

PublishMe

How to plan Memoirs & Family Histories

www.publishme.co.nz



Introduction

So . . . you have decided it's time to write a memoir? A memoir is usually an account of your own life or aspects of it, but it can also be your memories of time you spent with a significant person, so that they are the focus of your memoir.

You may be considering writing a history of your family, your district, your club, your business.

Maybe you are well down the track of planning and writing. Whatever you're writing, PublishMe can give you guidance where you need it, and you can tap into loads of free information on our [website](#). Our aim is to help you keep the publishing process as stress-free as possible. To assist you we'll give you some practical advice and examples of what others have learned along the way.

You are welcome to contact PublishMe's client manager, [Giles](#), to discuss your specific projects – there's no obligation or cost for that time and talking to us early could save you time, money and energy.

We're very well set up to help you.

PublishMe is a division of Graphix Explosion Limited, owned by Sharon & Shane Devlin – specialising for more than 20 years in printing and publishing a huge range of books. For the past few years the PublishMe team has been intensively involved in working with people who want to publish their own work. Memoirs and family histories are just one aspect of the range of books we print but it's a very special and rewarding part of what we do.

We all know how important it is to leave a legacy in a book.

Today families are spread throughout the world – they don't stay in tight groups and share stories eg: about how they lived, did domestic work, raised children, listened to their elders. Many families these days are split when relationships break down, so even important stories and special milestones can become just vague recollections.

A thoroughly researched family tree is not necessary, but it offers a framework for the stories, the special events and milestones.

Don't underestimate the value of your life.

It's **not** a vanity to record your upbringing, your working and family life and later years. And don't underestimate the interest your story will get from family, friends and the wider community. A book is like a footprint – an impression you leave so that people better understand your life, and therefore their own and the lives of others around them.

We want you to be proud of the publication you create.

Giles Scott, Client Manager of PublishMe, explains some of the strategies you can use and some of the decisions you'll need to make to start your project . . .

Is recording memoirs and family histories important?

Absolutely!

Some advice from Giles . . .

Letting family stories and histories die is almost like letting species become extinct.

Genealogists trace births, deaths and marriages and create family trees with dates, names and places and sometimes this builds into the stories, but a memoir or family history fills in the detail and the family 'picture' is created.



A memoir is a legacy – it builds out the fabric of the person, the time they lived and how the other members of the family fit in. So often you hear people say they wished they'd asked their Mum and Dad more about their lives before they died or before it got too challenging to do. Or they wish Mum and Dad had written down more about their lives, especially about their early life.

If these memories are not recorded, much knowledge is irretrievably lost; knowledge that may be important to our future understanding of ourselves and our place here.

We are such a young, small nation, if we don't take responsibility for our history-keeping at a personal level, we'll never be able to afford it fully at a national level. Let's not lose our history altogether.

Nagging thought 1: Will my families care? Will they value it?

Yes they will. Some immediately – others later. Who will want it? Sometimes the way something is written makes it suitable only for family and close friends.

At other times it becomes an autobiography and has a wider audience. Sometimes writers are surprised at who is interested and amazed that people want to buy their book.

Will your families be interested? They'll be captivated. They'll see you in a new light. Not only will your family value it – you will value it.

Regarding the value of recording memories, Jane talks about her father's memoir.

'My father's father left the family a memoir detailing his and my grandmother's life, arriving in NZ from England to minister in a remote parish in Raglan. My father, who was three when they landed in Raglan, treasured these memories and was determined to share his own story. In his later life he made this commitment and with my help we produced a modest document valued by every one of us.

Dad sent every member of the family, and special friends, a copy with a special message in each. My children treasure their copies.'

Nagging thought 2: Is my writing good enough? Can I write? Do I need to be able to write well?

Think about your goals . . . and talk to us if you need help.

If your book is a personal publication for family and friends you'll still want to have pride in it – no glaring spelling errors, or photo quality that doesn't do you justice.

