and genealogical forums, as well as for organizations and businesses to develop new online resources. FamilySearch, the renamed incarnation of the Genealogical Society of Utah, launched its website with digital images of records in 1999, and Utah-based for-profit

[19] J. B. Allen, J. L. Embry and K. B. Mehr, *Hearts Turned to the Fathers: a History of the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1894–1994* (Provo, 1995), pp. 213–32. On the Nazi regime's microfilming in Germany, see D. Hertz, 'The genealogy bureaucracy in the Third Reich', *Jewish History*, xi (1997), 53–78, at pp. 71–2.

[20] Allen, Embry and Mehr, *Hearts Turned to the Fathers*, pp. 186–90, 280–5; M. Lindström, *Drömmar om det minsta: Mikrofilm, överflöd och brist, 1900–1970* (Lund, 2017), pp. 122–3, Creet, *The Genealogical Sublime*, pp. 55–6, 59–60.

[21] Allen, Embry and Mehr, *Hearts Turned to the Fathers*, pp. 178–85; D. Harman Akenson, *Some Family: the Mormons and How Humanity Keeps Track of Itself* (Montreal, 2007), pp. 207–13; S. M. Otterstrom, 'Genealogy as religious ritual: the doctrine and practice of family history in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints', in Timothy and Guelke, *Geography and Genealogy*, pp. 137–52; Creet, *The Genealogical Sublime*, pp. 58–9, 61–2.

company Ancestry launched its site in 1997, initially offering online genealogical databases.[22]

While the digital era in many ways was a continuation of genealogical practices and methodologies from the nineteenth century − with digitization being related to both microfilm imaging and record excerpting, and online word-searches being the heirs of index card catalogues − the era of D.N.A. has constituted a more fundamental reshaping of the genealogical landscape. The subfield of genetic genealogy grew through the increased availability of direct-to-consumer D.N.A.-tests, first provided in 2000 by Family Tree DNA based in Houston, Texas, and now sold by several major businesses such as 23andMe, MyHeritage and AncestryDNA. Genetic genealogy today dominates both the market of and public discussion about genealogical research, and has attracted significant scholarly attention for the ways in which it reifies and fosters ideas about inheritance, race and identity.[23]

The relatively few historians that have so far studied genealogy have largely addressed the period of colonial and bourgeois genealogy before 1900, or the popular growth of genealogical interest after the 1970s shaped by the success of Alex Haley's 1976 book and subsequent blockbuster television mini-series *Roots: the Saga of an American Family*. This article rather emphasizes developments in the early and mid twentieth century, centering the role of media in transatlantic genealogy: primarily letters, but also forms, charts and sheets. These documents − which as Lisa Gitelman commented are 'integral to the ways people think and live' − have been constituted through a wider nexus of mediality that includes pens, ink, paper, typewriters, index cards, filing cabinets, archives and postal services (with their own internal administrative and motorized technologies for delivering letters), as well as immaterial standards and bureaucratic routines. They are part of media systems centred around the culture of paper.[24]

Beyond its materiality, paper functions as a 'storage battery and conductor' that always exists in 'a symbiosis with other media'.[25] The necessity of looking 'at the media as a whole', as argued by Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, is echoed in John Durham Peters's call for attention to be paid not only to the social and technical components of infrastructures but also to 'the basic, the boring, the mundane, and all the mischievous work done behind the scenes'.[26] At the foundation of these ideas is the notion that media, such as paper, do not merely reflect social or cultural meaning; it affects the shape and content of the practices. Correspondence is constituted by forms of 'mediators' that 'transform, translate, distort and modify the

[22] K. Veale, 'Discussing our family trees: a longitudinal analysis of online, community-based communication in genealogical newsgroups', *Interface: the Journal of Education, Community and Values*, iv (2004) < https://commons.pacificu.edu/work/sc/6177fab4-c912-4b03-a9e0-2f2fd220abde> [accessed 10 Nov. 2020]; E. Yakel, 'Seeking information, seeking connections, seeking meaning: genealogists and family historians', *Information Research*, x (2004) <http://informationr.net/ir/10-1/paper205.html> [accessed 12 Dec. 2020]; Creet, *The Genealogical Sublime*, pp. 63–93; K. Meethan, 'Remaking time and space: the internet, digital archives and genealogy', in Timothy and Guelke, *Geography and Genealogy*, pp. 99–114; J. De Groot, 'Ancestry.com and the evolving nature of historical information companies', *Public Historian*, xlii (2020), 8–28.

[23] See, e.g., K. TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis, Minn., 2013); C. Nash, *Genetic Geographies: The Trouble with Ancestry* (Minneapolis, Minn., 2015); A. Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation after the Genome* (Boston, Mass., 2016).

[24] L. Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham, 2014), p. 4; M. Krajewski, *Paper Machines: About Cards and Catalogs, 1548–1929* (Cambridge, 2011); B. Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (Cambridge, 2012); A. Monro, *The Paper Trail: an Unexpected History of a Revolutionary Invention* (New York, 2016).

[25] L. Müller, *White Magic: the Age of Paper* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. xii, 261.

[26] A. Briggs and P. Burke, *A Social History of the Media: from Gutenberg to the Internet* (3rd edn., Cambridge, 2009), p. 19; J. Durham Peters, *Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago, Ill., 2015), p. 33.

meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry'.[27] Before turning to a discussion on how the technique of genealogical correspondence developed in the early twentieth century, however, we need to engage with Mormon efforts to make ancestry a gospel.

