

PAUL THOMPSON with JOANNA BORNAT

# THE VOICE OF THE PAST

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ORAL HISTORY

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FOURTH EDITION



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PAUL THOMPSON WITH JOANNA BORNAT

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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# Preface to the Fourth Edition

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Why another edition of *The Voice of the Past*? There are two reasons. Firstly, this book caught the spirit of the idealism of the oral history movement at a time of hope. Today we may focus on different issues and use different words, but the search for social justice remains central to our work. That is why, amplified and brought up to date with current trends, it remains a resource for oral historians, life story researchers, and community project workers right round the world. It has been available in eleven different languages, and some of its phrases have been quoted again and again—I have even seen them on T-shirts at community festivals.

Secondly, in the fifteen years since the Third Edition, there has been an explosion of oral history activity, shown through the publication of hundreds of books and articles and, in parallel with this, the development of digital work and the creation of websites. This explosion reflects the influences of new means of communication, through the internet, as well as the spread of oral history worldwide. These developments have made oral history more commonly understood and more open to democratic practice than ever before. To be fully useful, the book needed to evaluate this new work. It has proved a daunting but exhilarating task. It has raised some difficult issues, such as with conflicting and contested memories, or with the role of testimony in social and political reconciliation. But in the process we have found not only brilliant recent examples of oral history work but also some outstanding but previously unnoticed forerunners.

So how is this new edition different? The first difference is that I have worked on the revision jointly with Joanna Bornat. We have discussed the whole text together, but she has taken the lead with chapters seven to nine. This co-operation has been a revival of our own earlier joint work in editing *Oral History*. It has been a very good experience to work together again, not only sharing the huge task of reviewing the field, but creating a context for arguing problems, and for courage. In this edition, because much of the original text remains, 'I' still means Paul. But there are now also more forms of 'we', sometimes meaning authors and readers together, sometimes Paul and his co-researchers, but also most crucially an authorial 'we', Paul and Joanna.

A second important new element is that Lynn Abrams has written a special chapter for us on the contribution of theory to oral history (chapter five),



inspired by her cogent and readable book *Oral History Theory* (2010). This links with many of the arguments in other chapters, but offers a new focus and coherent frame for theory in oral history. A third key factor has been the helpful support which we have received from Rob Perks as series editor, and co-editor of the invaluable *Oral History Reader*, and for his advice on chapter eleven and many other points.

*The Voice of the Past* is of course about oral history and life stories. But how do we define them?

Oral history and life stories are based on listening to and recording people's memories and life experiences. They are used in many forms of historical, social, or political work: whether by community workers, researchers, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, ethnologists, psychologists, or others. Oral history and life story recordings can be presented in films, radio, TV, heritage trails, books, online, or in museums and exhibitions; and they can be archived as a shared resource for others.

Oral history and life stories take three overlapping forms. The first and broadest is *oral history*, the term most used by historians and community workers, but also by broadcasters and many social researchers, for the recording of any kind of memory of the past. Oral history often focuses on just one theme, or one phase in a life.

The second form, which has been practised especially by anthropologists and sociologists as a way of understanding societies and social change, is the *life story*: the recording of the story of a whole life, from childhood through to the present. Thus while oral history often is not a life story, recorded life stories are always oral history. In Latin America, life stories bringing together collective as well as individual memory have become a political tradition, known as the *testimonio*.

The third form, most often recorded by anthropologists, ethnologists, or folklorists, is *oral tradition*, memories of the past handed down orally between generations. Most families have some such memories, so that they can be recorded in an interview. But oral tradition is of greater importance and more elaborately developed in societies with few written records, and in that context oral tradition has become a special form of historical expertise. Oral tradition has also become a crucial form of evidence in the struggle to validate the land rights of native peoples.

These three main forms of oral history are our principal focus in this book. But alongside them, as we shall see, there are many other activities which are partly based on oral history, or closely related to it. Thus there are autobiography competitions, which use written life story memories, but with similar objectives to oral history. There is contemporary reportage, which can be based on a form of interviewing similar to oral history; but we would say that projects about very recent events are not oral history, unless they include a dimension of the past, through recording the build-up to the events, and the participants' earlier or future histories. There has been a growth of various academic fields,

such as memory studies and narrative analysis, which offer the promise of new insights into methods and interpreting interviews, although so far their influence on practice has been limited. And there are new forms which use spoken memory, but in different ways and for different purposes: reminiscence work in support of older people, and reminiscence drama, and most strikingly, Truth Commissions which aim to bring political and personal reconciliation through the sharing of harsh memories.

This book is intended to be both practical and philosophical. The first chapters—one to eight—give broad overviews of the key features of oral history and life stories: their social and historical roles, their origins and development and worldwide spread, their place within the broader memory movement, and the issues concerning the nature of memory as evidence and its relationship with the self, experience, and identity.

Chapter one, 'History and the Community', presents an argument for the community and social purposes of oral history: a manifesto which for decades has inspired one major thread in oral history. We believe that its fundamental argument about the potential social value of oral history remains important. We have therefore tampered with it as little as possible, rather than attempting a radically new version with a completely new set of examples. The chapter was written in the more optimistic political and social context of the 1970s, and largely from British experience. However, the website boxes with which the book concludes are intended to symbolise the extent to which oral history today has become an international practice of continuing social commitment.

Chapter two, 'Historians and Oral History', begins with a history of oral history which is little changed, but concludes with a new overview of recent developments in the English-speaking world.

Chapters three and four are newly written. Chapter three, 'Reaching Out: Other Cultures', surveys the practice of life stories and oral history worldwide, and how varied cultural and political contexts have resulted in different approaches to practice, such as the Latin American *testimonio* or the German narrative interview. Although we have sought advice from colleagues conversant with many different languages, we have had to base this review mainly on publications in or translated into English, as well as some in Spanish, French, and Portuguese, which we could also evaluate directly ourselves. Clearly English has become increasingly the lingua franca in which we can most easily communicate internationally, but we recognise that this brings limitations, particularly of more local work in less familiar languages.

