

LITTLE HISTORIES

	FOREWARD	3
	INTRODUCTION	4
CHAPTER ONE	LOCATION OF THE REGISTRAR-GENERAL'S OFFICE	7
CHAPTER TWO	LEGISLATION GOVERNING THE WORK OF BDM	13
CHAPTER THREE	WORKING IN THE REGISTRY	35
CHAPTER FOUR	MARRIAGE CEREMONIES	57
APPENDIX 1	LIST OF REGISTRARS-GENERAL	70
APPENDIX 2	KEY LEGISLATION	70



FOREWORD

AS MINISTER OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS IT IS A PLEASURE TO INTRODUCE *LITTLE HISTORIES* AS PART OF THE CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS.

Here are some of the stories behind the births, deaths and marriage registers. Seven people who have worked closely with the registers describe the evolution of record keeping from beautiful old books, painstakingly handwritten, to computerised data systems that can search millions of records and verify the details of any particular one in seconds.

Little Histories also gives us much more. It captures in detail the way things have changed from era to era. We can enjoy the reflections and memories that add colour, some depth and the human element to the recording of the most important events in our lives. It is so good that these stories have been captured before people's memories and experiences are lost forever. Among the fascinating illustrations are some wonderful pictures of the earliest registers, transporting us back to the 1840s. These are published here for the first time.

Author Megan Hutching of the Ministry for Culture and Heritage wrote up these stories and in the process she uncovered so much of what goes to make up the history of our nation. These records are our collective history. They show how we are connected.

As Olivia Bradbrook, one of those interviewed says, "The deaths, the marriages, the births. That's where they all end up, and the next generation starts there. They're the history of New Zealand. That's where it begins and that's where it ends."

HON RICK BARKER

MINISTER OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS

September 2007

OPPOSITE A group of unidentified women, early 1900s. Reference number: F-11038-1/2. Cowan Collection. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, N.Z.

INTRODUCTION

Registering births, deaths and marriages sounds like fairly straightforward – and perhaps dull – work. After all, it appears to be merely filling in forms and checking them. When you have read this brief history of the Office of the Registrar-General, or Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDM) as the office is more usually called, it will be clear that

every registration has
a story attached to it, and often it is one
of great complexity.

In the days when having children out of marriage was seen as shameful, staff in the registries were responsible for registering these births, and the adoptions that usually followed. When divorce was uncommon, staff entered the annulments on the marriage records. When girls became pregnant by their stepfathers, staff entered those details. In small towns they knew all the secrets.

Until recently, new staff members had to sign a declaration saying that the information they dealt with was confidential and would remain confidential, and now it is part of the code of conduct that staff do not look through the registers for their own personal interest. People interviewed for this history recall being given the advice not to look at their family members' records in case they found something they did not want to know.

Working in the registries, staff are witness to the changes in New Zealand society, reflected in seemingly mundane things such as changes over the years in names that children are called, but also in legislation such as the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985 and the Civil Union Act 2004. As Olivia Bradbrook said in her interview for this book,

“there’s so much wonderful history in BDM. The deaths, the marriages, the births. That’s where they all end up, and the next generation starts there. They’re the history of New Zealand. That’s where it begins and that’s where it ends.”

This history begins with a brief overview of the different government departments in which BDM has been located. Chapter Two looks at the different legislation that has governed the work of the Office, and Chapter Three records the changes in work practice over the years as the registry has moved from paper-based registers to the current computer-based one. Chapter Four contains stories about registry office marriages, and there is an appendix that lists the legislation mentioned in Chapter Two.

The information is based on interviews with seven current and former staff and on research done in annual reports and other government publications. The interviews are archived at the Alexander Turnbull Library’s Oral History Centre in Wellington, where they are available to researchers, subject to any conditions placed on them by the interviewees. Those interviewed are Brian Clarke, Eileen Kennedy, Brian Hesketh, Danielle Amon, Evan Gould, Jack Wright and Olivia Bradbrook.



LEFT Frank James Denton, with his second wife Ethel and their baby, 1913. *Reference number: G-70179-1/2. Tesla Studios Collection. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, N.Z.*

RIGHT One-month-old-baby Austin with parents Emma and Richard, 2007.