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Mormonism has been called 'a theology of death's conquest'. While this in some sense is true for Christianity in general, Mormonism has taken the overcoming of death as a means of salvation further in both belief and action, adopting baptism for the dead as an earthly ritual with heavenly outcomes. The Mormon trajectory into the genealogical landscape has its origin in Church doctrine, stemming from the revelations of Joseph Smith. The practice of posthumous baptism is grounded in the belief that family and kinship relations are eternal. Eternity can be achieved through a temple ritual where husband and wife, but also children and ancestors, are 'sealed' to each other. The 'ultimate theological focus' within Mormonism, wrote Douglas J. Davies, thus 'lies with as broad an extended family as possible'.[28] The practical result of this doctrine has been a strong and, since the late nineteenth century, exponentially growing attention to genealogical research and family history.

The institutionalization of genealogy within the Church began in the 1890s under the presidency of Wilford Woodruff.[29] After having received a revelation in April 1894 concerning the Church's work for the dead, Woodruff proposed a change to the ways that individuals could be sealed to ancestors. Unlike the common practice at the time – where many Mormons proxy-baptized their deceased parents or declared themselves 'adopted' by high-ranking Church officials – Woodruff explained that Mormons should only work on their own family lines.[30] In order to support this doctrinal reorientation, in November 1894 the Church established the Utah Genealogical Society, tasked with maintaining a genealogical library, to educate Mormons on genealogical research, and to gather records to enable and facilitate proxy baptisms.[31]

One of the most important and forceful champions of L.D.S. genealogy at the turn of the century 1900 was Susa Young Gates, a daughter of Brigham Young, an organizer of women's associations within the Church, and a fervent writer on and educator of genealogical research. 'The Latter-day Saint views each name found as the symbol of an actual person', Young Gates wrote in 1913, 'dead to this world but very much alive in the great Beyond'.[32] Five years later, a revelation of President Joseph F. Smith opened up the potential to supplement missionary work for the living by doing 'mission for the dead'.[33]

The problem for Mormons was that Utah was far removed from the genealogical sources needed to find these names and trace the symbols of the dead. There were three

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[27] B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2005), p. 39.

[28] D. J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 184–6, 209–17 (pp. 91 and 185). On the Mormon theology of family and ancestry, see also A. J. Hawkins, D. C. Dollahite, and C. J. Rhoades, 'Turning the hearts of the fathers to the children: nurturing the next generation', *BYU Studies Quarterly*, xxxiii (1993), 273–91; A. L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana, Ill., 2003).

[29] Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, p. 228.

[30] Akenson, *Some Family*, pp. 63–4.

[31] Allen, Embry and Mehr, *Hearts Turned to the Fathers*, pp. 45–6; Akenson, *Some Family*, p. 64; M. S. Lofthouse, 'A history of the Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to 1970' (Brigham Young University, M.A. diss., 1971).

[32] S. Young Gates, 'The index as an aid to the genealogist', *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, iv (1913), 130–2, at p. 130. On the work and significance of Young Gates, see J. B. Allen and J. L. Embry, '"Provoking the brethren to good works": Susa Young Gates, the relief society, and genealogy', *BYU Studies Quarterly*, xxxi (1991), 115–38.

[33] Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism*, pp. 236–9; Akenson, *Some Family*, p. 201.

potential solutions to this problem: to travel to Europe to conduct research, to gather as many resources as possible in Utah, or to write letters. Although some genealogical missionaries travelled to Europe, the first project was a financially and logistically untenable strategy for the vast missionary task at hand.[34] The second project, the library, developed steadily but slowly during the early 1900s. Sporting 5,000 volumes by 1920, the collection grew significantly in the interwar period, reaching over 19,000 by 1937.[35] Despite surging membership and greatly improved facilities, these resources were not sufficient for transatlantic genealogical research. The Society had initially employed genealogical agents in England, Scotland, Germany and Switzerland, contracted to perform genealogy for hire (though few Mormons seem to have used the service). In the early 1920s, no longer wanting to be responsible for the work of these agents, the Society stopped employing field agents but continued to direct patrons to recommended professional genealogists.[36] To maintain these relations and support transatlantic research, the Society reverted to option three. As explained by the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* in 1919,

We westerners live in a new country – genealogically speaking, in a very new country … Therefore, in order to obtain any extended genealogical results, we must go elsewhere for our information – we must to go the countries where we or our forefathers came from … This obtaining of genealogical data from a distance is done largely by correspondence. Personal visits are expensive, and often unsatisfactory. Frequently a properly written letter, persistently and wisely followed up, will bring as great results as the more costly personal visit.[37]

The *Magazine* was the Society's journal founded in 1910. Until its cancellation in 1940, it served as a key platform for genealogical teachings, instructions, information and advertisement. Beginning in 1911, Susa Young Gates initiated a series of genealogical lessons in the *Magazine* that would be continued by her and other writers in the ensuing decades. As indicated by the 1919 article, a particular focus of the lessons was methodologies and techniques of correspondence. 'The importance of correspondence as a means of gathering genealogical data cannot be stressed too highly', an L.D.S. handbook reiterated in 1924.[38] The emphasis on correspondence in transatlantic research was strong enough to linger into the era of microfilm, still being touted in the 1960s as a tool that 'makes available the genealogical records of the whole world', and that constituted 'the most convenient and sure method of obtaining genealogical information'.[39]

The Genealogical Society of Utah spent much energy in teaching L.D.S. members how to use correspondence in their research. Its tone was highly didactical. The 'first requisite' of the genealogist, Young Gates explained, 'is notebooks, records books, pencils, paper, and ink'. 'The notebook', she continued, 'should be preferably about seven by ten inches, as this permits space for dates and names across the page'. The pencil 'must have a rubber, of course, or a separate rubber will be necessary', and it was vital to 'insist on securing the very best ink made'.[40] The Society provided lessons on composition,

[34] Allen, Embry and Mehr, *Hearts Turned to the Fathers*, pp. 39–41, 44. On early Mormon genealogical missionaries, see J. L. Embry, 'Missionaries for the dead: the story of the genealogical missionaries of the nineteenth century', *BYU Studies Quarterly*, xvii (1977), 355–60.