Chapter four, 'Parallel Strands', explores some related forms of activity, such as audio-visual recording, illness narratives, and memory studies and popular memory movements, which have implications for oral history and life story activity.

Chapter five is also new, a concise and compelling account by Lynn Abrams on 'Transforming Oral History Through Theory'.

Chapter six, 'The Achievement of Oral History', is greatly expanded, surveying both recent and earlier literature from oral history and life stories, worldwide, in terms of themes. This chapter is intended to provide a resource, showing what has been achieved in different fields, and indicating some of the gaps in activity.

Chapters seven and eight survey the development of research about memory as evidence and its psychological impact on the self. Chapter seven, 'Evidence', discusses the research on the reliability of memory as evidence for social and historical research, drawing the full range of interpretations from neuroscience to the social construction of memory. Chapter eight, 'Memory and the Self', explores memory as an aspect of individual identity and introspection and includes a discussion of the effects of damaging and traumatic experience.

Chapters nine to eleven discuss practical issues, including the potential of projects, interviewing, copyright, and confidentiality. In particular chapter nine on 'Projects' incorporates new examples of project work in education, in schools and universities, in communities, and through drama. Chapter ten, 'The Interview', gives a practical discussion of the issues and contexts of the interview, the heart of successful oral history and life stories work. Chapter eleven, 'After the Interview', sets out the latest recommended practices and digital innovations in the sorting and archiving of material.

Finally the book ends with a re-written chapter twelve on 'Interpretation'—on how recorded memories can contribute crucially to the interpretation of histories and societies—and for the first time a unique international bibliography of works significant for oral history and life stories. This again highlights both earlier and most recent notable examples.

In parallel with the chapter texts, we have created a last new feature, a series of boxes, sometimes expanding the chapter arguments, but most often presenting interview extracts taken from the books we have evaluated. The boxes can be read like a parallel sound to the chapters, the resonating richness of true voices from the past.

How did we decide what to evaluate and recommend? A new issue was how far to highlight digital as well as print sources. We see websites as particularly valuable for promoting current projects, and as current archives, but less well suited either to long-term storage, or to sustained social or historical arguments. It is especially problematic that websites keep changing and need regular maintenance, and their platforms can quite quickly become unobtainable. We have therefore focused mainly on digital sources which look likely to prove of long-term value. In selecting which to mention, we have given priority to accessibility and the likelihood of relative permanence. *The Voice of the Past* is meant for oral historians of all kinds, not just academics. Therefore we only refer to websites and journals which through their title are easily and freely accessible through Google or Google Scholar. We do not use the academic DOI system.

In evaluating internet sources, books, and articles we have asked four basic questions. Firstly, we want to know about the project and the interviewees: what was the project's theme and purpose, how many and which people were interviewed, and so on. Secondly, how far was its scope new? Did it explore hidden fields, such as criminality or sex, or record hidden voices, hidden social groups, or hidden aspects of life? Thirdly, how well did it express human experience? Were there substantial quotations from the interviews, and how vivid were they? Lastly, did they offer new interpretations of social change or historical events? How well argued were these re-interpretations? How convincingly did they use the evidence collected to present sustained new interpretations?

For the earlier editions of *The Voice of the Past*, I am especially grateful for comments to Keith Thomas, Geoffrey Hawthorn, Raphael Samuel, Joanna Bornat, Daniel Bertaux, Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame, Luisa Passerini, Ron Grele, Richard Candida Smith, Bill Williams, Colin Bundy, Trevor Lummis, Roy Hay, Michael Winstanley, Gina Harkell, Alun Howkins, Eve Hostetler, William Beinart, Leonore Davidoff, Ken Plummer, Michael Roper, Elizabeth Tonkin, and Natasha Burchardt.

This edition again, but more extensively, draws on crucial support from the international oral history community. We have been especially helped by suggestions and information from Ken Plummer on earlier sociological work, Richard Candida Smith and Linda Shopes on oral history in the United States, Arthur McIvor on Scotland, Steve Humphries on British television, Julia Letts on school projects, Steven Rose on the neurosciences of memory, Riki Van Boeschoten on Greece, James Mark on Eastern Europe, Steve Smith on Russia and China, Steven High on Canada, Paula Hamilton on Australia, Anna Green on New Zealand, Philippe Denis and Sean Field on southern Africa, Gadi BenEzer on Israel, Indira Chowdhury on India, Xun Zhou on China, and Elizabeth Dore and Karen Worcman on Latin America.

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# 1

## History and the Community

### **The social purposes of history**

All history depends ultimately upon its social purpose. This is why in the past it has been handed down by oral tradition and written chronicle, and why today professional historians are supported from public funds, children are taught history in schools, amateur history societies blossom, and popular history books rank among the strongest best-sellers. Sometimes the social purpose of history is obscure. There are academics who pursue fact-finding research on remote problems, avoiding any entanglement with wider interpretations or contemporary issues, insisting only on the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. They have one thing in common with the bland contemporary tourism which exploits the past as if it were another foreign country to escape to: a heritage of buildings and landscape so lovingly cared for that it is almost inhumanly comfortable, purged of social suffering, cruelty, and conflict to the point that even a slavery plantation becomes a positive pleasure. Both look to their incomes free from interference, and in return stir no challenge to the social system.

At the other extreme the social purpose of history can be quite blatant: used to provide justification for war and conquest, territorial seizure, revolution and counter-revolution, the rule of one class or race over another. Where no history is readily at hand, it will be created. South Africa's white rulers divided their urban blacks between tribes and 'homelands'; Welsh nationalists gather at bardic eisteddfods; the Chinese of the Cultural Revolution were urged to construct the new 'four histories' of grass-roots struggle; radical feminists looked to the history of wet-nursing in their search for mothers without maternal instinct.

Between these two extremes are many other purposes, more or less obvious. For politicians the past is a quarry for supportive symbols: imperial victories, martyrs, Victorian values, hunger marches. And almost equally telling are the gaps in the public presentation of history: the long silences in Russia on Trotsky, in Germany and Eastern Europe on the Holocaust, in the Middle East on the Armenian genocide, in France and Britain on their colonial wars, as in Algeria or Kenya.<sup>1</sup>

These multifaceted possibilities are even evident in the potential of oral history for use in development work, one of the new directions of oral history work in the 1990s, which Hugo Slim and I advocated in *Listening for a Change*. In this case historical work only takes place with an explicit social purpose. Nevertheless it can vary fundamentally in perspective. Among refugee peoples, such as the Palestinians or the Guatemalans, the aim of projects has been to help people hold onto and sustain their culture through recording it.

