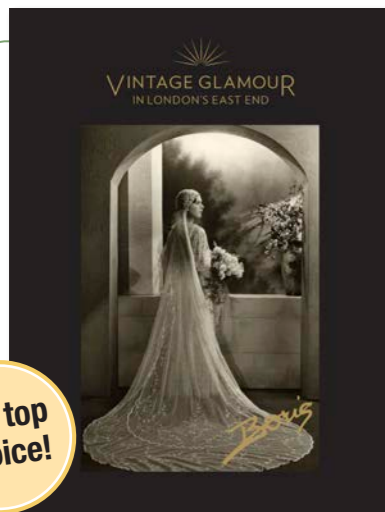


REVIEWS

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Our top choice!

Portraits from the past Vintage Glamour in London's East End curated by Michael Griesman assisted by Frank Harris

Picture London's East End in the first half of the 20th century and you may conjure up hackneyed images of slums and poverty, where Jewish and non-Jewish communities had lived and worked side-by-side since the 17th century. So this stunningly beautiful cloth-clad book from another world and age is a revelation. It is the first to feature the work of acclaimed Jewish wedding and studio portrait photographer Boris Bennett (né Sokhatchevsky, 1900-1985), who ran his Art Deco studio in Whitechapel Road in the 1930s and 1940s. This neon-lit building was *the* place where ordinary East End Jewish wedding couples and families flocked to be transported to the glamour of Hollywood that they had witnessed on the cinema screens. A local saying was, 'if you haven't got a Boris picture, you aren't married'.

Some of Boris's wonderful wedding and family portraits have been rediscovered and collected together for

this book – and the stories behind them painstakingly researched – by curator and editor Michael Griesman, with the aid of assistant curator and fellow photography fan Frank Harris. A collection of essays sets the scene with evocative descriptions of the lost East End of Boris's era, when a visit to the photographer's studio was 'an integral part of the wedding day'.

Boris's son, Michael Bennett, shares his memories of his Polish-born father, who emigrated to Britain in 1922, and his 'warm personality and charisma'. We learn of the working life of a studio photographer – Boris photographed up to 40 weddings on a single Sunday, including the bridal couple and entourage of page boys, bridesmaids, parents and grandparents, with a crowd outside to witness this spectacle.

The old East End is also colourfully recreated by Rachel Kolsky, co-author of *Jewish London* (2012), with nostalgic descriptions of its businesses, theatres, cinemas, restaurants, bakeries, workshops and synagogues. 'The Jewish East End', she writes, 'lives on through the collective memory of the community, the buildings and especially the stories behind these very special wedding photographs and portraits. Each one tells a family story, but also the story of the Jewish journeys to the East End and then beyond to the suburbs.'

Boris took an astounding 150,000 wedding photographs over his working life



Thousands of East End Jewish couples marked their wedding day with an iconic Boris Bennett photo.

and his fame spread, leading him to open studios in the West End. In the 1950s, he opened his first retail venture, Bennett Cameras in Oxford Street. This was the first of a chain of shops across the country, which was bought by Dixons in 1963.

The photos in the book take your breath away, each a snapshot of an ordinary family's life and aspirations and including brief, fascinating family biographies. It presents a gorgeous slice of history and is a real treasure, not just for those of Jewish descent or with relatives who were photographed by Boris, but anyone with ancestral ties to the East End and researchers interested in historical cinema, fashions, photography and, of course, lives.

As Steven Berkoff, actor, director and playwright, writes in the introduction: 'I don't think anybody, Jew or gentile, could fail to be moved by this most wonderful collection of human beings.'

The Jewish Museum in London is hosting an exhibition called 'For Richer For Poorer: Weddings Unveiled' from 13 February to 31 May 2015, which will feature many of Boris Bennett's portraits: www.jewishmuseum.org.uk/weddings.

● ISBN: 9780957699861. RRP £25 hardback. Hoxton Mini Press; hoxtonmini.com.



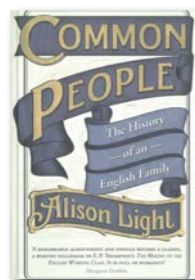
Photos from *Vintage Glamour* with permission of the publishers.

Tracing a tree

Common People: The History of an English Family by Alison Light

Family history blends imperceptibly with English social history in Alison Light's glorious investigation into her ancestry.

Inspired to trace her roots, ostensibly for her terminally ill father whose mother died when he was too young to recall her, this is a thoughtful and poetic attempt to



reach the heart of what family history is all about. The story of Light's forebears is the story of Victorian Britain and the Industrial Revolution, from the hard-living women needlemakers of Worcestershire to the bricklayers and Baptists of Portsmouth, via cod fishing of the North Atlantic. All life is here: there's religion, babies, love, loss, farms, building sites, workhouses and asylums, and it's noticeable that Light's forebears were always moving, migrating. Little by little, she uncovers their lives – like most of us, there are no rich nobles in her tree, but poor and working-class folk laid to rest in unmarked graves (which was

an initial shock after Light had cultivated a romantic image of locating her young grandmother's resting place).

The emotional highs and lows of her genealogy journey will strike a chord with many researchers, but this is the family history we'd all love to write. Told with compassion and perception, it's part-memoir, part-family, social and place history, with a reflective tone flowing through every page as Light eloquently questions her own motives for digging up past lives long-forgotten within her own family. 'There is no closure in family history,' she writes, 'only the reverberation of a life'.

