

MEMOIR

Not for official use

Finding a name

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WHEN I read Georgia Blain's memoir, *Births Deaths Marriages* (Random House, 2008), I was struck by the cover of the book as well as by its remarkable contents. The design incorporates a copy of a birth certificate of similar vintage to mine, a document which is more familiar to me than any other I have owned.

My pale pink birth certificate, spotted and torn, is something that I took for granted until recently. Now I treasure it. This was because a couple of years ago I had to apply for a new passport, starting from scratch. The process proved to be yet another ordeal in the bureaucratic silos of government departments – not unexpected. But it was also a salutary lesson for someone like me, who has spent a lot of time undertaking primary research and who appreciates the significance of the original source – the document – when all else may prove inconclusive.

For here is a story of what can only be called official falsification of the records. It began back in 1985, when I changed my surname from my father's to one of my own choosing. As a feminist, this became important to me, and I chose my maternal grandmother's middle name. My grandmother's parents must have had an eccentric sense of humour or were hardcore monarchists, as

they named her Queenie Adelaide, and her surname was Hewitt (later, when she married, Speedy – and I've often wondered how going through life as Queenie Speedy affected my grandmother, but that's another story).

On 27 February 1985, at the old Registrar General's Office in Prince Albert Road, I filled in an Instrument Evidencing Change of Name form, which was witnessed by a clerk at the office, stamped 'Old System Deed Book', and given a number. A simple one-page form. Looking at it now, I can identify the pen I used – a Sheaffer cartridge pen, medium italic nib, blue-black ink. I filled out one copy for me, and one for the office.

On this form I was required to 'abandon the use of the name' I had not exactly been born with (though that is the common term) but which had been mine since birth, and 'in lieu thereof assume the name' that I had chosen. As I was married at the time I was also required to list my husband's surname as well as my father's, among the name/s 'abandoned'. I explained to the clerk (who would be a Customer Service Representative now) that I did not use this name, had never used this name, was never known by this name (except when my mother-in-law half jokingly addressed me as Mrs C) and therefore had no reason to abandon it. It didn't matter, she said. As I was married, people would still assume it was used, and I should do it anyway. So that name is listed in parentheses next to my original surname.

To effect this change, I had only to produce my birth certificate and pay a small fee. At the time the procedure seemed to be invested with authority. Nowadays it would be laughable. I could have taken along the birth certificate of any woman of a similar age and officially changed her name. (I can't see the point, but such mischief could be useful to, say, a spy or a drug courier.) And this was at a time when people were still obtaining false passports by visiting cemeteries and selecting identities from likely candidates among the deceased who'd been born around the same time as them. Armed with details from a gravestone, you could apply for a copy of the birth certificate, and then a passport. Apparently you could get several this way, as many as you wanted. The New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages was three unconnected silos: it did not communicate even within itself, so records of births and deaths were not cross-referenced. You could live forever in that office. Or die without ever having been born.

THE CHANGE-OF-NAME CERTIFICATE was kept in my folder of official documents, along with all the other documents: birth certificate, school certificates, wedding certificate, university degrees and then, later, the birth certificates of my children. I began using the new name straightaway, and barely thought about the process of changing it again until I applied for a passport in 2007.

My diary for the last few days of November that year contains a cluster of appointments centred on the small triangle of Sydney that includes the Australian Passport Office, the New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, and the University of Technology, Sydney, where I work. This would be easy, I thought, so I took the application form, along with my birth and change-of-name certificates, over to the passport office in Lee Street, behind Railway Square. After queuing for some time I learned I needed an appointment. I queued again, in another line, and made the appointment for the next morning. When I returned there was barely a wait. How efficient, I thought. However, the Customer Service Representative (how I itch to write 'clerk') shifted the application form and the two certificates around and around on his desk like tarot cards, before telling me that there was a problem. The application was in a different name to my birth certificate.

'I know. I changed my name officially.' I tapped the change-of-name certificate. 'That's why I brought this.'

He picked it up, then placed it down again.

'This does not count.'

'Why not?'

He shook his head slowly, tut-tutting. Easing himself off his chair, he took the certificate aside to someone else behind the cubicle, and returned a minute later still shaking his head. He pushed it back to me.

'It's not in the system. We cannot recognise it.'

This document, which I'd carefully kept on file for twenty-two years – and which had accumulated its own authenticating brown spots – could now not be used for the very purpose it was intended. The clerk (forgive me) told me to go to the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, and obtain a new change-of-name certificate, one that would be in The System, one that the passport office would recognise and one that would be kept in The System

forever. He would keep all the other documents, and start processing the passport, while I went to the registry and obtained the new, valid form. I was lucky, he said, for the registry was nearby, just across the road and around the corner. Perhaps I'd be back at work before lunchtime.