[35] Allen, Embry and Mehr, *Hearts Turned to the Fathers*, pp. 47–9, 84–6, 92–3.

[36] Allen, Embry and Mehr, *Hearts Turned to the Fathers*, pp. 49–52, 104.

[37] 'The gathering of genealogy', *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, x (1919), 132–4, at p. 133.

[38] *Handbook of Genealogy and Temple Work* (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1924), p. 298.

[39] *Handbook for Genealogical Correspondence*, ed. J. F. Vallentine (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1963), p. 1.

[40] S. Young Gates, 'Lessons in genealogy: introduction', *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, ii (1911), 163–9, at p. 166. This kind of didactics continued in the following decades, see, e.g., 'Lesson department', *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, xvii (1926), 167–85, p. 171.

on proper formatting (margins, spacing, proportions) and on 'accurate penmanship' in letter-writing. For those who wished, there were sample letters to use, as well as a pre-printed answer form supplied for a fee by the Genealogical Society.[41]

Another dimension of correspondence concerned storage and archiving, connected to the notion that the work in itself – and not only the outcome of the searches – was made for posterity. The securing of a record of research began with the very writing of letters, and the choice of paper of sufficient thickness and ink of good quality to ensure that the letters did not tear or fade. Once correspondence was set in motion, it was paramount to arrange the letters systematically. Young Gates advised readers to

Use a large box or drawer or other receptacle, and in this keep all your papers and sheets. It will soon be necessary to have several separate drawers, one for correspondence, one for records and one for sheets and circulars. The correspondence should be filed carefully in separate manila envelopes or letter files, with the date of receiving and of answering the letter written plainly across the top of the folded letter or page.[42]

Eventually, there would be a need for cross-referencing records and of arranging the data, which could be done using a card index system, 'One of the most striking evidences of our modern clear-cut methods in business life'. Allowing for work to be 'tabulated, divided and subdivided into parts and neat little index cards', Young Gates was pleased to see that 'genealogy has adopted this simple device for quick examination and sure results'.[43]

Although these techniques were adopted for genealogy within the mainland United States, they were most consequential for research overseas. The focus of the early issues of the *Magazine* was on Great Britain, and in particular on England and Scotland. This emphasis was not surprising considering that British immigrants constituted the largest foreign-born group in Utah (a position retained until the 1950s), and that a large number of British-Americans held prominent positions within Church leadership.[44] Beginning in the 1920s, the Genealogical Society slowly increased its coverage of other ethnic backgrounds.[45] The community that, alongside the British, received by far most attention was the Scandinavian, which constituted the second largest group in the state. Of the more than 46,000 Scandinavian converts that migrated to Utah between 1850 and 1905, 50 per cent came from Denmark, about 36 per cent from Sweden, and around 14 per cent from Norway. By 1920, the 6,000 Swedish-born people in Utah remained the third-largest group in the state, while persons of Swedish 'stock' (including individuals with at least one Swedish-born parent) numbered close to 17,000.[46] Although the Swedish-American community was far larger in states such as Minnesota and Illinois, it played an outsize local role in Utah, where it occupied a notable position in the Mormon genealogical landscape.

[41] 'Lesson department', pp. 173–4; *Handbook of Genealogy and Temple Work*, pp. 298–305 (pp. 298 and 300).

[42] Young Gates, 'Lessons in genealogy: introduction', p. 169. See also *Handbook of Genealogy and Temple Work*, p. 304.

[43] S. Young Gates, 'Lessons in genealogy: numbering', *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, iii (1912), 123–32, at p. 123; Young Gates, 'The index as an aid to the genealogist', p. 130; *Handbook of Genealogy and Temple Work*, p. 304.

[44] R. L. Jensen, 'Immigration to Utah' and 'British immigrants and life in Utah', *Utah History Encyclopedia* <https://www.uen.org> [accessed 8 Jan. 2020].

[45] See *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, xi (1920); *Handbook of Genealogy and Temple Work*, pp. 143–74.

[46] W. Mulder, *Homeward to Zion: the Mormon Migration from Scandinavia* (Minneapolis, Minn., 2000 [1957]), pp. 107, 197–8; *Fourteenth Census of the United States: Population 1920; General Report and Analytical Tables* (Washington, D.C., 1922), pp. 697, 902–3.

The practice of Swedish genealogy within the Mormon community provides a case through which to analyse how genealogical correspondence worked in practice. To study this relationship, we need to look at the networks of transatlantic correspondence. This includes the individual patrons in Utah and the societies and institutions of the L.D.S. Church, but also the professional genealogists in Sweden and the infrastructure that they relied on when conducting genealogical research. Correspondence was an uncertain practice, where a client had to trust a far-away genealogist to undertake the desired research. As the client did not have first-hand access to the sources (or, as was often the case, had very little knowledge about the sources in general or the necessary language skills), the process was thoroughly opaque. As a consequence of these perils, two dimensions were particularly valued within the culture of correspondence: professional reliability and record accessibility.

<p style="text-align:center">∗</p>

Correspondence culture did not necessitate personal connections, yet interpersonal relations could be used to convince others about the reliability of a particular overseas genealogist. More impactful than self-funded campaigns, the practice of publicly vouching for another person's credibility and competence was a powerful form of advertisement. A good example of this is the genealogical agency in Sweden that had most Mormon clients during the twentieth century, the Ella Heckscher Genealogical Bureau in Uppsala.