By contrast, the documenting of American Indian traditional hunting and land rights through oral evidence, which has been increasingly used in legal battles, is typically intended to be more actively restorative of a lost past; and likewise the collecting of information on traditional land management techniques in desert regions like the sub-Saharan Sahel. Some oral history projects have also contributed to build new and different futures. Thus migrant Brazilian shantytown dwellers have drawn on oral memory, not to recover the past, but to win the confidence to mobilise and demand recognition of their new landholdings and campaign for basic city services, such as water and electricity. Because they are concerned with the needs of their new settlements, their projects focus much more on the moral dynamic of change through migration, including mythologised justifications of their present tenure.<sup>2</sup>

In such diverse ways, through history ordinary people seek to understand the upheavals and changes which they experience in their own lives: wars, social transformations like the changing position of youth, technological changes like the end of steam power or the advent of digitisation and social media, or personal migration to a new community. Family history especially can give an individual a strong sense of a much longer personal lifespan, which will even survive their own death. Through local history a village or town seeks meaning for its own changing character.

Sometimes this kind of history can become a negative defence against change: Jeanette Edwards in *Born and Bred* (2000), her portrait of the former shoemaking small town of Bacup, vividly describes how a local upbringing and knowing local history are inextricably bound up with a sense of identity and belonging which excludes incomers. But in many communities it is newcomers who gain a sense of roots through involvement in local history. And it is through political and social history taught in schools that children are helped to understand, and accept, how the political and social system under which they live came about, and how force and conflict have played, and continue to play, their part in that evolution.

The challenge of oral history lies partly in relation to this essential social purpose of history. This is a major reason why it has so excited some historians, and so frightened others. In fact, fear of oral history as such is groundless. We shall see later that the use of interviews as a source by professional historians is longstanding and perfectly compatible with scholarly standards. It is not tied to a single political perspective. American experience shows clearly enough that the

oral history method can be regularly used in a socially and politically conservative manner. For example, at the Billy Graham Center they have been recording the history of religion from an evangelical perspective since 1978; and oral history recording was pushed as far as sympathy with Fascism for John Toland's portrait *Adolf Hitler* (1976).

In the 1970s, in fact, there was quite a sharp difference in the typical community oral history practice between the United States and Britain. British local oral history work grew out of a long radical tradition, from the working-class autodidacts of the nineteenth century to the pioneering early-twentieth-century work of the Women's Institutes and the Workers' Educational Association classes—whose tutors notably included the socialist historian Edward Thompson. British sponsorship originally came from educational sources. Between 1973 and 1988 many projects were funded by the government's Manpower Services Commission, which was seeking to reduce unemployment by skills training, an awkward but productive source. Since 1997 these projects have been strongly supported primarily for their social value by the national Heritage Lottery Fund. But in the United States there has been much less of a tradition of national or state support, with the notable exception of Kentucky. American community oral history projects have always relied much more on local business sponsorship.

Thus the influence of sponsorship can be one reason why oral history is not necessarily an instrument for change. Moreover, in practice its method is based on awakening people's consciousness and strengthening pride in their own experience and identity, rather than radically challenging their attitudes.<sup>3</sup> And clearly its impact depends upon the spirit in which it is used. But oral history certainly can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry. It can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside. And in the writing of history—whether in books, or museums, or radio and film—it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.

### **The transforming impact of oral memories**

Until the present century, the focus of history was essentially political: a documentation of the struggle for power, in which the lives of ordinary people, or the workings of the economy or religion, were given little attention except in times of crisis, such as the Reformation, the English Civil War, or the French Revolution. Historical time was divided up by reigns and dynasties. Even local history was concerned with the administration of the hundred and parish rather than the day-to-day life of the community and the street. This was partly because historians, who themselves then belonged to the administering and governing classes, thought that this was what mattered most. They had developed no interest in the point of view of the labourer, unless he was specifically troublesome;



nor—being men—would they have wished to inquire into the changing life experiences of women.

But even if they had wished to write a different kind of history, it would have been far from easy, for the raw material from which history was written, the documents, had been kept or destroyed by people with the same priorities. The more personal, local, and unofficial a document, the less likely it was to survive. Thus, despite the key economic role of the colonial slavery plantations, the only personal documentation which survives is either from the slave-owning classes, or from the rare autobiographies of ex-slaves. The voices of the thousands still in slavery were never recorded. The very power structure worked as a great documentary machine shaping the past in its own image.

In Britain this remained true even after the establishment of local record offices and archives. Registers of births and marriages, minutes of councils and the administration of poor relief and welfare, national and local newspapers, schoolteachers' log books, and legal records of all kinds, are kept in quantity. Very often there are also church archives and accounts and other books from large private firms and landed estates, and even private correspondence from the ruling landowner class. But of the innumerable postcards, letters, diaries, and ephemera of working-class men and women, or the papers of small businesses like corner shops or hill farmers, for example, very little has been preserved anywhere.

Consequently, even as the scope of history has widened, the original political and administrative focus has remained. Where ordinary people have been brought in, it has been generally as statistical aggregates derived from some earlier administrative investigation. Thus economic history is constructed around three types of source: aggregate rates of wages, prices, and unemployment; national and international political interventions into the economy and the information which arises from these; and studies of particular trades and industries, depending on the bigger and more successful firms for records of individual enterprises. Similarly, labour history for long consisted of studies on the one hand of the relationship between the working classes and the state in general, and on the other of particular but essentially institutional accounts of trade unions and working-class political organisations. And, inevitably, it is the larger and more successful organisations which normally leave records or commission their own histories.

