

WRITING A LEGACY-MEMOIR

by

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A **legacy-memoir** is an autobiographical record that one writes for one’s descendants. Other types of personal memoir are usually written for publication, with potentially the entire reading public as their audience. Typically, they’re designed to describe or demonstrate one’s importance as a player in major events, or to provide humorous or titillating anecdote, or to explain oneself, or justify one’s actions (to “have the last word”), or (in the case of celebrities) to please one’s fans and make money. In contrast to this, the purpose of legacy-memoirs is to provide to the niche audience of the author’s descendants reference materials regarding family history, and, in so doing, acquaint subsequent generations with the life, thoughts, and experiences of a far-sighted forebear.

The value in writing such a work (besides supplying family reference material) is to give your descendants an awareness of who you were as their ancestor, an understanding of how life was lived when you were living it, information regarding what you found to be important, interpretations of major events you lived through (which they may know of only through their study of history), and reasons why they should find all of this worth knowing.

A legacy-memoir is a gift to the future, a reaching out to generations of one’s own family yet unborn, sending a message to your great-great-great grandchildren (and beyond) that you care for them, wish to participate in

their lives by sharing yours, and hope thereby that they will be able to see how theirs and yours, though different, are yet similar. Your descendants are the *ultimate* “niche audience”: not much money to be made there! And, as you hopefully launch your gift into the void, you have no certainty that any of those descendants will ever read your words, will *want* to read your words, or will appreciate or have a response to your feelings if they do. A legacy-memoir is thus both an act of faith and a labor of love.

Legacy-memoirs are *edited* to accomplish certain specific objectives. In this, they are akin to projects in oral history, which bring skillful interviewers to people “who were there” to glean their memories, impressions, and opinions while they are still present to record them. Everyone has a lifetime of experiences, memories, stories to tell. Everyone, if so inclined, and with the time and leisure to do it, can create a legacy-memoir. If individuals can’t write it themselves, they can dictate it and have it transcribed.

An archival-quality, acid-free, print-on-paper book that can be passed on from generation to generation is a useful, permanent, and portable format to serve as default and backup (who can say what technologies will have evolved by your great-great grandchild’s day?). Magnetic tape is currently obsolescent; here in 2012, digital CD formats, and computer PDF files are available for storage and reading—but what will be the case in 2280? It will be your descendants’ responsibility to continually update the text for retrievability in the technology current to them. *Your* responsibility—if you wish to leave them a legacy-memoir—is to write it.

I am currently writing a legacy-memoir for *my* descendants. What gave me the idea to do so, and why I think it’s important to leave a personal record, is the joy and enlightenment I experienced in discovering a group of writings

by my great-grandfather, Robert John Sutherland (1838-1921), of which my immediate family was unaware. These writings (a text of over 61,000 words) are currently in the possession of my second cousin, Catherine Muir Butterfield, who inherited them from her grandmother Catherine Sutherland Semple, who was Robert John's daughter and my father's aunt. The writings are contained in a scrapbook as a series of newspaper clippings; I borrowed this scrapbook, transcribed the clippings, and published them in 1999 as *The Observations of Ulysses or, Notes by an Occasional Correspondent, being Dispatches Sent to THE EVENING STAR, a Newspaper in Dunedin, New Zealand by Robert John Sutherland, of Keokuk, Iowa from March, 1881 to January, 1883*. Robert John was an astute observer, highly opinionated, well-read, and an excellent writer inclined to ironic humor. I learned much history from editing his dispatches and found him to be an interesting and engaging man.

About 1848, Robert John emigrated from Thurso, Scotland and settled in Carleton Place, Ontario, in Canada; from there he moved as a young man to northern Illinois to study; in 1861, he enlisted in the Union army to fight in the Civil War. In 1865, as an aide to Brigadier General Joseph B. West, he was present when the last Confederate generals surrendered in New Orleans. After the war he married and lived in Keokuk, Iowa for many years, working for a railroad that ultimately merged with the Rock Island line. He became an American citizen in 1886.

Some years before, his brother had moved to New Zealand in the wake of an Australian gold rush. In 1881, this brother suggested that Robert John write dispatches to the Dunedin newspaper discussing current issues and events in the United States. From 1881 to 1883 Robert John did this, using the

pseudonym Ulysses; the brother sent the newspapers to Iowa as they were published, and Robert John's articles wound up as clippings in his scrapbook.

My great-grandfather reported on a broad range of topics, among them American grain and wool production (with tables of statistics), the latest international trade agreements, the legal controversy over Mormon polygamy, the Chinese Exclusion Act (that terminated Chinese immigration, a law he eloquently opposed), the introduction of refrigeration for shipping meat by sea from New Zealand, the closing of the U. S. government's program for homesteading on public lands, the assassination of President Garfield (whom he supported), the trial of Garfield's assassin Guiteau, and his personal opinion that Garfield's successor Chester Arthur was a political hack. He saw the building of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railroad as a scam perpetrated by big business interests against the Canadian people. Of Oscar Wilde's visit to America in 1883, he said "The Southern States have Oscar Wilde this summer as a substitute for the yellow fever. He is now in Texas. From either infliction 'Good Lord deliver us' say I."