If your goal is to sell your book then we strongly recommend you get skilled support to help you polish your writing and to ensure the cover will grab buyers' attention. You want to be able to sign that book with pride.

There are varying levels of assistance for editing, proofreading, design and layout, so invest to the level you believe will enable you to make the impact you want . . . and you'll be more confident of getting a return on your publishing investment.

Nagging thought 3: What if I can't write a whole book?

A book can be a very slim 20-page booklet – it need only include the content that you feel is important to tell. And the beauty of having it as an electronic file is that you can add to it as you think of more to say!

Nagging thought 4: Do I have to be able to use a computer?

No . . . it helps, but we have solutions we can discuss with you.

Nagging thought 5: Can I afford to do this?

Talk to us about your writing project – again, there can be solutions when your financial resources are very limited.



How do I start making my book a reality?

There is no 'one size fits all' recipe but the most important thing is to start. Don't put it off too long – too long quickly becomes too late!

We'll give you some writing tips that may help you find the way that best suits you . . . a smorgasbord of ideas to select from.

Know **why** you want to do it – what is **the purpose?** Who is it for?

Is this a book for family and friends only or do you want a wider audience to read your book?

This will help define what resources you will need to put into it, your goals, and also the structure of the book.

For a wider audience you will need to think about serious editing, proofreading, design, layout and marketing – we have [downloadable information](#) on our PublishMe website, and info-packed packages which will help with those aspects.

What commitment do you need to make?

Time, money, energy, hard work, and a willingness to go outside your comfort zone to learn new things.

How much of any of these depends on the purpose.

For family and friends you can do the editing and layout yourself or encourage a family member or talented friend to help you. You don't need to work alone. A couple could work together on this project or you can work with other members of the family.

For a wider audience you may need to be prepared to pay for an editor or a designer to assist you.

Part of the commitment is to tell people you are going to write. Their caring enquiries about how your writing is progressing will keep you on track!

Support from your partner and family is important.

- If you are writing a personal memoir you will benefit from their understanding and they can help with facts you have forgotten, help find photos, and read the copy to offer feedback and encouragement.
- If you are writing a wider family history, family support is critical as you will need to interview family members and get information from them.
- For a wider audience, you will need support as the time component will be greater and the money resource probably also. Not everything costs you in publishing, but you need to invest what's appropriate to meet your goals.

The school teacher in me says:

- Set a goal so the project doesn't drag on – set a realistic goal for completion and write the goal down.
- You might want to work towards a special occasion – it could be this occasion that has been the catalyst for your interest.
- Work out a programme so you can achieve this. This is part of making a commitment to time and energy. Things like this don't 'just happen' – you do need to make them happen. It doesn't necessarily have to be a lot of time. As you get 'into the project' you will find it easier and easier.
- Set aside some time each day/week/several times a week – whatever suits the other commitments in your life. Block that time off and endeavour to make that your writing time. My husband's parents have set time aside at morning tea to work together on their memoirs and so each day a little more is achieved. Others we spoke to 'just let it flow' and others set aside a full day a week for research and writing. If the occasion is imminent then the time commitment will need to be more intense.



- Always have a notebook with you – it is often at the most unlikely times that you remember things and it's important to capture them.

It seems a big task at the beginning – but don't be overwhelmed. Take it one bite at a time. Again, just make a start. Once you have the structure of your story mapped it is often easier to plan and set smaller goals within the big one.

So where to start?

Some people start by randomly writing down stories and later finding a common theme and title. I think this is possible but I know that planning a structure can help get you started on your journey and make the travelling easier.

Memoirs can be:

- Chronological – but they don't have to be. Sometimes this is the easiest way – start at the beginning and work through era by era
- Topic-based eg hobbies and interests, jobs, things I treasure
- Theme-based eg family, houses, schooling and learning, work and play, beliefs and wisdoms
- Event-based eg weddings, births, great achievements, trips/holidays
- Significant parts of your life eg early childhood years, schooling, the depression/war, university/training, my proudest achievement, my worst moments
- Favourite family photos – the memories they set off for me – the stories behind them
- Things that define you – my favourite recipes, poems, photographs, paintings, handwork, gardens etc
- You may decide to have a potted timeline at the beginning of your book with significant dates and then pick out 3 or 4 things to develop in detail.