At the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages a sign told me to take a number from a machine and wait in a queue for a Customer Service Representative to serve me. There was no queue. In fact, for a government office it was remarkably quiet. Along one side of the floor was a bank of frosted glass cubicles, Interview Rooms 11, 12, 13 and 14. Where were Interview Rooms 1 to 10? And what were they used for? But as I waited, a door to one opened and I saw into a room with decorative certificates arranged on the walls, a desk and woman behind it. A young couple in a black suit and formal cream dress were standing up. Smiling, the marriage celebrant came out from behind the desk and shook hands with the couple, before ushering them out. The bride held a small bouquet. They looked happy but also abashed, as if they were almost embarrassed to be married, or embarrassed to have such a moment of intimacy witnessed by a stranger.

The customer service representative who appeared at the desk took my number, listened to my request and frowned.

'No, that's not possible. We can't issue a new one. We don't have the data to check.'

There was, apparently, a consolidation of records between the Office of the Registrar General and the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, but that was later in the 1980s, after my change of name. Before that, there was a period of a few years in the mid-1980s when the Registrar General and this registry – two separate entities – did not communicate with each other and certifications from this time could not be located, or if they could they would still be invalid. From later in the 1980s, no problem. And, for some reason I still do not understand, had my change of name been *earlier* than this bleak window of lost records, there wouldn't have been a problem either.

Perhaps I could get some original certification from the old office?

'Well, that office doesn't really exist any more. Or it just handles property titles, that sort of thing.'

'What happened to the personal records, like my name change?'

'Oh all that merged with us.'

'So you could have the information?'

'Only if it's in the computer system.'

'But what about the deed book?'

'The what?'

I pointed to the stamp on my change of name certificate. 'The Old System Deed Book. It must exist somewhere. Couldn't you – couldn't someone – go and check it?'

'A deed book.'

It was the way she said it. Not a question, but a monotone statement. As if a book alone were contemptible enough, but something called an Old System Deed Book? It may as well have been called *Grimms' Fairy Tales* or *The Nautical Almanac*. There was a pitying look on her face now. What kind of person would want to consult an artefact as obsolete, as useless, as a record book? A person who probably believed in elves and dragons too.

'We don't have anything like that here. I don't know where a book would be.'

And it was true: the glassed-in offices of the registry were bare of papers, books, anything that fluttered in a breeze or tore or became spotted and yellow.

'All our records are digital now, and I'm afraid if you're in the old system, we can't help you.'

It was as if these two systems were in separate countries, on different continents, like Mexico and India. Although if that were the case, at least I could have bribed people like her into co-operating. I did not believe her, in any case. I did not believe that events as important as births and deaths were only recorded on electronic files. Behind her were head-high partitions, concealing what I suspected were many metres of filing shelves.

I was not in The System. I was here, I had been born – there was no disputing that. But it felt as if the simple narrative of my life was somehow slipping away. How easy it would be for me to disappear, officially, to unbecome the person I had always been. Aloud, I wondered how I was meant to acquire my passport, or was I doomed never to go overseas?

'You could get your passport in your old name,' she suggested, pointing

to the pink certificate, which was apparently still valid. The irony was painful.

‘What about all my other ID?’ I said. ‘My driver’s licence, Medicare card?’

‘Oh, you could change those back too.’ As if this were the work of minutes, a few simple phone calls. There would be other cards, bank accounts, utilities, internet accounts, memberships... it was unthinkable. Besides all that, this was my name now, had been for years, the name under which I had published everything I had written. The idea was impossible.

‘What am I meant to do, then?’

‘The only thing is, we issue you with a new birth certificate, in your new name. This will cancel out the other and you’ll have no problem getting your passport.’

So I filled in an application form for a new birth certificate, paid a fee, then paid an extra fee to have it done within twenty-four hours, and made an appointment to return the next day. I also had to provide three forms of identification to apply for the new certificate, and naturally the old one did not count. I had my driver’s licence. I had my university staff card, but without a passport no other form of photo ID. Kindly, she agreed to accept my Medicare card – perhaps, as it was issued by another government department, there was a connection mysterious to me.

And miraculously, the next morning, the new birth certificate was ready. Over the years they have been white, pink, green and blue, according to paper supplies, but now all birth certificates are blue. The new certificate also had a different registration number, as if I had been reborn, and it was stamped and dated 17 Nov. 2007 by Greg Curry, Registrar. Forty-nine years after my birth, I was the owner of a crisp, unspotted, pale blue birth certificate. The original was still on the counter. The same customer service representative as the day before was gathering it up among the many other forms and documents that had effected this remarkable event.

‘What happens to that?’

‘Oh, it’ll get destroyed.’

Quite unexpectedly, I had a rush of affection for my old birth certificate. A sensation almost like panic hit me.