Ella Heckscher was born in 1882 into a bourgeois Jewish family in Stockholm.[47] Having worked part-time at the Regional State Archives in Uppsala between 1911–21, she officially opened her own genealogical agency in 1918.[48] As genealogist at the Swedish Institute for Racial Biology (1922–4), co-founder of the Swedish Genealogical Society (1933), and the author of a popular and highly read Swedish genealogical handbook (1939), Heckscher played a significant role in the history of genealogy in Sweden. She directed the Genealogical Bureau until 1949 and continued to do genealogical research for hire until her death in 1964. Under the leadership of a former employee, the bureau remained open until 1979.[49] Heckscher's own ancestry does not appear to have played an interest in her chosen career. She grew up in a secularized family and although she had her *bat mitzvah* at seventeen, took a religious interest as a young woman and retained friends and relations in the Jewish community, religion did not shape her adult life.[50] When asked in 1923 about how long she had taken a genealogical interest, Heckscher referred to a moment ten years before when she had assisted a population statistics study at Uppsala University. The career that ensued, Heckscher explained, happened 'by chance, as is often the case with a vocation'.[51] While Heckscher and her employees certainly shared a passion

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[47] For biographies of Ella Heckscher, see K. Thörn, 'Att söka sin plats: En berättelse om Ella Heckscher', in *Obemärkta: Det dagliga livets idéer*, ed. R. Ambjörnsson and S. Sörlin (Stockholm, 1995), pp. 59–87; H. Stenholm, 'Släktforskaren mot landsarkivarien: En fallstudie av offentlighetsprincipens tillämpning på 1920-talet' (Uppsala University, B.A. diss., 2006), p. 8; 'Amerikasvenskarna och släktforskningen: Ett samtal med chefen för genealogiska byrån i Uppsala', *Vecko-Journalen*, xxvi, 1 July 1923.

[48] Unofficially, however, the Bureau had launched already in 1917. See Stockholm, National Library of Sweden, L 67, Eli Heckschers efterlämnade papper, Brev från Ella Heckscher (hereafter E.H.), series 63, vol. 1, Ella Heckscher to Eli Heckscher, 2 Apr. 1917.

[49] E. Heckscher, *Sex kapitel om släktforskning* (Stockholm, 1939); the latest edition appeared as *Släktforskning: Kort handledning för amatörer* (Stockholm, 1970). On the organizational history of the Genealogical Bureau, see Växjö, Swedish Emigrant Institute, Finding Aid to Ella Heckschers Genealogiska Byrå, Lars-Göran Johansson, 10 Dec. 1986 (hereafter E.H.G.B.).

[50] Thörn, 'Att söka sin plats', p. 64–8.

[51] 'Amerikasvenskarna och släktforskningen'.

for genealogy, their role in the transatlantic infrastructure was chiefly driven by economic considerations. For them, genealogy was not about the afterlife but about business.

With exception for the early years of the Bureau's existence, the majority of its clients came from Utah and, although the Bureau did not record religious affiliation, it is safe to assume that they were overwhelmingly Mormon.[52] By the late 1920s, the Bureau had earned an unrivalled status within the L.D.S. Church as the go-to option for U.S. Mormons wishing to do genealogical research in Sweden. Between 1928–41, the Bureau was the main provider of genealogical information for the Swedish Genealogical Committee in Salt Lake City, an organization established to facilitate research and temple work.[53] The Bureau continued to occasionally receive referrals from the Genealogical Society of Utah as late as 1976, but the bulk of the orders that had been channelled to the Bureau through either the Society or the Swedish Mission of the L.D.S. Church ceased in 1966.[54] By then, the Church had secured its own wealth of genealogical resources in Salt Lake City, making correspondence increasingly superfluous.

The inclusion of the Genealogical Bureau as a non-official agent of the L.D.S. Church took place through interpersonal relations. Heckscher had received research referrals from the L.D.S. Church as early as 1917. The turning point, however, came in 1928, when the *Magazine* carried four articles on Scandinavian genealogy, one of which was solely devoted to the promotion of Heckscher – an exceptional move by the journal – while a supplementary text (on rules regarding Swedish soldier names) was written by Heckscher herself. The article on Heckscher not only covered her professional work, but also featured a lengthy description of her biography and personality, her educated family background and language skills. Her 'beautiful apartment', and her brown eyes that 'sparkle and flash' when discussing genealogy, served to anchor Heckscher as sympathetic, knowledgeable and reliable. The article did not mention Heckscher's Jewish background, or that she was unmarried (a status she would retain throughout her life), two facts that did not as easily square with a Mormon readership. On the contrary, readers were flattered by a quote from Heckscher saying that 'I can't help but feel that you people are very extraordinary to spend so much time and money doing work for the dead … Therefore, when I receive a communication from Utah I start probing the records immediately, for I know someone is anxious to begin work for the dead'.[55] The reliability of the Genealogical Bureau was based on portraying Ella Heckscher as both a competent and likeable professional, but also on the notion that she shared fundamental Mormon values.

The extensive coverage was followed by additional endorsements from prominent Mormon clients, such as Archibald Bennett and Joseph Christenson, who publicly praised the work that Heckscher had done. Christenson, the vice-president of the Genealogical Society of Utah and the Recorder of the Salt Lake Temple, suggested that his getting in touch with Heckscher had been the work of God. After having hit a roadblock in his own research, he 'continued to hope and pray that the Lord would open the way' and that he 'would get records from some source'. His changed fortune came when he 'felt

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[52] Uppsala, Regional State Archives, ULA/10183, Ludolf Häuslers genealogiska samling, D3, vol. 1, Beställningsbok 1919–34 (hereafter L.H.).

[53] On the aims of the committee, see Utah, Salt Lake City, Church History Library, MS. 4028, Swedish Genealogical Committee collection, ca 1929–58, box 1, F 9, Axel A. Nylander to Ella Hechser [*sic*], 12 Oct. 1928 (hereafter S.G.C.).