There is no right way – the right way is the way that suits you and best captures you and the legacy you have to pass on; the most important aspects to communicate about your life. You can build on that framework after family members have looked at it and offered useful contributions.

The purpose you have for your book will impact on these decisions.

Don't think you've got anything to write about?

Brainstorming is a way to generate questions, solutions or ideas for a topic.

- Make a mind map, then clump similar things together, build your plan and then start writing. As you go the shape may change but initial planning will give you a roadmap that will make the process easier.
- You could mind map around a topic/theme/event/part of your life, or just let the possibilities flow and see if there is a pattern emerging.
- Use a large piece of paper or cut up paper in to postcard-sized pieces. Write down any ideas/possibilities that occur to you. Write down every idea, no matter how far-fetched. Your aim is to generate a large quantity of ideas. Take about 10-15 minutes – if you find yourself running out of ideas too quickly, don't give up.
- Keep working at it until you have written down at least 10 possible ideas or solutions.
- Once you have finished brainstorming, go through the results.
- Look for any answers that are repeated or similar. Group similar ideas together.
- Eliminate responses that definitely do not fit.



How will you write/record your stories?

- Hand write on paper and have it typed later by family, friends, yourself, employ someone
- Type straight into computer – and back up your files!
- Talk into a tape recorder yourself
- Speak to someone and tape record – set up visits and plan what you will talk about each time. In both these cases you can transcribe the recording yourself or have someone do it for you – this will need to be read and edited after it is typed. This can be done by a partner, husband/wife, friend, family member, or you can employ someone to help you.

Commit and get started

- Know the purpose of your writing
- Commit resources
- Tell people what you are going to do
- Ask for the support you will need
- Set realistic goals
- Work out regular times to write
- Plan the structure
- Decide how you will get it down
- Keep going
- Reward yourself when you finish!

Need help with the practical aspects of the publishing process? Points to consider . . .

Preparing your book for print – guidelines from Giles Scott, PublishMe client manager

The Benefits of Digital Printing

- Digital printing has revolutionized printing and made self publishing more accessible. You can now print small runs and print on demand – what you need, when you need it.
- Digital printing is affordable. You can work out a book per unit price and then calculate how many copies you would like based on your finances.
- A small run means you can make changes in between print runs. An example of this would be if you were printing a family history and a new member was added to the family or new information came to light.
- The quality of digital printing has evolved dramatically. We have state-of-the-art digital machinery at PublishMe to ensure you get the best results.
- Digital printing allows us to give you a fully-bound proof of your manuscript which will be the same quality as your final print run. This allows you to see the final product in its finished state.

Your manuscript is ready . . . what now?

- What is your budget? It is important to decide on this early as it can affect everything from the size of your book to the amount of colour pages.



Sample Quotes (GST exclusive)

300gsm cover laminated Perfect Bound Book
246 x 189mm Crown Quarto Portrait Book
180 pages 80gsm, black and white (B&W)
\$14.04 per book

300gsm cover laminated Perfect Bound Book
A5 Trimmed Portrait Book
180 pages 80gsm B&W
\$9.78 per book

300gsm cover laminated Perfect Bound Book
246 x 189mm Crown Quarto Portrait Book
180 pages Total 160 B&W on 80gsm + 20 Colour on 120gsm
\$20.15 per book

As you can see, the size of the book, the paper weight and the colour can affect the price. It is best to work out your budget early on so you can design your book to suit that budget. Your book can be any size but if it's not a standard size then there will be additional costs.

Remember, if photographs are a strong feature of your book then an A5 size may not do them justice and a crown quarto or A4 format may better suit your material.

