

**The Surnames Handbook: A Guide to Family Name Research in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.** By DEBBIE KENNETT. Gloucestershire: The History Press. 2012. Pp. 224. \$18.99. ISBN: 978-0-7524-6862-4.

Within the US alone, approximately 1 in 25 people have voluntarily submitted their DNA to a commercial firm in hopes of gaining information about their family ancestry (Regalado 2018).<sup>1</sup> This commercial technology is being used not only by lay people. It is also being harnessed by social scientists in large-scale genealogical surveys. Based on this research, investigators have surmised that a surprising number of people who happen to have the same surname are indeed genetically related (Plant and Plant 2015; Nash 2012; Remmonds et al. 2011; King et al. 2006). Such findings have in turn inspired a whole new generation of surname researchers.

The book under review offers a handbook for names scholars and enthusiasts interested in exploring this new investigatory tool. Without a doubt, the reference makes a convincing argument for the potential advantages of DNA analysis for surname research. Where the work falls decidedly short is in its failure to address adequately the possible disadvantages of this genetic approach. It does not take an expert to recognize that one of the reasons why surname research is intriguing is the unexpected twists and secret turns family roots can take. Uncovering who is and isn't a blood relative can be delightful or devastating. Consequently, direct-to-consumer DNA testing should be used with great caution. As fascinating as the potential findings may be for the intrepid names researcher, the real-life ramifications for the DNA donors should not be underestimated. As US Senator Chuck Schumer warns, "Here's what many consumers don't realize, that their sensitive information can end up in the hands of unknown third-party companies. [...] There are no prohibitions, and many companies say that they can still sell your information" (qtd. in Silva 2017).

Sadly, the Kennett reference provides little or no discussion of these potentially negative repercussions. Neither does it adequately address the very serious ethical concerns involved in the widespread use of gene analysis by commercial enterprises. Despite its commercial image as a harmless and fun family pastime, direct-to-consumer gene testing is a multimillion-dollar business accompanied by an intimidatingly complex of ethical and legal questions (Wood 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Even if the risks of (mis)use could be minimized or completely eliminated, the ancestral claims made by many of these companies remain scientifically unsound. As geneticist and science writer Adam Rutherford explains in a 2018 article for *Scientific America*, "DNA is very good at determining close family relations such as siblings or parents. [...] For deeper family roots, these tests do not really tell you where your ancestors came from. [...] [T]o say that you are 20 percent Irish [...] or 12 percent Scandinavian is fun, trivial, and has very little scientific meaning" (para. 10).

Sadly, *Surname Handbook* largely ignores these ethical and scientific limitations. Instead it enthusiastically praises commercial DNA testing as the new onomastic tool. The author even goes so far as to offer readers tips for approaching and encouraging targeted strangers and family members to surrender their DNA for a surname research project. To a certain extent, this seemingly unbridled support for gene testing is not surprising given the author's first publication, *DNA and Social Networking*, a work which by its very title extols the virtues of "the brave new world of genetic genealogy" (2018, 1). However, given that we are now in the twenty-first century, as Kennett is wont to stress, she is at best remiss in her failure to discuss in detail the ethical and legal issues involved.

The author's zeal for state-of-the-art technology combined with a tendency to use such out-of-date phraseology as "the researcher [...] he" makes for a curious, oftentimes irritating, read. Such passages could be overlooked as a manifestation of (un)conscious

authorial style. However, what's much less easy to ignore is the tendency to present unqualified statements of personal opinion as well established scientific fact. For example, the author asserts that "the English language [...] is the language with the largest and richest vocabulary" (52). The truth is that lexical-semantic "richness" has little to do with universal, objective linguistic fact and everything to do with subjective personal taste. This was not the only instance in which such glaring inaccuracies can be spied.

In the chapter "Variants and Deviants" (49–67), the following erroneous assertion appears: "If two people with different variant spellings have closely matching DNA results, we can safely assume that the variants are related" (60). Although genetic analysis, assuming the results are accurate, may provide strong evidence of a *possible* etymological link, this finding alone is neither a sufficient nor irrefutable reason for automatically drawing such a conclusion. Instead gene testing is simply one of many powerful tools that can assist in untangling the complex history of surname development. In other words, DNA analysis may aid but not replace good old-fashioned detective work, the nuts and bolts of which remain historical syntax, morphology, phonology. Oddly, very little information is offered about the complex system of linguistic rules that underlie many of the surface changes surnames routinely undergo. Instead, the author tends to depict these diachronic alterations as being largely inscrutable or, in Kennett's unfortunate choice of words, "rather like a game of Chinese whispers" (55).<sup>3</sup>