[54] L.H., E1, vol. 1, folder '1966', Frank Smith to Genealogiska Byrån, 27 Apr. 1966; L.H., E1, vol. 2, folder J, Nils H. Jansson to Genealogiska byrån, 19 March 1976.

[55] C. J. Fagergren, 'Ella Heckscher and her Work', *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, xix (1928), 9–12.

a sudden impression to ask Miss Heckscher to do research for me', the results of which reportedly had been successful.[56]

While all Mormons naturally hoped that their correspondence research would be fruitful, their most fundamental expectation was to receive the product (that is, the research effort and genealogical data) for which they had often paid an advance fee. Since the genealogists were both geographically and socially remote, a client usually had very little control over whether they would receive what they had paid for. Conversely, however, professional genealogists also had limited means of ensuring that they received the pay due for the work performed. As a consequence of distance, the culture of correspondence was plagued by fraud.[57] When it came to finances and delivery of research results, reliability was thus both crucial and reciprocal. While clients expected the prompt delivery of their research requests, the professional genealogist similarly expected the prompt delivery of payments. In the case of the Bureau, these transactions were done either through money orders or cheques deposited at bank accounts in Stockholm, New York or Salt Lake City.[58]

It was rather common that the Bureau's clients simply did not pay the fee, despite strongly worded reminders to do so.[59] When Heckscher's own attempts at obtaining payments failed, she adopted the strategy of using her connections with Church leadership as leverage. 'Tell him [the client]', Heckscher wrote to the Swedish Committee in 1934, that if he does not pay 'I will turn to Mr. Joseph Christenson at the Salt Lake Temple'. Christenson 'usually helps me, when there is trouble', Heckscher explained, 'and he carries significant authority, so I have the impression, that the clients do not like to see, that he finds out about their negligence in paying'.[60] Some of the complaints from Heckscher were even taken up for discussion by the board of the Genealogical Society. If Mormon clients refused to pay the fees even after having been reminded to do so, the board at a 1936 meeting declared that 'charges should be entered against them and they should be cited before a bishop's court'. While the board made clear that 'the society has no moral or legal obligation as to private orders', they also emphasized their interest 'in the furtherance of the work generally'.[61] Reliability was an important selling point for the professional genealogists but, since genealogy was such a crucial dimension of the Mormon missionary work, it was likewise imperative for the Church to maintain a public image of providing reliable clients.

The coming of the Second World War caused great problems for correspondence research. As it relied on the regular operation of national and international postal services, it was heavily affected by the battle of the Atlantic and the collapse of established lines of transatlantic communication. A 1940 *Magazine* article headlined 'Closed avenues in research' described how the war 'had an adverse effect upon genealogical research

[56] A. F. Bennett, 'A daughter of kings', *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, xxi (1930), 108–13, at p. 111; J. Christenson, 'Life and ancestry of Joseph Christenson', *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, xxviii (1937), 145–56, at p. 149. Similar stories about divine intervention have been common within Mormonism (see W. A. Wilson, 'The paradox of Mormon folklore', *BYU Studies Quarterly*, xvii (1977), 40–58, at pp. 47–8).

[57] Weil, *Family Trees*, pp. 153–6.

[58] See, e.g., S.G.C., box 1, F5, Ella Heckscher to Axel Fors, 21 Oct. 1931. On the bank accounts, see E.H.G.B., series G, vol. 1, deposit tickets for Zion's Savings Bank & Trust Co., and Robert Myer to Ella Heckscher, 3 Apr. 1939; Ella Heckscher to Della Belnap, 21 Dec. 1932, Bluth Family web site <www.bluth.info> [accessed 6 Jan. 2020].

[59] See, e.g., Church History Library, MS. 6575, Nils G. Rasmuson Collection, box 11, F5, Ella Heckscher to Nils G. Rasmuson, 28 Apr. 1937.

[60] S.G.C., box 1, F2, Ella Heckscher to Nils G. Hedberg, 7 Nov. 1934.

[61] Church History Library, CR 226 109, Genealogical Society, Correspondence Files, box 1, vol. 4 [vol. '3' on binding], Minutes, 27 Oct. 1936 (hereafter G.S.C.).

in Europe', with some researchers enrolled in the army and many archives becoming inaccessible.[62]

Although Sweden was less effected by the war than continental Europe – or, for that matter, the rest of Scandinavia – it did affect the work of genealogists specializing in transatlantic genealogy. This caused problems for Heckscher. The Bureau continued to receive a steady stream of American clients, but she had great difficulties in collecting payments from the United States. Writing that 'we are one of the innocent victims of the war', she called the situation 'a catastrophe' for the Bureau.[63] Not being able trust that mail would be delivered to her present clients, Heckscher wrote an open letter to the editor of the *Magazine*:

As many of the readers … have one or several genealogical lines in Sweden, I wish to inform them that the genealogical research work here is, at the present time, very difficult to perform on account of the war in Europe. Some of the archives are wholly or partly closed; some are still allowed to be used. Thus the work can be done only in some parts of the country. Moreover, the mail to and from the U.S.A. is very much delayed – sometimes letters will not reach Sweden at all or reach the U.S.A. from Sweden … All these circumstances explain why many of my clients have not received their work ordered rather long ago … I wish to inform all my clients that I have a sum deposited in the U.S.A. large enough to give their payments back. Do not worry; everybody will have his work – or his money back.[64]

Through the nature of correspondence as a long-distance technique – and sometimes a faceless one, as was the case before the 1928 *Magazine* coverage that featured Heckscher's full-page portrait – interpersonal qualities became the adhesive glue of the communicative networks that sustained proxy as a business model. The dependency on reliability in the culture of correspondence was, at the same time, its greatest weakness. Clients needed to be able to trust that overseas genealogists performed the work that they were supposed to do when clients sent them their cheques, and the genealogists trusted that the cheques would be sent by the clients when the work was carried out. In order to sustain this system of mutual dependency, the culture of correspondence was supported by a layer of checks and balances – bank accounts and acquaintances with power. Heckscher's open letter printed during the war was an attempt at disarming this weakness through transparency, keeping a line of communication open by way of her access to the genealogical infrastructure of the L.D.S. Church.