Social history has remained especially concerned with legislative and administrative developments like the rise of the welfare state; or with aggregate data such as population size, birth rates, age at marriage, and household and family structure. And among more recent historical specialisms, demography has been almost exclusively concerned with aggregates; the history of the family, despite some ambitious but mostly ill-judged attempts to break through to a history of emotion and feeling, has tended to follow the lines of conventional

social history; while for many years even women's history to a remarkable extent focused on the political struggle for civil equality, and above all for the vote.

There are, of course, important exceptions in each of these fields, which show that different approaches are possible even with the existing sources. And there is a remarkable amount of unexploited personal and ordinary information even in official records—such as court documents—which can be used in new ways. The continuing pattern of historical writing probably reflects the priorities of the majority of the profession—even if no longer of the ruling class itself—in an age of bureaucracy, state power, science, and statistics. Nevertheless, it remains true that to write any other kind of history from documentary sources remains a very difficult task, requiring special ingenuity. It is indicative of the situation that Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and James Hinton's *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (1973) each depended to a large extent on reports by paid government informers, in the early nineteenth-century and First World War, respectively. When socialist historians are reduced to writing history from the records of government spies, the constraints imposed are clearly extreme. We cannot, alas, interview tombstones, but at least for the twentieth century onwards the use of oral history immediately provides a rich and varied source for the creative historian.

In the most general sense, once the life experience of people of all kinds can be used as its raw material, a new dimension is given to history. Oral history provides a source quite similar in character to published autobiography, but much wider in scope. If you are searching for sources for a particular place, an event, or an organisation like a church or a trade union, you will be very lucky to find published autobiographies from outside a restricted group of local or organisational leaders, and even then they may well give little or no attention to the point at issue. Oral historians, by contrast, may choose precisely whom to interview and what to ask about. The interview will provide, too, a means of discovering written documents and photographs which would not have otherwise been traced. The confines of the scholar's world are no longer the well-thumbed volumes of the old catalogue or the desk-bound searches of the internet catalogues. Oral historians can think now as if they themselves were publishers: imagine what evidence is needed, seek it out, and capture it.

For most existing kinds of history, probably the critical effect of this new approach is to allow evidence from a new direction. The historian of working-class politics can juxtapose the statements of the government or the trade union headquarters with the voice of the rank and file—both apathetic and militant. There can be no doubt that this should make for a more realistic reconstruction of the past. Reality is complex and many-sided; and it is a primary merit of oral history that, to a much greater extent than most sources, it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be re-created. But this advantage is important not just for the writing of history.

Most historians make implicit or explicit judgements—quite properly, since the social purpose of history demands an understanding of the past which relates directly or indirectly to the present. Modern professional historians are less open with their social message than Macaulay or Marx, since scholarly standards are seen to conflict with declared bias. But the social message is usually present, however obscured. It is quite easy for a historian to give most attention and quotations to those social leaders whom he or she admires, without giving any direct opinion of their own. Since the nature of most existing records is to reflect the standpoint of authority, it is not surprising that the judgement of history has more often than not vindicated the wisdom of the powers that be. Oral history by contrast makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated. It provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account. In so doing, oral history has radical implications for the social message of history as a whole.

At the same time, oral history implies for most kinds of history some shift of focus. Thus the educational historian becomes concerned with the experiences of children and students as well as the problems of teachers and administrators. The military and naval historian can look beyond command-level strategy and equipment to the conditions, recreations, and morale of other ranks and the lower deck. The social historian can turn from bureaucrats and politicians to poverty itself, and learn how the pre-welfare-state poor saw relieving officers and how they survived their refusals to provide assistance. The political historian can approach the voter at home and at work, and can hope to understand even the working-class conservative, who produced no newspapers or organisations for investigation. The economist can watch both employer and worker as social beings and at their ordinary work, and so come closer to understanding the typical economic process, and its successes and contradictions.

In some fields, oral history can result not merely in a shift in focus, but also in the opening up of important new areas of inquiry. Labour historians, for example, are enabled for the first time to undertake effective studies of the ill-unionised majority of male workers, of women workers, and of the normal experience of work and its impact on the family and the community. They are no longer confined to those trades which were unionised, or those which gained contemporary publicity and investigation because of strikes or extreme poverty. Feminist historians have been able to explore how gender differences permeate social life, or the importance of women's work in the home as well as outside it, or the active roles which women have played as labour organisers, or in political struggle and in war.<sup>4</sup>

Urban historians similarly can turn from well-explored problem areas like the slums to look at other typical forms of urban social life—the small industrial or market town, for example, or the middle-class suburb—to construct the local patterns of social distinctions, mutual help between neighbours and

kin, leisure, and work. They can even approach from the inside the history of migrants—a type of history which has become crucially important worldwide, but often first documented only from outside as a social problem. These opportunities—and many others—are shared by social historians: the study of working-class leisure and culture, for example, or of crime from the point of view of the ordinary, often undetected and socially semi-tolerated poacher, shoplifter, or work-pilferer.

Perhaps the most striking feature of all, however, is the transforming impact of oral history upon the history of the family. Without its evidence, the historian can discover very little indeed about either the ordinary family's contacts with neighbours and kin, or its internal relationships. The roles of husband and wife, the upbringing of girls and boys, emotional and material conflicts and dependence, the struggle of youth for independence, courtship, sexual behaviour within and outside marriage, contraception, and abortion—all these have been effectively secret areas. The only clues were to be gleaned from aggregate statistics, and from a few (usually partial) observers. The historical paucity which results—a lop-sided, empty frame—is well summed up in Michael Anderson's brilliant, speculative, but abstract study of *Family Structure in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (1971).

With the use of interviewing, it is now possible to develop a much fuller history of the family over the last ninety years, and to establish its main patterns and changes over time, and from place to place, during the life cycle and between the sexes. The history of childhood as a whole becomes practicable for the first time. And given the dominance of the family through housework, domestic service, and motherhood in the lives of most women, an almost equivalent broadening of scope is brought to the history of women.