- Is your book for a special occasion? If you are looking to have your book ready in time to mark a birthday or a family anniversary, please let us know. Not only do we need to know for printing reasons, it will also give you a bit of extra motivation having a deadline to work with. However, try to make this deadline realistic so as to avoid unnecessary stress.

Design

- Do you require the services of a professional designer? People have different levels of computer skills so there is no 'one size fits all' answer for this question. Many people decide to set their book up in Word themselves. To print your book you need to supply the file of your book contents to us in an electronic format, not handwritten or typed and printed out – it needs to come to us via email, or on CD or brought in on a memory stick. If you can't do that we need to help you find a solution – perhaps a family member or friend will help, maybe a high school student or someone happy to work from home, or someone at a local SeniorNet group. There will be some cost that you can discuss with these helpers. If you require the assistance of a designer to flow the information you have typed up into a presentable format, then we can also assist you with that.
- We require the final files in PDF format so please remember to convert your file to a PDF once you have finished compiling your manuscript. Encourage family to support you – to help you record your story, create a computer file and check that it matches our print needs. All that detail is explained on our [website](#).
- You may decide that you are happy to do the insides of your book but need some assistance with the cover. The cover is important. Don't overdo the number of photos or the amount of text on the cover and by all means have a sub-title that gives a taste of the book's contents. On the back of a book below the blurb (yes, that is the technical term), you will often see an ISBN number and a barcode. Those are there to identify your book to booksellers and libraries. It is very simple to arrange an ISBN number – we're happy to send you a link to do that. If your book is not for sale to the public, but for family and friends only, then you don't need an ISBN or barcode.
- We have an excellent designer at PublishMe and we offer Design packages according to the complexity of the design you are requiring.

Turnaround Times

- Once we have established that your files are indeed printable we can generate a proof within a few days and deliver it to your door. This proof gives you the opportunity to see the finished product as it will look



once printed. I would suggest that you use this proof for confirming that you are happy with the quality of the pictures and paper rather than proofing the content. You sent us your final files, so by this stage proofing the content should be more a process of checking that the text, images and captions have stayed intact, that alternative fonts haven't been substituted (software glitches can happen) and that the contents page numbers match those throughout the book. Obviously if there are errors that have gone unmissed then please submit a new file, however, please be advised that we will need to do a new proof each time new files are supplied. See our free [download](#) for more helpful tips about proofreading and editing.

- Once the proof is signed off and the deposit is paid, we will be able to deliver the books within 2 weeks.

My Tips

- Communicate with me regularly.
- Use the website. It's a great source of useful information.
- There is no such thing as a stupid question! If you can't find an answer you are looking for on the website, please contact me and I will do my best to help you out.

Giles Scott

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Things that helped these PublishMe authors of memoirs and family histories could help you too.

Bonner Gearon

Bonner lives in New Plymouth but was born in Wales, emigrating to New Zealand when he was 26.

His book, *Gearons, Ralphs and Smarts* contains his life story and as much of the histories of his families as Bonner could gather. He wrote only for family and friends, not to market it to the public.

In terms of **research** he says: *'Since my family's history was European, I used my home-town's library, by e-mail. I find the Web a valuable source, too. But be wary – as the proverb says, "You believe all you read, better not read." On any page, I look for links to authenticated or reputable sources.*

I used pen and paper (about 360 foolscap, single side) for my first attempt. I scrapped that effort, and rewrote, from scratch, again using pen and paper. When I read what I had written, again I shredded the paper I had written it on. By now, contrary to what I had thought when I began the first effort, I decided that I did not know how to write. Before making a third attempt, I bought many books, and learned how to write. Then, I typed. I still type. It works best for me. I use pen and paper now only for making notes 'on the run'. I always have the wherewithal with me.

A word of caution about reading advice expressed by other writers — including this one: weigh up what they tell you, one with the other and with your own instinct.