On the ground, the genealogists who performed the research worked within existing structures of archival institutions – national, regional and local. They were subject to the nature of the historical records, as well as to the ways in which these records were made, or sometimes not made, available to the public. The question of accessibility was consequently one of the key advantages of choosing correspondence over travelling long distances. As Young Gates explained about genealogy in Britain, 'unless he [the genealogist] understands a little about how to go to work, he will waste time and money with a prodigality that is beyond belief'.[65] The most efficient way to get research done was rather to use a genealogist with access to relevant records.

The Bureau adopted two strategies when they conducted research in Sweden. The first strategy, aimed at securing records and information from recent history, was to contact

[62] 'Executive department: closed avenues in research', *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, xxxi (1940), 168–9, at p. 168.

[63] E.H., series 63, vol. 2, Ella Heckscher to Eli Heckscher, 30 Nov. 1941, and Ella Heckscher to Eli Heckscher, 4 May 1943.

[64] Ella Heckscher quoted in 'Executive department: closed avenues in research', p. 168.

[65] S. Young Gates, 'Cutting the cost in genealogical research', *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, viii (1917), 138–40, at p. 139.

parish offices. Rather than travelling around to various parishes, the Bureau adopted the less time-consuming, and thus more cost-efficient, strategy of letter-writing. Through their central position as guardians of valuable records, parish priests and offices became part of a formalistic culture of genealogy in Sweden played out through correspondence. Correspondence was, in this way, not only a means for individuals to gather genealogies overseas, but also a tool for the genealogists who performed the actual research.

The second strategy was to use the resources of the Swedish Regional State Archives. Access to genealogical sources at these archives had been a point of contention for Heckscher early in her career, enveloped in a conflict over the public's right to access archive records. In 1922 the regional state archivist in Uppsala had refused Heckscher access to some public records, including genealogically valuable church books, officially for privacy reasons and because her requests had placed an undue burden on the limited capacity of archive staff. The archivist, moreover, found it unacceptable that his paid staff helped professional genealogical businesses. The refusal caused Heckscher to file a complaint to the parliamentary ombudsmen, an institution that oversaw whether Swedish government agencies complied with laws and statutes. The case eventually found its way to the appellate court (Svea Court of Appeal), which explained that the records were public and that Heckscher indeed did have a constitutional right to read them.[66] The conflict received considerable coverage in the Swedish daily press, functioning as effective publicity for Heckscher and her bureau.[67] The case, moreover, ensured that Heckscher's business would continue to benefit from public archive access.

While Heckscher sometimes travelled to the regional archives, an advantage of the Bureau was that the volume of their orders allowed them to keep assistants stationed at the most important archives. By the 1930s, the Bureau had assistants at four Regional State Archives – including much-used institutions in Lund, Gothenburg and Vadstena – which significantly reduced the need to travel.[68] It is unclear how many individuals that the Bureau regularly employed; in the late 1950s, it hired between sixteen and nineteen assistants (including secretaries) on a temporary basis, some of whom merely worked a few hours while others were regular subcontractors.[69] As a consequence, instead of travelling, the Bureau primarily conducted its work by writing letters back and forth to the central office in Uppsala, which functioned as a clearing house for the compilation and distribution of genealogical data to clients. The network of assistants enabled the Bureau to accept a larger quantity of clients, as the work could be done more efficiently and expediently.[70]

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Once received, or sent and retained as carbon copies, letters were regularly preserved in drawers, cabinets or boxes. The records were turned into resources of the professional genealogists. Over time, some of the records were absorbed into institutionalized archive systems and entered into a path of preservation. Viewed in a longer temporality,

[66] Stenholm, 'Släktforskaren mot landsarkivarien', pp. 12–28.

[67] See, e.g., 'Vägrade utlämna handlingar: Landsarkivarie anmäld för J.O'., *Aftonbladet*, 10 Dec. 1922; 'Arkivforskning, som försvåras av arkivarien', *Dagens Nyheter*, 23 Jan. 1923; Regan, 'Stamträdens skugga', *Dagens Nyheter*, 3 Feb. 1924.

[68] Stockholm, National Archives Marieberg, Utrikesdepartementet handarkiv, series 3, Sven Lagerberg, vol. 1, folder '1933', Ella Heckscher to Sven Lagerberg, 8 Feb. 1933. See also 'James M. Kirkham visits European missions', *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, xxix (1938), 49–53, at p. 50.

[69] E.H.G.B., Räkenskapshandlingar, series G, vol. 1, folder 'Löne- och kontrolluppgifter', 'Sammandrag över uppgifter från arbetsgivare', 1957 and 1958.

[70] E.H., series 63, vol. 2, Ella Heckscher to Eli Heckscher, 6 Sept. 1944.

genealogical correspondence thus exists in a liminal space. These were working materials, useful in a process that aimed at something greater than the papers themselves, but they also became historical records worth preserving for posterity as remnants of the past.

The usefulness of correspondence ultimately stemmed from the materiality of letters. The work of clients, professional genealogists, archivists, parish priests and postal services resulted in the co-creation of material residues of the research process that were valuable research tools in their own right. These residues of paper and ink filled immediate functions in the production of ancestral knowledge – or, in the case of Mormon genealogy, the gathering of names – but they also produced a trove of papers which could be archived. 'Caution: Do not destroy any history', the L.D.S. handbook from 1924 explained. Just as the names gathered, the correspondence itself should also be preserved for posterity, preferably kept in 'a tin box, with a cover to exclude dust so that in case of fire the important and valuable correspondence may not be destroyed'.[71] The longevity of letters was not coincidental but an integrated aspect of the culture of correspondence.

