
To the amateur and professional alike, the first visit to the Public Record Office in London can be an overwhelming experience. A quick read of this latest edition of the PRO's handbook for genealogists should ease the trauma. Anyone with British antecedents who is contemplating constructing a family history should consult this volume first.

Ms. Bevan and Duncan not only provide a step-by-step guide to the PRO holdings, they also identify useful genealogical collections held elsewhere in the U.K. and abroad. As a consequence, the researcher need not set foot in either the Chancery Lane or Kew Gardens branch of the PRO in order to find this volume useful. In fact, the authors rightly point out that for many family historians, the PRO is the wrong place to begin the hunt for ancestors. A visit to London's St. Catherine's House - or the General Register House in Edinburgh - where records of births, deaths and marriages have been kept since the middle decades of the nineteenth century, would be a better starting point.

The PRO holds the historical records of the various government departments and, as a consequence, their collections are only useful to the family historian if the ancestor in question had some dealings with officialdom. An obvious example would be those who served in the military. Service records, promotions, war-time casualty lists and military pension records are all useful genealogical materials and the PRO contains information on thousands of individuals who served in the various forces from the early eighteenth century to 1913. The authors provide a detailed guide to these materials and less obvious official sources of genealogical significance. These include lists of English and Welsh professionals - doctors, lawyers, clergymen and teachers - kept by various government departments from the early eighteenth century. Family historians may also be able to trace known ancestors in the PRO's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century lists of merchant seamen, various foreign and domestic police forces and members of the civil service. Less upright family antecedents may also be found in the Home Office records of criminal prosecutions. By far and away, the richest government source held by the PRO are the census records, kept since 1841 (the Scottish returns are housed
separately in Edinburgh). By their very nature census documents are an invaluable source for family history; nevertheless, the authors rightly point out that this material is of little use unless the researcher has already established the place of origin of the individual being investigated. The same holds true for those following the trail of an emigrant ancestor.

Bevan and Duncan's discussion of emigrant sources is a useful counter to the widely-held belief that a mere dip into the records will uncover a ship list containing detailed information on a migrating forefather. The PRO's Colonial Office records can aid researchers studying the general phenomenon of British emigration, but they are of limited value for those wishing to pursue particular individuals. The most detailed evidence is, unfortunately, restricted to the emigrant registers which recorded departures from the British Isles to North America in the years just prior to the American Revolution. The records of "voluntary emigration" after that period are extremely sparse, and only the relatively rare government-assisted emigrations of the early nineteenth century are recorded with any precision. "Involuntary" emigrations in the form of transportation to the Penal Colonies of Australia are, on the other hand, well recorded and the authors provide a thorough list of relevant materials and a short bibliography of the most useful monographs on the subject.

This is a particular strength of the volume. Up-to-date bibliographies follow the discussion of each type of record. Many readers will surely find this quick guide to further research well worth the purchase price of the book. Those interested in Scottish genealogy, however, should be cautioned. The majority of relevant Scottish genealogical material is not to be found in the PRO but in Edinburgh. Nevertheless, this is still a useful introduction to archival research and the authors have clearly identified those PRO materials which do contain information on Scots.

In sum, whether one is embarking on the ancestor trail for the first time or wishes to achieve a greater understanding of the PRO's holdings, this guide will prove extremely fruitful.

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