‘Does it have to be destroyed?’

She shrugged. ‘Well, it’s invalid now.’

‘Can’t I keep it?’

‘Yes, I suppose. I’ll have to cancel it, though.’

She picked up a stamp, slammed it down on the certificate, smiled and handed it back. ‘There you go. All done now. Have a nice day.’

NOT FOR OFFICIAL USE. She had stamped it beside the text, not over it, so that my parents’ names and details, my older sister’s name and age, were still intact.

THE REGISTRY OF Births, Deaths and Marriages is located in a stretch of Regent Street close to Central Station. There is nothing here to improve the streetscape. No trees, no decorative paving. No lights, no potted plants. People do not walk by for pleasure, or on their way to anywhere else – restaurants, shops, museums or galleries – for there is none. There are no bars or cafés. Next door is the local office of Curtin University, a place that could hardly be called a campus. Across the road is a methadone clinic. The closest thing to atmosphere is the old mortuary station, over on the railway line.

What unimaginative committee or individual decided to locate a place of such symbolic importance in this shabby little part of the city? And while applications for birth and death certificates are mostly done by mail, marriages cannot be dispatched quite so impersonally. Couples arrive regularly to have their relationships legally acknowledged, rising to the event in their white frocks and hired suits, like the couple being married when I was there. Just once a year, the registry adopts a festive aspect, displaying red heart-shaped balloons and scattering rice for the weddings that take place on Valentine’s Day, its most popular day for business. Otherwise, the bouquets and veils and photographers and witnesses and dressed-up family members are all incongruous against this backdrop. After extracting my birth certificate, I felt like I was leaving some form of incarceration. What must the newly married feel when they step out into this barren end of Regent Street? And where do they go to celebrate? The mini-supermarket nearby? Michel’s Patisserie, perhaps, back at Railway Square?

But more worrying, as I left, was the feeling I had just conspired in a fraud. In the past, I had spent time looking up official records of dead authors, verifying facts. What might someone – say a grandchild, or other descendant – make of the clear anomaly on my new birth certificate, which was that my family name, my own surname, was not the same as either of my parents'? What purpose would they ascribe to this?

Nevertheless I was also relieved and optimistic, plotting lunch after finally securing my new passport. Ten minutes later, at the desk of the passport office, I was told it couldn't be processed straightaway. I would have to make an appointment and return the next day. I was already wearing a path between work, the registry and here and, while I was trying to feel grateful that I wasn't coming in from Penrith for all this, I still felt cheated. And my nagging sense of complicity was augmented by the feeling that all the documentation and officialdom was worth nothing. It was an illusion, a chimera. Paper chasing paper, or floating away in the wind. I might have been in a Dickens novel. A plaintiff in *Jarndyce vs Jarndyce*.

When the passport arrived I inspected it closely, wanting value for money, but this sense of illusion was only confirmed. Now that the photograph is embedded within the page like a watermark, not stuck on, and the details are printed in rather than typed on, a new passport appears not quite authentic. The images dance around under the surface of the page, ghostly, elusive. From a technical point of view the whole document would be very hard to fake now, but the strange thing is, it doesn't *look* original.

Before filing all the documents away, I examined the old birth certificate again, the one that said I was number 695 in the register, whatever that meant. The one produced using a standard typewriter (now known as the font American Typewriter), with its uppercase S stuck halfway up the line and full stops like billiard balls. The one that confirmed my birth was recorded a prompt ten days after the event. The one where my parents' address is stated as my grandparents' address, next door to the house where I grew up; we moved into the new house a few months after I was born. The one that has a place to list 'Previous issue living and deceased' in language that is biblical, as opposed to the new one which simply asks for 'Previous children of relationship'. The one where the deputy registrar's name, Cyril Humphrey Collis,

appears at the top, and though I know nothing about the man that name has made him familiar to me, I always picture Cyril Humphrey Collis wearing horn-rimmed spectacles, a clipped moustache and braces. The one dated 23 April 1970, meaning my parents didn't apply for a copy of my birth certificate until the year we first travelled overseas as a family. The one that I have gazed at all my adult life, wishing my father, the 'Informant', had recorded my name as Deborah, the proper spelling of my name.

The one, in other words, that contains questions, partial truths, little stories, narrative possibilities. NOT FOR OFFICIAL USE. Maybe not, but for other uses, of the imagination.

Somewhere, despite what I was told at the registry, there is a book. Many books. I imagine they are ledgers, great black-bound volumes requiring both hands to carry, inside inscribed in sepia ink. Here all these births are or were originally recorded – while we sometimes assume we have obtained our birth certificates, these are only copies of the original certification of those births. This is only some of the story of my birth certificate, which is like every other story, not straightforward and never really complete.

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