The records of correspondence turned into two sets of archives: one belonging to the client and one to the genealogist. For the professional genealogists, correspondence accumulated into a collection of names and relations, producing a paper trail that could be useful in future genealogical work. The correspondence between the Ella Heckscher Genealogical Bureau and their Mormon clients was, for example, put to use by her successors. The preserved correspondence and family group sheets from previous searches could be solicited when old clients wanted to resume research, or when new clients wanted to continue to research lineages initiated by an older relative.[72] In these cases, the institutionally archived correspondence provided a resource for the business of the Bureau.

The very technique of correspondence has also been key to its sustained relevance as genealogical resources in the digital era. We can explore this process through the papers of the Genealogical Bureau. Although the exact chain of events is unknown in the narrative to follow, the outlines are clear enough to warrant a discussion. In 1976 the bulk of the Bureau's records were donated to the Swedish Emigrant Institute (S.E.I.) in Växjö in southern Sweden, a research library and archive devoted to the study of Swedish emigration to North America.[73] During the years of researching and writing this article, the majority of these records were lost. However, through persistent work – and a stroke of luck – the records reappeared during the very publication of this article, and is now once again in the possession of the S.E.I.

The S.E.I. underwent a major organizational restructuring during the early 2000s. As a result of leadership overhauls, financial conflicts and major organizational changes, the institute was for much of 2014 and 2015 closed to research. It has since been reorganized and opened under new leadership.[74] Parallel to the organizational collapse of the S.E.I., the organization Svenska Migrationscentret (the Swedish Centre for Migration, S.M.C.) had quickly developed as a major actor in the archival and genealogical field in Sweden. Founded in 1960 as a regional emigrant register in the city of Karlstad, it had in the 2010s developed into a sprawling organization focused on the digitization of archival records at local 'scanning centres' across Sweden. While some digitizations were made on behalf

[71] *Handbook of Genealogy and Temple Work*, pp. 298, 304.

[72] See, e.g., L.H., E1, vol. 1, Frank Smith, 3 Oct. 1966, and unsigned [probably Miriam Häusler] to Frank Smith, 28 Oct. 1966, and Frank Smith to Genealogiska Byran, 20 Oct. 1966.

[73] Johansson, 'Ella Heckschers Genealogiska Byrå i Uppsala'.

[74] E. Laquist, 'Oviss framtid för Utvandrarnas hus', *Svenska Dagbladet*, 22 Sept. 2008; H. Runblom, 'Släpp greppet om Emigrantinstitutet', *Smålandsposten*, 24 Sept. 2014; 'Utvandrarnas hus', Kulturparken Småland <www.kulturparkensmaland.se> [accessed 9 Jan. 2020].

of organizations such as the Swedish National Archives, others were placed in the online database Emiweb, in which both S.M.C. and S.E.I. were stakeholders.

At some point during the crisis of the S.E.I., the entire collection of the Ella Heckscher Genealogical Bureau was shipped off to S.M.C., divided into smaller units and distributed to a number of scanning centres. It is notable that this did not merely include the series containing genealogical research files (family group sheets and pedigree charts), but also the voluminous series of correspondence with American and Swedish clients. In the spring of 2017, as the scanning of the records was underway, the S.M.C. went bankrupt. In the administrative and organizational confusion that followed, the collection of the Genealogical Bureau receded from the radar of both the defunct S.M.C. and the (now re-staffed) S.E.I. Merely a few months after the bankruptcy, the former director of the S.M.C. established the Kinship Center (K.C.) in Karlstad, an organization with leadership and goals similar to the S.M.C. that retained the collections and resources of its forerunner (to complicate matters further, the K.C. also went bankrupt and closed in the summer of 2020).[75] Despite help from archivists at the S.E.I. and from K.C. leadership, it was not possible to locate either the collection or the administrative paper trail from the S.M.C. scanning. By the time of writing this article, roughly 140 volumes had been returned to the S.E.I. from local scanning centres, but over 250 volumes were still missing, including all records of correspondence. As this article went into the editing process, the Swedish National Archives of Gothenburg discovered the records of the Genealogical Bureau during a regular inventory, tucked away in one of their storage units. It appears that the National Archives had supported the S.M.C. with the digitization and promised to store the volumes free of charge. When the S.M.C. went bankrupt, no one remembered to look for and return them to the S.E.I.[76]

Rather than pondering on how more than 400 volumes of archive records – the single largest collection at the S.E.I. – could go missing for several years, it is instructive to focus on why this situation emerged in the first place. An important reason is arguably to be found in the media of correspondence. In a longer temporal perspective, these documents have become cultural heritage, harboured in an institution intent on archival preservation. But the reason why the records of the Genealogical Bureau were deemed relevant to digitize was not its dimension as heritage. These records after all have a limited public value as remnants of the Bureau. The reason was rather its usefulness for genealogical research, grounded in its dual character of being a resource (containing data) and a lens into the research methodology (containing information about the research process), and thus a potentially lucrative commodity on the market of digital genealogy.

<p style="text-align:center">∗</p>

It is impossible to imagine modern-day genealogy without individual genealogists. But it should likewise be impossible to envision genealogy without the media, resources and infrastructures that genealogists rely on. Applying this shift in perspective can be seen as a way of stripping individuals of historical agency, diminishing the role of desires and

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[75] A. Rutz, 'Migrationscenter öppnar över hela Sverige', *Landets Fria Tidning*, 1 Aug. 2015; 'Konkurs för Migrationscentret', *Nya Wermlands-Tidningen*, 10 March 2017; L. Fosselius-Peterson, 'Kinship Center tar över Migrationscentrum', *Värmlands Folkblad*, 8 June 2017; M. Schmidt, 'Efter ekonomiska krisen: Kinship avvecklas', *Värmlands Folkblad*, 13 July 2020.