I wrote for as long as circumstances allowed, usually every day, up to seven hours per day. I set myself targets, deliberately beyond what I knew I could achieve. I found this tactic a great spur. But the greatest aid to my **getting started** had been in my telling everyone that I was going to write a book. I had to get on with it then. Now, with one book published, I no longer need to do this. Writing is such a joy that I can't get enough of it.

Regarding photos Bonner says, *'I always considered important the inclusion of as many photos as possible in my book, placed in context, not in a block, divorced from their appropriate places in the narrative. I am a reader, too.*

In my current writing, I rewrite and edit each chapter as I complete it. Next day, I read what I wrote the previous day. No more of facing that daunting task from the MS's start to its finish. My method also keeps me in touch with what's gone before, so that my characters (in novels) do not imperceptibly change their . . . er . . . characters as the story progresses.'



Vera Christmann

Vera Christmann's book, *Born Behind a Veil*, is the story of her early life, growing up in a small village in the German state of Hessen, in the years that followed the Second World War.

She said: "One day, here in Wellington as I looked through photographs of my early years, I found myself feeling sad that I knew next to nothing about the childhoods of my mother and father. How did they spend their time? What games did they play? How did they dress? I would have loved to have known a bit more about them. And so I began to write down my childhood memories . . ."

In doing that, Vera has ensured that her son knows the fascinating early years of his mother's life.

She used the Internet for her research, then says she wrote her stories down quite randomly and later found a common theme, but even while she was writing she never thought it would make it into a book. She always kept pen and paper in her bag, in the kitchen, in her office and next to her bed – she said lots of thoughts came during the night. She wrote just as time allowed and read other people's memoirs and looked at things like how they arranged their photos in the layout. And she says while family can and do help, be careful not to let them unduly influence your ideas and style – it's your story. Anything she'd do differently next time? She said, 'No, everybody has to find their own way.'

Sarah Semple

Sarah is at the more seriously dedicated end of writing family histories but her advice is very useful for all levels. She has published 5 books since 2008. 'I am currently writing three books – two family tree books, and another more commercially viable book . . . got to try and make some \$\$ out of this, researching family trees can be an expensive hobby!'

Sarah shares candid comments to help writers of family histories . . .

Research: My main sources are Internet sites (ancestry.co.uk; findmypast.co.uk; scotlandspeople.gov.uk; NZ BDM site; on-line newspapers (great for NZ and Australia in particular)). I also use the local library, National Library and NZ Archives. If possible, I also visit the main place where my ancestors lived, and visit the local library facilities there, plus talk to local historians etc. I also use facebook and sites like oldfriends to track down distant relatives and make contact with them. I get out books from the local library on the region that my descendants were from. Invaluable. I tend to set aside one full day a week for my research, however when I am full on into writing a book, I will use any hour available to me.

Structure: I tend to focus on a set of great grandparents, and dedicate the first chapter to a history of the area that they were from, then a chapter on their ancestors; then a chapter on the great grandparents themselves and then a chapter for each of their descendant lines. I always include historical material so that I can give a better context to my writing. For example, it isn't enough to say that the great grandparents emigrated from Scotland to NZ in 1862. Why would they have moved? What was happening in Scotland at that time etc.

It is essential to use **family tree software** to keep a track of all the individuals. Mine and my husband's combined now has nearly 13,000 individuals – impossible to keep track manually. The software also helps to identify duplicate individuals which is essential, since you often get cousins marrying. When I interview people, I always use a notebook, and when I go to a library, I always use a notebook to write items down, and then transfer it to my family tree package when I get home. I also backup my books and family tree package onto a memory stick which I carry in my handbag at all times.

Family support is critical. Interviewing family members, making notes from conversations. It is amazing how much knowledge there is. Most conversations tend to start with them telling you that they don't remember much, but this never seems to be the case. Always prepare for the conversations, so that you can ask leading questions. This is where you learn the stories, what kind of people your ancestors were. It allows you to move beyond dates (birth, death and marriages) and actually personalise somebody. Essential if you want to make your book interesting to read, and not just a series of dates. There is quite a bit of skill involved to uncovering the dirt in the family, since often there is a reluctance to talk about it.