Perhaps it is the need to lay our ancestors to rest that drives us, get to know them so we know ourselves and give them a 'proper burial', restoring them to their rightful places in our history.

Like all our own family histories, the story of Light's ancestors is epic, never-ending, and the breadth incredible as their lives weave in and out of the fabric of time. It is based on careful research led from the heart as well as the mind and, if you enjoy the writings of our wonderful columnists Diane Lindsay and Gill Shaw, you'll find this just as thrilling and absorbing. Told by a literary critic-turned family historian, it's a unique and intelligent story of who and what made our ancestors the people they were, and why we feel the need to know them. It's so engrossing, be warned that your own research may be put on hold until you've read the final page.

● ISBN: 9781905490387. RRP £20 hardback, £6.99 Kindle. Fig Tree (Penguin).

New Zealand links

Fitz: The Colonial Adventures of James Edward FitzGerald by Jenifer Roberts

This beautifully written book examines the colourful life and times of colonist James Edward FitzGerald, first Superintendent of the Canterbury province in New Zealand, whose driving spirit, foresight and enthusiasm helped to found the city of Christchurch, where his statue still stands. Born in 1818 to a well-to-do Anglo-Irish family in Bath and educated at Cambridge, Fitz (as he was known to friends) sailed for New Zealand in September 1850 with his 18-year-old bride, the petite and witty Fanny (née Draper). Thoroughly researched and written by one of Fitz's direct descendants – his English 2x great-granddaughter Jenifer Roberts – this is an in-depth portrait of a remarkable and charming statesman.

From four ships full of colonists, Fitz was the first pilgrim to set foot on Canterbury soil – and it was a defining moment in the nation's history. A journalist and founder of the *Press* newspaper, orator, dreamer and politician, Fitz and the equally intelligent Fanny have personified the pioneer spirit of early 19th-century settlers, acquiring legendary status in the process.

Fitz was a controversial figure too – an

occasional 'thoughtless' hero, prone to bouts of mania and depression, possibly due to bipolar disorder.

Roberts' diligent research has uncovered fresh sources and her attention to historical detail makes for a beguiling read, from the newlyweds' frenzied preparations in England before departure, to descriptions via letter of their long journey aboard the *Charlotte Jane*, where 'every day was colder than the last' as 'they suffered in the Antarctic cold'.

There are revealing descriptions of settler life for the Canterbury Pilgrims too, in the early days of 'roughing it'. Despite the hardships, Fitz and Fanny's family thrived into a happy 'brood' of 13, before a run of tragedies between 1878 and 1888 saw them bury seven of their beloved children.

Including a family tree, early photographs and Fitz's own illustrations, this is not just an insight into one family but an invaluable look at the settler history of New Zealand. Roberts really has the measure of the intriguing Fitz, a man of many talents and faces; her 'warts and all' biography also reveals how family truths can be separated from myth.

● ISBN: 9781877578731. RRP £24.50 paperback. Otago University Press. Available on Amazon.

Genealogical fiction

The Lost Ancestor: A Genealogical Crime Mystery by Nathan Dylan Goodwin

Morton Farrier is back in his second outing as a 'forensic genealogist' in this historical crime series penned by Nathan Dylan Goodwin. This novel features the genealogical sleuth just a few months after the end of Goodwin's debut book, *Hiding the Past* (2013), when Morton's new-found fame has enabled him to 'cherry pick' his assignments.

This time Morton is asked to investigate the disappearance in 1911 of a young housemaid called Mary Mercer, the great-aunt of his new client Ray Mercer. Ray's final wish is to solve the mystery of Mary's vanishing act and Morton enthusiastically takes up the case – unaware he's putting himself and others in grave danger.

With the action building up via flashbacks, it's a tale of love, jealousy, murder and intrigue, entertainingly focused

on an Edwardian country house – a delicious conceit being that it is used for the filming of a TV 'Downton Abbey'-style drama called 'The Friary'.

Finely paced and full of realistic genealogical terms and tricks, this is an enjoyable whodunnit with engaging research twists that keep you guessing until the end. If you enjoy genealogical fiction and Ruth Rendell mysteries, you'll find this a pleasing page-turner.

● ISBN: 9781500883492. RRP £7.99 paperback. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. www.nathangoodwin.co.uk. Available on Amazon.

Anniversary reads

Edward II: The Unconventional King by Kathryn Warner

Medieval historian Kathryn Warner has penned this vivid biography of the unorthodox King Edward II, using almost exclusively 14th-century sources to tell his story. Focusing on his relationships with his male companions and disaffected wife, and his mysterious death, this highly readable biography throws fresh light on Edward's lifestyle and genealogy following last year's 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn.

● ISBN: 9781445641201. RRP £20 hardback. Amberley Publishing.

24 Hours at Waterloo by Robert Kershaw

Previously unpublished eyewitness reports provide an exhilarating blow-by-blow account of the iconic Battle of Waterloo, which took place on 18 June 1815. With the 200th anniversary of the pivotal battle approaching, and no doubt lots of new resources being made available for historians and genealogists, this gives readers the chance to get up on our ancestors' terrifyingly brutal experiences from the horse's mouth.

● ISBN: 9780753541425. RRP £25 hardback. Ebury Publishing (Random House).