[76] Personal emails and conversations with Judit Söderblom and Gunnar Wennerström at the Swedish Emigrant Institute between June 2016 and Sept. 2020, and email from Malin Juvas, Swedish National Archives in Gothenburg, 28 Sept. 2020.

needs for the history of the field. This certainly has some merit; the focus on the material, structural and cultural circumstances of genealogy indeed reduce the analytical impact of individual will, which admittedly is crucial to understanding the function of genealogy. But the framing of genealogy as a history of media results in two important takeaways for understanding the genealogical landscape: the acknowledgement of the outsize power of certain actors within the field, and the ways in which media itself has regulated the possibilities and limitations of genealogical research.

Correspondence was not merely a way for people to get in touch with one another. Rather, the culture of writing letters was a technique through which genealogy could be practised by proxy. It was both a method and a resource. On the one hand, it was a means of bridging geographical distance in genealogical research and a way through which clients could access genealogical information in far-away records. On the other hand, it was also a technique that had the benefit of becoming its own residue. As a research methodology, it had its own dynamics and characteristics, transforming and modifying genealogy. It both expanded and limited the capacity of research and, thus, the production of knowledge about ancestry. While correspondence made transatlantic genealogy more accessible and affordable than ever before, the fact that it relied on hourly work (and fees) of professionals (and archivists and parish priests) capped the volume of research possible to conduct. The significance of interpersonal reliability and record accessibility was, moreover, a particularly salient aspect of the culture of correspondence.[77] This was a contrast to subsequent genealogical eras. The post-war development of microfilm in the genealogical landscape meant that individuals for the first time could personally access large amounts of primary sources. This technological transformation effectively cut out the middlemen from the research process, making professional genealogists nonessential in the search for ancestral knowledge. With the era of microfilm, as with the digital era, record accessibility became an increasingly self-evident aspect of the genealogical landscape.

The fact that correspondence was configured by various media – letters, forms, sheets and tables – meant that the culture gave rise to practices of storing and indexing. In some cases, it inspired archiving and even digitization. The fact that correspondence contains data of potential value for genealogists today makes it relevant both as a genealogical resource and as a cultural heritage, invaluable in the minds of genealogists, archivists and historians alike.

Although correspondence research itself was individually practised, it took place within a cultural framework that was highly standardized, structured and scripted. These frameworks were to a considerable degree produced through the work of agents – Mormons and non-Mormons, such as Heckscher – active in the genealogical landscape. François Weil's assertation that Mormon genealogical history should be separated from 'mainstream American genealogy' since it 'did not take part in the marketplace orientation' of U.S. genealogy can thus only be sustained if the analysis focuses on the agency of individual genealogists, and if it does not account for the transatlantic means through which genealogy was practised.[78] The transatlantic networks necessitated by correspondence seem to have relied on individual movements and contacts through which interpersonal relations could be established, and to have been conditioned by cultural scripts for how correspondence research should be carried out.

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[77] Markus Friedrich has found that social trust and professional information networks were important aspects of the work of early modern genealogists in Europe, suggesting that reliability and accessibility are intrinsic dimensions of correspondence as a medium. See Friedrich, 'How an early modern genealogist got his information'.

[78] Weil, *Family Trees*, p. 177.

Placing Mormons on the side line of genealogical history also does not give sufficient acknowledgement to the role of the L.D.S. Church in the commodification of genealogical records.[79] Although for-profit genealogical businesses were thriving already in the nineteenth century, the commodification of records increased in the era of microfilm as the rolls could easily be duplicated and traded. Many of these microfilms, including those created by the L.D.S. Church, have been scanned, digitized and made available online. The role as provider of record-commodities has in recent decades been embraced by the Church, as they have sought opportunities to share their microfilmed and digital resources with for-profit businesses – such as Ancestry.com – arguing that this can lead to more genealogical research which, in turn, is beneficial to the religious cause of the Church.[80] As the case of the Genealogical Bureau shows, though, the L.D.S.-driven commodification of genealogy was a process that in fact did not begin in the digital era, nor in the era of microfilm. While digital renditions and film rolls are commodities, so were the letters with which Ella Heckscher conducted and traded her genealogical information.

For the L.D.S. Church, correspondence was a proxy technique in a dual sense. Grounded in the doctrine of the salvation of the dead and of being sealed to family and ancestors in eternity, it was the Mormon prospect of proxy baptism that stimulated the development of guidelines and infrastructures for research by proxy. It is thus important to consider the history of genealogical correspondence in relation to the ways in which theology, mediality and practice became intertwined. Developed at a time of theological transformation, the promotion of correspondence was an element in the Church's efforts to increase the Mormon interest and engagement in genealogical research.

As genealogical correspondence became increasingly institutionalized, it transformed the genealogical landscape, turning transatlantic genealogy from a barrier overcome by the few who had the necessary capital into a naturalized aspect of genealogy for the many. This was a stark contrast to the American bourgeois hunt for pedigree, or the pre-modern search for legitimacy among European nobility that before the twentieth-century had dominated genealogy. It opened a new international vista for the mission of the dead that was both spatial and temporal. While offering a solution to the problem of geographical distance, correspondence demonstrated that the expansion of the historical family could be done on a global scale.

[79] On the commodification of genealogy in the 21st century, see Hogan, *Roots Quest*, pp. 169–72.
[80] Creet, *Genealogical Sublime*, pp. 81, 86–91.