In all these fields of history, by introducing new evidence from the underside, by shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgements of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored, a cumulative process of transformation is set in motion. The scope of historical writing itself is enlarged and enriched, and at the same time its social message changes. History becomes, to put it simply, more democratic. The chronicle of kings and queens has taken into its concern the life experience of ordinary people. But there is another dimension to this change, of equal importance. The process of writing history changes along with the content. The use of oral evidence breaks through the barriers between the chroniclers and their audience, between the educational institution and the outside world.<sup>5</sup>

This change springs from the essentially creative and co-operative nature of the oral history method. Of course oral evidence once recorded can and indeed should be used by lone scholars in libraries just like any other type of documentary source. But to be content with this is to lose a key advantage of the method: its flexibility, the ability to pin down evidence just where it is needed. Once historians start to interview they find themselves inevitably working with

others—at the least, with their informants. And to be a successful interviewer a new set of skills is needed, including an understanding of human relationships. Some people can find these skills almost immediately, others need to learn them; but in contrast to the cumulative process of learning and amassing information which gives such advantage in documentary analysis and interpretation to the professional historian well on in life, it is possible to learn quite quickly to become an effective interviewer. Hence historians as field-workers, while in important respects retaining the advantages of professional knowledge, also find themselves away from their desks, sharing experience on a human level.

### **Co-operation in project work**

Because of these characteristics, oral history is peculiarly suited to project work, both for groups and for individual student enterprises: in schools, universities, colleges, adult education, or community centres. In Britain, increasing rigidity in state educational curriculum policies since the late 1980s has made project work more difficult to realise, so that today the possibilities are more likely to be experienced elsewhere, and the best English-language school teaching handbooks are produced in the United States. But in principle, oral history can be carried out anywhere. In any part of any country there is an abundance of topics which can be studied locally: the history of a local industry or craft, social relationships in a particular community, culture and dialect, change in the gender roles at work or in the family, the impact of wars and strikes, and so on. An oral history project will be certainly feasible. It will also demonstrate very well, especially if the project focuses on the historical roots of some contemporary concern, the relevance of historical study to the immediate environment.

In schools, projects on children's own family history have been developed which provide an effective way of linking the children's own environment with a wider past. Family history has two other special educational merits. It assists a child-centred approach, for it uses as the project's basis the children's own knowledge of their family and kin and their access to photographs, old letters and documents, newspaper cuttings, and memories. Equally, family history encourages the involvement of parents in school activity.

A child's own family history represents perhaps the simplest type of project subject. It is more suited to suggesting than to solving a historical problem. Older groups are likely to choose some issue of more collective interest. At Corpus Christi College, Oxford, for example, Brian Harrison led a group of his students in a small research study on the history of college servants, a group of workers whose old-fashioned deferential respect for their employers, loyalty, meticulousness in their craft, and formality of dress and manner were understandably perplexing to most students today. Through the project they came to a better understanding of the college servants (and vice versa) and at the same time of the significance of history itself. As one commented: 'I found equally important and interesting . . . seeing the impact of social change in really close

detail . . . how changes in the general social environment changed the style of life, values, and relationships within a traditional community.<sup>6</sup>

The immediate environment also gains, through the sense of discovery in interviews, a vivid historical dimension: an awareness of the past which is not just known, but personally felt. This is especially true for a newcomer to a community or district. It is one thing to know that streets or fields around a home had a past before one's own arrival; it is quite different to have received from the remembered past, still alive in the minds of the older people of the place, personal intimacies of love across those particular fields, neighbours and homes in that particular street, work in that particular shop.

Such fragmentary facts are not merely evocative in themselves, but can be used as the raw material for worthwhile history. It is possible for even a single university or college student in a summer vacation project, with interviews, to make a useful extension of historical knowledge, and also to create new resources which others may be able to use later. With a group project the opportunities naturally enlarge. The number of interviews can be greater, the archival searches more extensive, the subject more ambitious.

The group project has some special characteristics of its own. Instead of the atmosphere of competition common in education, it requires a spirit of intellectual co-operation. Isolated reading, examinations, and lecture sessions give way to collaborative historical research. The joint inquiry will also bring teachers and students into a much closer, less hierarchical relationship, giving far more chance of informal contact between them. Their dependence will become mutual. The teacher may bring special experience in interpretation and in knowledge of existing sources, but will rely on the support of the students as organisers and field-workers. In these ways some of the students are likely to show unexpected skills. The best essay-writer is not necessarily the best interviewer—nor is the teacher. A much more equal situation is created. But, paradoxically, at the same time, by resolving—or at least suspending—the conflict between research and teaching, it enables the teacher to be a better professional. The group project is both research and teaching, inextricably mixed, and as a result each is done more effectively.

The essential value of both group and single projects is, however, similar. Students can share in the excitements and satisfactions of creative historical research of intrinsic worth. At the same time they gain personal experience of the difficulties of such work. They formulate an interpretation or theory and then find exceptional facts which are difficult to explain away. They find that the people whom they interview do not fit easily into the social types presented by the preliminary reading. They need evidence from facts, or people, or records which proves tantalisingly elusive. They encounter the problems of bias, contradiction, and interpretation in evidence. Above all, they are brought back from the grand patterns of written history to the awkwardly individual human lives which are its basis.

Both kinds of project also have the important consequence of taking education out of its institutional retreats into the world. Both sides gain from this. Interviewing can bring together people from different social classes and age groups who would otherwise rarely meet, let alone get to know each other closely. Much of the common hostility to students is based on little knowledge of what they are actually like or do, and these meetings can bring an appreciation of the serious-mindedness and idealism which is widespread among them. They can also show ordinary people that history need not be irrelevant to their own lives. Conversely, teachers and students can become more directly aware of the image which they present to the wider public. And through entering into the lives of their informants, they gain more understanding of values which they do not share, and often respect for the courage shown in lives much less privileged than their own.

Yet the nature of the interview implies a breaking of the boundary between the educational institution and the world, between the professional and the ordinary public, more fundamental than this. For the historian comes to the interview to learn: to sit at the feet of others who, because they come from a different social class, or are less educated, or are older, know more about something. The reconstruction of history itself becomes a much more widely collaborative process, in which non-professionals must play a critical part. By giving a central place in its writing and presentation to people of all kinds, history gains immensely. And older people especially benefit too. An oral history project can not only bring new social contacts and lasting friendships; it can render them an inestimable service. Too often ignored, feeling their skills are no longer valued, they can be given a new dignity, a sense of purpose, in going back over their lives and transmitting valuable information to a younger generation.

