

More than *words*

One man's quest to understand the father he never knew leads him to handwriting analysis.

Words David Wilson

Why his crowd called him Bosco is a mystery, like much about my father. He died just five months after my birth in March 1966. From talking to my mother, who no longer remembers him clearly, and other relatives, I have gleaned some details.

Bosco was a retired, hard-drinking British colonel and latterday tea planter who worked in what is now Bangladesh during the twilight of the British Empire. He had a superb physique, shot wild pigs and once, during his army days, "accidentally" set fire to a tent full of documents so he would not have to deal with them.

I have no papers relating to him except a green, leather-bound diary from 1951. It registers public events such as the re-election of Winston Churchill and personal experiences including the signing of his will (Wednesday, June 6) pretty factually.

Among the few flourishes are an unfranked

Festival of Britain stamp stuck to the page, the admission that his radio is belting music out louder than anyone else's during an SS Himalaya voyage and this assertion: "Glorious Gloria. Virtuous Valerie."

I hand his diary to Mona Vale handwriting analyst Caro Duncan, who holds a certificate of Graphology from the American Handwriting Analysis Foundation and has practised in Boston and Sydney.

Championing her trade, which critics dismiss as an astrology-like pseudo-science, Duncan traces its lineage to Confucius, who said: "Beware of the man whose writing sways like a reed in the wind."

Duncan shows me examples of the disintegration in the style of a teenager who committed suicide and the script of an accident victim who, holding a pen in his mouth, wrote just as with his hand, showing that all writing is "brain writing" – a "photo" of the thoughts in our heads, she says.

I harbour doubts about whether handwriting can illuminate the deepest recesses of the mind yet I suspect it must give broad clues into character, just as gait, dress and manner do.

Duncan interprets character by assessing size, slant, speed, letter formations, pressure, writing materials and use of space. "The first thing that jumps out is his love of nature," she says. "And he has a nice sense of how he fits into society."

"He was neither in-your-face, nor is he a shrinking violet. He would be popular at parties."

Flicking through the marble-trimmed pages, she adds that his writing is "exceptionally, exceptionally minute" – a point she repeats throughout the 40-minute reading. "The fact that he writes so small clearly shows a fine mind – it shows a mind that's capable of going his own way, believing in himself and an incredible mind for detail and a wonderful memory."

His style is refined, which adds to the impression of intellectual finesse. Less intelligent people stick with the clunky script they learned in the classroom.

All the talk of braininess comes as a surprise. I always thought my father lived through his body and had little time for flights of the mind.

He was quite bookish, according to Duncan, who focuses purely on the visuals rather than the literal meaning of words. Evidence for her observation comes at the back of the diary in the shape of a numbered list of 22 books by the likes of British thriller writer Nevil Shute.

Duncan paints my father as a solid character who could fit into just about any milieu. Smiling at the spidery writing in my notebook, she rightly says that I am not like that.

My father's tight, tiny hand and his supposed desire for more money brings my brother to mind. Disclosures of other traits, such as sensuousness and love of female attention offset by the urge to withdraw, hit even closer to home.

But, although I remember my mother saying that Bosco was strange and sometimes sad, nothing disturbing comes up. The closest Duncan gets to finding serious fault with the stranger responsible for me is calling him "naughty" – he expected others to conform to traditional standards but let himself slip and hid secrets. Still, she says, he would have been a "tremendous" and protective father.

Making it plain that she is not just being nice, Duncan points out that her rosy diagnosis is by no means the norm – she has a "rogues' gallery" of people whose writing contains sinister aspects.

Duncan's take on Bosco has a commonsense dimension. To me it stands to reason that, if you form incredibly tightly wrought words, you probably have a keenly organised mind.

The practice of delving into the lives of lost relatives' texts is booming. Graphologist Meryl Bolin, of Hallidays Point, has done more than 500 readings.



Visual connection
... handwriting analyst
Caro Duncan (right).
Opposite page: Bosco (centre),
and his diary (above).
Photo: Edwina Pickles
Illustration: Michael McGurk

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She casts the typical reaction as "wowed recognition" provoked by the realisation of sharing characteristics such as a hot temper, an adventurous spirit or a tendency to timidity. The digging for insight is part of the search for meaning that people undergo when they investigate family trees. "Australians are intrigued by this type of research," Bolin says.

Ian Spencer, a retired Baptist minister and marriage counsellor from Greenwich, was intrigued by two key figures in his family history: his great-uncle and a larger-than-life great-grandfather. "I wanted to know as much about them as possible," Spencer says.

He hired Bolin to deepen his understanding after seeing her analyse participants in personal growth programs he ran. Among other things, Bolin's readings confirmed that his great-grandfather, who met the 19th-century bushranger Ben Hall, was physically outgoing and had little time for social niceties.

Indeed, he was a rebel. Now Spencer better understands why he is a bit of a rebel himself.

"My background was that I was a complete sceptic," he says. "I'm a chemical engineer, I'm a scientist – the idea of getting information about people from their handwriting sounded to me to be completely off-the-wall."

But now he believes he understands more of where he comes from and feels that he has filled in blanks and confirmed hunches about the past.

Which is also how I feel. It's as if I have had a conversation with my nearest yet most distant ancestor through a process marrying seance with science.