As I edited the old boy's dispatches one hundred and sixteen years after he wrote them, I found all of this fascinating. Eye-witness commentary on history unfolding! Getting to know a striking and formidable personality whose genes I carry! It was then I began to see the value of legacy-memoirs for those with interest in the past and eyes to see.

I decided to frame my legacy-memoir as a direct address to my descendants, a communication to the future from the past. This was a rhetorical choice. Anyone who undertakes to write such a memoir has to decide what to tell, how much to tell, and how to tell it. I decided to present mine as a cross-referenced mosaic, organized around general topics. I am not

writing a conventional autobiography beginning as David Copperfield did in Chapter One with “I am Born”, and proceeding from there. The topics I’ve tentatively chosen (which may change as I progress) are as follows:

FOREWORD (direct address: introducing myself to my descendants and explaining my hopes and intentions)
CHRONOLOGY (timeline of significant life-events with historical context)
FAMILY (brief genealogical summary; description of my immediate family)
EDUCATION
READING
PHILOSOPHY
WORKING (jobs, training)
TEACHING (professional career)
WRITING
EDITING AND PUBLISHING
ARTWORK
MUSIC
CONCERNS
SOCIAL ACTIVISM
POLITICS
AMUSING INCIDENTS
PEOPLE
TRAVEL
SUCCESSES AND FAILURES
HOBBIES
PARENTING
THOUGHTS ON AGING
CONCLUSION (a summing up and wishing my descendants well)

Each of these topics will be treated in its own section, and each section will be free-standing, able to be read for itself. I conceive people reading *in* the memoir, not *through* it from beginning to end: picking, choosing, dipping at will. I’ll cross-reference between sections where appropriate.

So far, I have drafted the FOREWORD and am currently halfway through the sections on EDUCATION and WORKING; in both of these I am proceeding chronologically since both are developmental, earlier experiences providing a

foundation for later. But not all sections will follow this model: I can see PARENTING, READING, PHILOSOPHY, CONCERNS, and SOCIAL ACTIVISM having their own topical subcategories. Some sections of the legacy-memoir will be relatively long, some relatively short. Part of the fun is figuring out how to structure the sections. All persons who write legacy-memoirs must determine what they wish to say (choosing what to include, what to omit), how they wish to say it, and how to structure their presentation. There is not a single way to write a legacy-memoir.

However, there are certain things one should consider and keep in mind. Paramount is knowing what *needs* to be included.

Since you are writing to be read in the indefinite future, you must anticipate what your descendants might not know or realize about the time in which you lived, and supply the background, context, and factual information they need in order to understand what you are saying. Facts regarding culture, politics, the natural environment, law and governmental process, means of transportation (cars and highways, trains, airplanes), the energy supply, communications (newspapers, radio, TV, DVD's, e-mail), etc. that are self-evident to you and taken for granted, may not be at all self-evident to people living two hundred years from now; may be only vaguely understood, or altogether unknown. You must second-guess what those readers might need to have explained or described, and supply that information. (For example, whenever I cite a measurement of length, or weight, or volume, I use the English system (*foot, pound, etc.*), but always include as a parenthetical a conversion to metric (*centimeter, meter, gram, etc.*): the English system may still be used a hundred and fifty years from now—but that's not something one should *assume.*)

It's also important for you to try to guess what kinds of things your descendants might *want* to know or would find informative and interesting about you, your world, your life, your values and opinions, your activities, and your socio/political environment and be sure to supply that information. You have to guess what questions they might like to ask you, and then provide answers to those questions.

You've got to remember that you are reporting an "eyewitness" account from what, for them, is a time long past. It's important to be honest, accurate, *clear*. (Opaqueness, vagueness, and ambiguity should be avoided, and remedied in your editing.)

Your personal history can be told anecdotally, as vignettes (humorous or grave) and short-short stories within the larger text. Everyone's style is different. But it's crucial that your account of what you've done, and where you've been, and what you've thought about it be *interesting, informative, and fun to read*.

Writing a legacy-memoir entails a lot of work. In the process, you'll learn much about yourself, recall a great deal that you've "forgotten", and gain new perspectives on what you've seen and done.

How many copies of the memoir should you make? A good question. At least one copy for each of your children, at least one copy for each of your grandchildren (present and projected)—and probably at least three each in addition that they can pass on to *their* children. Potentially burdening your offspring with multiple copies to supply to *their* offspring argues the need for an alternative plan of storing text through electronic means (continually updated to keep pace with evolving technology). Electronic storage will allow additional copies to be made by each generation as needed.

Also, you might wish to send a copy to the historical society or societies of the region(s) in which you did the bulk of your living. The archivists there might be happy to have your memoir in their collections.

Some of your descendants may be grateful to you for having thought of them, happy to have made your acquaintance, glad to have an accurate and coherent account of what preceded them. Hopefully they will be empowered by your gift to better understand their own experiences and to better manage their own thoughts, actions, and relations to the world.