### **Oral history in public settings and broadcasting**

The changes made possible through oral history are not confined to the writing of books or projects. They also affect the presentation of history in museums, public archives, and libraries. These all now have a means of infusing life into their collections, and through this, of bringing themselves into a more active relationship with their community. They can set up their own research projects, such as Birmingham's early projects on the city's baths and washhouses and Southampton's on its West Indian port community, or the Imperial War Museum programmes on early aviation and on conscientious objectors.

In the 1970s and 1980s many British museums were among sponsors of oral history projects giving short-term work to young unemployed people through the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), in a way that recalls the Federal Writers' Projects of the New Deal era in the United States. The Jewish Museum at Manchester was an outcome of the Manchester Studies oral history programme launched by Bill Williams from the then Manchester Polytechnic, which



stimulated the city's Jewish community to save a closed Victorian synagogue. This became a permanent museum. Here you could find an early combination of visual and audio display: you could lift a phone and listen to memories relating to the objects on show. In a similar innovation, at Erddig, a National Trust house in Cheshire, visitors were re-routed to enter through the servants' quarters, to the overhead sound of the voices of the last generation of servants and their masters. Today such effects are most often incorporated into portable audio guides provided for visitors, so that whether in a house or an exhibition, you can switch on the commentary as you move round.

Oral history research can also help bring the display itself closer to the historical original. The 'period setting' for objects is replaced by the reconstruction of a real room, like the migrant family's 'West Indian front room' shown for an exhibition at London's Geffrye Museum, or more typically a craft workshop with tools and shavings and half-made baskets or pots left about as if the craft worker were still using it. Indeed, especially in Scandinavia, in some museums it will still be regularly used, most famously in Stockholm's reconstructed island village of Skansen. When local people see this kind of museum, they are likely to have comments, and may even help with improvements by offering articles of their own. In one lively East London museum, attendants who heard this kind of conversation would alert a curator, and the visitors would immediately be offered a cup of tea and a chance to record some of their impressions on the spot.

As in most community projects, some of the recordings can be used to make educational programmes for use in local schools, and weekends have been arranged for the schoolchildren—normally older school students—to meet some of the people recorded for the project. Thus an active dialogue develops between the older generation and their own local history, and a museum which has become a social centre. Here is a model of a social role for history with great potential, which needs to be taken up elsewhere.

### **Historical voices in broadcasting**

The use of interviewing for historical presentation in broadcasting is of course long-standing. Here indeed is a fine tradition of oral history techniques of evoking history through the use of raw material, some of it dating from the original period, some recorded retrospectively. For the historian of the future the preservation of many of these programmes, along with others in the BBC Sound Archives, will provide a rich source. It is by contrast very unfortunate that at present only a small proportion of what has been broadcast on television is being preserved. Undoubtedly the most remarkable broadcasting contributions to the archives come from radio. Following the death of Studs Terkel, the most internationally famous radio oral historian, WFMT radio, his station, and the Chicago History Museum have combined to set up the online Studs Terkel Radio Archive, which will eventually make available more than five thousand



interviews with activists, artists, and working people, recorded between 1952 and 1998. In Britain a similarly ambitious initiative was the nationally coordinated millennial local radio series that created the Millennium Memory Bank, bringing together an unprecedentedly large set of more than six thousand thematic life story interviews from right across the country, available through the British Library.

In historical broadcasting it is the introduction of people, the original actors, which brings the programmes alive. Charles Parker's *Radio Ballads* produced from Birmingham with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger in 1958–63, along with *Singing the Fishing*, and his series on miners, *The Big Hewer*, all combining interview extracts with folk music, were for many years an inspirational example. Some local radio stations have deliberately used this type of programme to encourage links and exchanges with their local community, through programmes of voices stimulating listeners to send in their own comments and offering to be interviewed in turn. The *Making of Modern London* series on London Weekend Television in the 1980s was linked with a competition for projects by viewers themselves, for which local schools and older people's centres as well as individuals entered.

But perhaps the most impressive broadcasting experiment has been in Sweden. Here Bengt Jansson was able to organise through Swedish educational television a series on social change (*Bygd i förvandling*), concentrating on two regions of the country, where seven hundred local discussion circles were set up in association with the programmes, bringing together, in all, eighty thousand people to join in exchanging their own experience of history in a lifetime.

Although television seems a much more remote medium than local radio, perhaps partly because it is daunting for an older person to be interviewed for it, I have been repeatedly impressed by how much care the best producers take in the human relationship with those whom they film. I saw this especially when working on the BBC's series *The Nineties*, for which all the participants were aged ninety or over. This sensitivity was especially led by the example of Stephen Peet, whose pioneering oral history programme *Yesterday's Witness* ran from 1969 until 1981. He would get his interviewees to look into the camera, and did this by crouching underneath the camera lens. In this way viewers could feel they were being spoken to directly, giving an authority and authenticity to the witness. He was a particular inspiration for the work of Steve Humphries and Testimony Films over the last twenty-five years. Probably the most remarkable of their television series was *A Secret World of Sex*, with old people comfortably breaking through once forceful taboos to speak of their early sexual experiences.<sup>7</sup>

Television can also evoke a direct and especially powerful response from its audience. An example of this is a BBC oral history documentary by Testimony Films on experiences of sexual abuse in the punitive Catholic Magdalen homes for unmarried mothers and other disapproved young women. Abuse in the

homes had until then been an unspoken matter in Ireland, but the telephone helpline which was provided following the broadcasts was overwhelmed by hundreds of calls from the Republic.