To a certain extent, the fact that the book offers little in terms of linguistic or onomastic theory might be attributable to the author's attempt to provide a useful resource for both surname specialists and hobbyists. However, the fact that so many of the book's potential readers may not be well versed in diachronic linguistics would seem to strengthen rather than weaken the necessity of avoiding the temptation to reinforce popular yet inaccurate folk beliefs about people, names, and history. Take for example, the following two descriptions:

Wales *was obliged* to accept the English legal and administrative system, which resulted in some streamlining of the patronymic naming system' [emphasis added]. (28)

Ireland was one of the earliest countries *to adopt* a system of hereditary surnames. [emphasis added]. (25)

The fact that the traditional naming systems of the Celtic peoples were systematically, purposefully, and relentlessly oppressed under centuries-old policies of cultural imperialism and linguistic repression is completely ignored by such politically euphemistic and historically inaccurate descriptions. This is not the only instance in the book where the historical complexity of surname use and development is oversimplified. Kennett also asserts that "[t]here are still some countries in the world, such as Iceland, which do not use surnames at all" (102). This description is completely incorrect and grossly oversimplifies the onomastic reality of the country. As linguist Aðalsteinn Hákonarson, Project Manager in the Department of Name Studies at Iceland's Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, reports in an e-interview, "The statement that 'there are no surnames in Iceland' is most certainly inaccurate. There are many people in Iceland who have family names."<sup>4</sup> During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hákonarson explains, it was not uncommon for Icelanders to adopt family names. This practice was often followed by affluent powerful families who had contact with foreigners at home and abroad. This trend continued into the twentieth century as more foreigners settled in Iceland, bringing with them their family names. According to Hákonarson, still today, Icelanders regularly devise and unofficially use last names. Family names, Hákonarson stresses, "are part of Icelandic naming traditions." Kennett's unqualified assertion completely ignores the true diversity of this nation's surname history.

Importantly, Eýlenda is not the only island nation that falls prey to this onomastic homogenization.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the attention paid to surnaming in the United Kingdom is also sadly selective in that it, like many guides on family names in the British Isles,

stubbornly avoids so-called “immigrant surnames.” One might try to excuse this ignorance as the author’s decision to focus on indigenous names. However, this argument crumbles when, for example, the discussion turns to the USA and Australia and not one mention is made of Native American or Aboriginal surnames. Such oversights don’t undermine the value of the information provided about majority communities in these nations. However, the market is filled with references devoted to Western European names. By comparison, there is still woefully little available for people whose focus lies outside this narrow range. The fact that this handbook fails to provide substantive guidance for researching the surnames of minority communities is, yet again, a missed opportunity for the author, the reader, science, and society at large.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, it would be unfair to proclaim the work completely devoid of merit or utility. The interested reader will doubtlessly appreciate this reference for its truly impressive offering of genealogical, demographic, and onomastic resources, both online and print. The book also provides many cogent descriptions of some of the most seminal surname studies. This information is effectively complemented by instructive and engaging anecdotes from the author’s own research. The manager of three large-scale DNA surname projects, Kennett holds clear authority as a genealogist and surname specialist. Family-tree detectives about to embark on their own surname journey can certainly profit from this expertise. By the same token, onomastic scholars who use this work as an annotated bibliography may also find value in the *Handbook*.

## Notes

1. According to industry estimates, the number of people who used direct-to-consumer genetic genealogy tests more than doubled in 2017, exceeding more than 12 million customers (Regalado).
2. The US Federal Trade Commission has investigated some of the world’s industry leaders in direct-to-consumer genetic testing for their questionable handling of consumers’ personal information and genetic data. After this review, the FTC issued a general warning to consumers advising them to consider carefully the privacy implications of using such services (Fair).
3. Kennett’s use of the phrase “Chinese whispers” is again extremely regrettable in this day and age. As Ros Ballaster points out, “The sinophobic name points to the centuries-old tradition in Europe of representing spoken Chinese as an incomprehensible and unpronounceable combination of sounds” (202–203).
4. Aðalsteinn Hákonarson, email interview with author, January 16–17, 2018.
5. *Eylenda* is the toponymic endonym for Iceland.
6. In recognition of this societal and scientific need, the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol) undertook a mammoth onomastic project covering the UK and Ireland. The study includes not only indigenous family names but also thousands of immigrant surnames now common in the British Isles. The results of this pioneering research appear in the 2016 multivolume masterpiece, the *Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland*, edited by Patrick Hanks, Richard Coates, and Peter McClure (UWE Bristol).

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