I have learnt a lot along the way. The only book that I am not happy with is my first book. The cover of the book is bland, and I didn't research any of the family lines down to the current generations. If you do complete lines of the current generations, you sell a lot more copies of your book. Everyone likes to see their name in

print! Also, the information available on the Internet is so much more than it was in 2008, and so I know that I am missing a lot of valuable information.

Break up the text. *Though they add to the costs coloured photographs look great in books. I wish that I had known how easy it is to photoshop photographs when I started out. Putting a face to a name is very important, and so where possible I use photographs not only of people, but also of houses (for example, the first house that they lived in when they emigrated). I have also used newspaper articles, tables etc. It helps to break up the text. Once all my text is in the book, then I resize the photographs so that the text is placed better on a page, with no gaps.*

Barcodes. *I have never marketed my books, but am amazed at how many bookshops have contacted me for copies. Always bar-code your book. I tend to find out from family members how many copies they would like to purchase, and then I get about 10 extra copies produced. I have had to get reprints on most of my books, which adds to the cost since there is a set-up fee for each print run.*

Don't delay. *Each book evolves and is better than the previous one. Use lots of photographs, don't delay interviewing people – they might not be around to be interviewed if you wait too long. Enjoy doing it, so wonderfully rewarding and you get to meet relatives that you never knew you had.*

Jimmy John

A Full Life, A Full Ride, My Journey

Jimmy passed away a couple of years ago and those of us at PublishMe who worked with him to get his book published still miss him. He'd had a very full life, he had personality to burn and only embarked on his memoirs at 85. He'd thought about writing about his life but was concerned it would be too big an exercise – then Jimmy got put in touch with Alison Robinson, a writer whose books included a history of Stratford Hospital. She sat with him with a tape recorder and the story unfolded! Soon Jimmy bought his own little recorder to record stories when he woke during the night. Once his book was published he became a real marketing trooper, he got a huge kick out of ordering new print runs and he sold over 200 copies . . . at \$40 each.

He was often surprised that people were interested in his life story, we loved that he got such a kick out of his book and the processes it went through. In our experience, writing and publishing can be a very meaningful undertaking for the author – it gave Jimmy a whole new purpose in life and he said it was splendid therapy in helping him dealing with his grief after his wife died. When he was 90 Jimmy became very ill, but he still kept a box of books under his hospital bed which he would sell to the nurses!

Colin Radford

The Boy from Mokau River

Colin Radford now lives in Auckland but he grew up beside the Mokau River in the 1930s – no road access or electricity. His memoirs are a real slice of New Zealand life and cover a happy childhood and his early-adult years growing up in the rugged King Country. Colin's determination to buy his own farms and to provide for his growing family drove him on – but eventually drought and other misfortunes overcame him.

In his book he talks honestly about his experiences of mental illness and its accompanying prejudice, and how he changed from 'back blocks' farmer and keen rugby supporter to university graduate, protester at the 1981 Springbok tour and Bastion Point, and antiques dealer in Auckland.

While in his late 70s, Colin learned how to use a computer so he could write his memoir. He says, *"Initially, I knew what a mouse looked like and that it was attached to a computer, but that was about it!"*

Colin has now had 700 books printed to satisfy orders and bookstore interest. An excellent outcome – and the cover design we helped him with looks great – you'd happily pick it up off a bookstore shelf.



So you can see – everyone approaches it differently, but in our experience everyone has the same reaction when they get hold of the copy their first book – absolutely delighted – we’d like that for you too!

Many queries can be answered by browsing through the information on our website, but please contact [Giles](#), PublishMe client manager, if you need further guidance.

When to start?

Now . . . you’ll never regret it, it’s something you’ll treasure and it will just get even more precious as time goes by.

What have you got to lose other than your stories!

