



Common People: In Pursuit of My Ancestors

Alison Light

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“Family history begins with missing persons,” Alison Light writes in *Common People*. We wonder about those we’ve lost, and those we never knew, about the long skein that led to us, and to here, and to now. So we start exploring.

Most of us, however, give up a few generations back. We run into a gap, get embarrassed by a ne’er-do-well, or simply find our ancestors are less glamorous than we’d hoped. That didn’t stop Alison Light: in the last weeks of her father’s life, she embarked on an attempt to trace the history of her family as far back as she could reasonably go. The result is a clear-eyed, fascinating, frequently moving account of the lives of everyday people, of the tough decisions and hard work, the good luck and bad breaks, that chart the course of a life. Light’s forebears—servants, sailors, farm workers—were among the poorest, traveling the country looking for work; they left few lasting marks on the world. But through her painstaking work in archives, and her ability to make the people and struggles of the past come alive, Light reminds us that “every life, even glimpsed through the chinks of the census, has its surprises and secrets.”

What she did for the servants of Bloomsbury in her celebrated *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants* Light does here for her own ancestors, and, by extension, everyone’s: draws their experiences from the shadows of the past and helps us understand their lives, estranged from us by time yet inextricably interwoven with our own. Family history, in her hands, becomes a new kind of public history.

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