Harwoods of Darwen: Volume 2, Part 1

Michael Harwood
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This is an amazingly well-researched account of a large, interesting family in the 1800s.

Exhaustive research and a keen interest in where he came from led to Michael Harwood's extensively detailed family history, which continues in The Harwoods of Darwen: Volume 2, Part 1.

After developing an interest in his family tree in the 1990s, Michael Harwood began a search to trace his ancestors and write about them. This resulted in a two-volume, four-part book series. With the help of multiple libraries, registrars, contracted researchers, and contacts around the world, Harwood has put together an unbelievably detailed account of his family, dating back to the time of the Saxons.

This volume begins in 1837. It mostly takes place in Lancashire, England, moving later to western Australia, where the family tree splintered due to emigration. The chronicle is full of rich details about when and where ancestors were born, who they married, how many children they had, and the often colorful ways in which they died.

Attention is given to many diseases that were common at the time, including typhoid, tuberculosis, diphtheria, and purple fever. Not only are these manners of death recounted, but the actual diseases are written about to provide context about what their victims would have experienced.

Elaborate family trees are included throughout the volume, helping to organize the stories of each family member. These are enhanced by multiple maps of the areas where the Harwood ancestors lived, historic pictures of dwellings common to the time, and photographs of the headstones of family members, as well as by included folklore and poetry that was popular in their time.

The census seems to be the main source of information for birth and death records, as well as for the living situations of the family members. These often prove to be unreliable: ages fluctuate, family members mysteriously disappear, and names change.

As well as describing his ancestors' lives to the best of his abilities, Harwood also refers to news stories, police records, court documents, and obituaries to better round out the tales, resulting in a full picture of what life may have looked like for the Harwoods in the 1800s. There is also plenty of detail about the handloom weaving industry, as many Harwoods made their living that way and were greatly affected by the mechanized looms that made their jobs obsolete.

This volume evinces astounding time and effort. There is enormous value in the intricate details of the Harwoods' lives for anyone connected to the family. Extensive details about life in the lower classes in England and Australia are also valuable.
Prose is dry and overly detailed, with passages that are stilted and repetitive. Keeping the players straight is difficult, even more so because of the sheer number of people mentioned.

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ANGELA MCQUAY (May 22, 2017)

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