Television and film can bring history to far greater audiences than any other medium: internationally, millions have watched films like *Roots* or *Shoah*. In Britain *The Secret World of Sex* attracted up to six million viewers. Today Piers Morgan's ITV series of *Life Stories* has a big following. There is a parallel radio series on BBC Radio 4, *In the Psychiatrist's Chair*, again mainly recording known subjects. But television programmes differ from radio artistically in that they have to hold an audience with a speaker's physical presence as well as voice, and this makes them much more selective mediums in terms of whom they can present as witnesses. They also suffer from the recurrent problem that a series of interwoven interviews easily becomes visually repetitive, and—despite vivid moments—lacks dramatic action. When available, old film is most often used to provide an effective contrast, and also to cover breaks when a cut is made in the original recording.

### **Reminiscence in drama and in health**

With television and radio most programmes have a professional presenter, and always the control remains in the hands of the producer. With drama there is more room for experiment. The most sustained reminiscence drama group was London's Age Exchange Theatre, founded in 1983 and led by Pam Schweitzer. They started by recording group memory sessions on themes of concern to the participants and from the transcripts of the sessions developed the scheme of the drama. They consulted with the group who were recorded, and sometimes encouraged members to try acting, but usually the presentation was by professional actors. They successfully made more than thirty productions.<sup>8</sup> There are other long-standing regional groups with a similar approach, such as Eastern Angles in East Anglia. Some drama groups have been more explicitly political, such as the Labor Theater Project, which celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Flint Sit-Down Strike in Michigan. Other projects focused on breaking down the divisions between producers, actors, and audience. Thus Elyse Dodgson developed work with London schools which was based on the Royal Court Young People's Theatre, with children gathering material from their own families and then producing a joint performance.

In a similar spirit, Angela Hewins' *The Dillen* (1981) movingly records the life of George Hewins, a man who wrote with difficulty yet had a rare gift for words in telling his story, brought up as an orphan by his grandmother in a common lodging-house, struggling for a living as a casual labourer, cruelly maimed in the trenches in the First World War. It was produced as a play by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-on-Avon, with a core of professional actors supported by 150 local volunteers, who made their own costumes, and included a band; and the actual performance left the theatre itself to move round the

town, stopping for scenes in a park, a building site, by the river, and on a disused rail track. Each night a crowd who soon outnumbered the original audience would gather and follow, and in the fairground atmosphere of the interval out in the meadows you could listen to groups of them exchanging their own memories of just these same places. After the shattering First World War scenes, huddled into a military tent, the performance would culminate in a torch-lit peace procession of actors, audience, and bystanders, by now seven hundred strong, back into the town.

Sometimes oral history projects may call their material ‘stories’, and certainly storytelling is crucial to reminiscence drama. It is also at the heart of oral history activities whose main purpose is to help older people through ‘reminiscence work’ or ‘reminiscence therapy’. A very early recognition of this is in Barbara Myerhoff’s touching description in *Number Our Days* (1978) of how she listened to participants telling their stories in a Jewish Old People’s Center in Venice, California, and the success of her ‘Living History’ class there. Since then it has been increasingly recognised by specialists on ageing on both sides of the Atlantic that reminiscing may be one important way in which people keep their sense of self in a changing world. More remarkably, group memory sessions can be used to rekindle the spirit of the acutely withdrawn and depressed, and even as a form of treatment for people suffering from depression or dementia. The ‘Recall’ reminiscence tape and slide kit created by a team at Help the Aged with oral historian Joanna Bornat has sparked a growing movement among professionals caring for older people.<sup>9</sup> A more recent development is websites like Healthtalk, a medically led source which provides patients’ accounts of experiencing particular diseases. There is also a Scottish mental health movement project which supports patients through recording accounts of their problems—ironically named ‘Oor Mad History’.

The possibility of using history for such a constructive social and personal purpose comes from the intrinsic nature of the oral approach. It is about individual lives—and any life is of interest. And it depends upon speech, not upon the much more demanding and restricted skill of writing. Moreover, the audio recorder not only allows history to be taken down in spoken words but also to be presented through them. In a ‘Recall’ sound and photo show, or a museum demonstration of craft techniques, or a historical talk, the use of an audio clip of a human voice—fresh, personal, particular—always brings the past into the present with extraordinary immediacy. The words may be idiosyncratically phrased, but all the more expressive for that. They breathe life into history.

Something more is to be learnt from them than mere content. Recordings demonstrate the rich ability of people of all walks of life to express themselves. George Ewart Evans has shown in his many books how the dialect of the East Anglian farm labourer, long scorned by the county landowning class for its notable inarticulacy, carries a Chaucerian grammatical and expressive strength which is hard to equal in conventional English. And this kind of discovery has

been shared by oral historians wherever they have worked. The recorder has allowed the speech of ordinary people and their narrative skills to be seriously understood for the first time.

Educationists a few years ago, under the influence of Basil Bernstein, were assuming that working-class speech was a fatal handicap, a constraint which imprisoned all but the simplest types of thought. But with the help of tape recorders, the magazine *Language and Class Workshop* was able to challenge Bernstein's theories with published transcripts; and in America 'urban folklore' has become an accepted literary genre. However, it may well be a long time before such re-evaluations reach general acceptance. Meanwhile, one of the key social contributions which can be made by the oral historian, whether in projects or through bringing direct quotation into written history, is to help give ordinary people confidence in their own speech.

### **Digging where you stand: Historians and the community**

In the same spirit, the development of local oral history has led to a radical questioning of the fundamental relationship between historians and the community. Historical information need not be taken away from the community for interpretation and presentation by the professional historian. Through oral history the community can, and should, be given the confidence to write its own history.

Some of the most interesting ventures in this direction have again come from Sweden, particularly through the role of the Swedish state exhibition organisation in encouraging local self-help exhibitions, and Sven Lindqvist's book *Grav där du står* (*Dig Where You Stand*, 1978) which has provided a practical manual for workers to write the histories of their own workplaces—from their own standpoint, rather than that of employers and shareholders—combining both documentary and oral sources.

The full possibilities of the approach were, however, still more strikingly revealed in Poland. It is true that the audio recorder had been slower to make its impact there, so that the life history movement, which dates back to a 'humanistic' tradition in Polish sociology established between the wars, still works through the encouragement of written autobiographical memoirs rather than oral testimony. No doubt this limits who can participate in it. Nevertheless, after 1945 memoir-writing became an important form of popular self-expression in Poland, allowing discussion not only of pre-war society and the experience of Nazi occupation, but also of the radical social reconstruction which took place under subsequent Communist rule.

