

It is as important to know where you are coming from as to know where you are going.

I confess that looking forward is generally more productive than looking back, especially if you have suffered loss or have regrets. But, we are all rooted in history so it is meet and proper that we should know our place in this world and where our roots have grown deep into the soil. Race, history, shared happiness and sorrows shape our deepest consciousness.

Be aware of the influence the past has upon the present and how this might cause you to adapt your future. You are a different person to your parents and grandparents but you will share a few of their traits and foibles, you will probably make some of the mistakes they made and share some of their characteristics. You might even discover a propensity to heart attack or breast cancer. Forewarned is forearmed.

I found it a profoundly moving experience, knowing so little of my family history, to trace my grandfather's footsteps as he fled England and his wife for Chicago in 1896. He married bigamously there and became the father to a stepson. I stood by that man's son as he showed me my grandfather's grave in rural Michigan and told me tales of our mutual grandfather. I wondered if grandfather ever knew that both the sons he left behind in England had survived the Great War and that one of his sons, my father, had married a goddaughter of Queen Victoria. Tracing this story had taken many months of persistence starting in Cottenham in Cambridgeshire from where the family came. I met his first cousin twice removed when she invited me in for tea in her house in the village.

At the individual level, knowing and understanding your past can help you to learn about yourself and correct your weaknesses. You will gain a more rounded picture of yourself and your siblings – not always a pleasant experience. I learned that my grandfather was estranged from his brothers as my father was from his and as I am from mine. History does repeat itself.