The key to this success was the use of memoir competitions, organised by the national newspapers and radio, and by local newspapers in every big city. Broad themes were set, and quite substantial prizes offered, two or three times a year. Each competition normally attracted a thousand or more entries. The best results were serialised in newspapers, and published as collections in book

form. By now several hundred thousand Poles have entered competitions, and a special national archive has been developed for the material collected. Popular memoir-writing, in short, became a recognised part of the new national way of life, to an extent which had few parallels either in other Communist countries or in the West. The closest is the use of life story competitions, which has been an impressively systematic aspect of the Swedish national museums and educational service. The emphasis in Scandinavian life story work—which is partly written, partly oral—is as much on the resourcefulness with which people cope with the complexities of the present as of the past. Marianne Gullestad has nicely summed up the approach in her book on a competition which she organised in Norway, *Everyday Life Philosophers* (1996).

The Polish success in generating a form for democratic enthusiasm for history also led on to the forming of collective memoir-writing groups at some of the big factories, mines, and steelworks. A sociologist might launch the initial meeting, and help with suggesting themes and later with the publication of books produced by the group, but the essential dynamic was provided by the commitment of the group members. Where else could you have found co-operative groups of industrial workers, up to two hundred in number, helping to correct and enlarge their own life history drafts through coming together regularly, after work, for two-hour discussion meetings?

A similar hope inspired some of the relatively small British co-operative local oral history groups which have issued cheaply produced broadsheets and pamphlets of transcribed extracts from recordings, adult education local history projects, and joint projects between oral historians and trade unionists. The springing up of such groups in every major city was indeed one of the most striking early features of the oral history movement: in London alone, the 1985 Exploring Living Memory exhibition held in the Festival Hall attracted 100,000 visitors in a fortnight, infusing it with a constant hubbub of talking as they saw and discussed the work of ninety projects from local history and publishing groups, hospitals and care centres, and schools from across the capital.

Among them, perhaps the most radical model was provided by the People's Autobiography of Hackney. This arose from a group, originally connected with the WEA (Workers' Educational Association), which met in the 1970s in a local book and community centre called Centreprise. Members of the group varied in age from their teens to their seventies, but all lived in or near Hackney in East London. Their occupations were very mixed. The group was an open one, brought together by notices in the local papers, libraries, and other places. Any member could record anyone else. At the group meetings they played and discussed their tapes—sometimes also recording these discussions—and planned ways of sharing what was collected with a Hackney audience. For this reason they especially emphasised publishing and issued a series of cheap pamphlets, assisted by a local library subsidy, based on transcriptions and

written accounts of people's lives, which have had a large local circulation. The group also collected photographs, and combined this material as tapes and slides for historical presentations to audiences in the community—another way of giving back to people their own history, showing them it was valued, and stimulating their own contributions. The People's Autobiography thus aimed, on the one hand, to build up through a series of individual accounts a composite history of life and work in Hackney, and, on the other, to give people confidence in their own memories and interpretations of the past, their ability to contribute to the writing of history—confidence, too, in their own words: in short, in themselves.<sup>10</sup>

This is one of many different paths by which oral historians have sought to give support to ordinary people. Thus education projects seek to give people confidence in their own experience. The feminist revival has been paralleled by the flourishing of women's oral history. Other projects address health problems. Many projects focus on memories of a particular place. A few, like the Museu da Pessoa in Brazil and Storycorps in America, have sent travelling recording booths around the country. City-based projects often document the stories of migrants and their cultures, hoping both to give respect and pride to the migrant inheritance, and also more mutual understanding with the host population. There are substantial projects aiming to support survivors of trauma, whether of the Holocaust, the Partition of India, the Bosnian massacres, or civil war in Somalia.<sup>11</sup>

Yet other projects are more openly political, celebrating the struggles of the labour movement and trade unions, and the later subsequent pains of closure and unemployment in Steven High's *Corporate Wasteland* (2007); or campaigns against homophobia, racism, and the civil rights movement. McSweeney's Books in San Francisco publishes a Voice of Witness series, collections of testimonies aimed to highlight human rights crises: from wrongly convicted Americans, women prisoners, and New Orleans victims of Hurricane Katrina, to Sudanese refugees sold as slaves and child soldiers in Burma. The series editors are a writer, Dave Eggers, and a human rights physician, Lola Vollen.

#### FROM REFUGEE TO CHILD SLAVE: CIVIL WAR IN SUDAN

*How do 'disaster stories' relate to oral history? McSweeney's has published a striking series of testimonies of recent disaster experiences, from hurricanes to civil wars. Some oral historians, including the Columbia University centre, have moved into this field. We would argue that such memories need a time dimension to be regarded as oral history. This might come from recording the interviewee's life before the disaster or for a period—hopefully a decade or more—after it. Some striking examples of disaster testimonies that are also oral history life stories are given by Craig Walzer in his book on refugee peoples in the Sudan.*

*Abuk Bak Macham (1975), a Dinka from South Sudan, recalls the start of civil war in 1983. This is a vivid oral history memory of disaster earlier in her life:*

We were playing in my yard outside the house. It was in the morning, around noontime. We were playing, and we heard gunfire. Suddenly we heard people running and guns being shot. They set fire to the houses, and we all ran in different directions. We didn't know where to go. The children were screaming, and the people were being shot and killed. Mostly they killed the men; when they saw men, they shot them right away. My father was running; he hid and I didn't see him, but I thought at that time that he had been killed. I didn't have any idea because they shot a lot of people, all men. The militiamen wore a *jallabiya*, a long robe, and something on their head. They spoke Arabic. Some had light skin, but some had dark. Some of them looked like us. They came with horses, all running with horses. They came by groups, like a hundred or two hundred, village to village.

People said the Arabs were taking control in the South. We had heard that they had come to other towns to take cows and other valuable things. The people were fighting; we were all Christian, and they are Muslim . . . We thought that people from the North came to the South for business. In my village, we didn't have sugar or tea. People used to come for business, to bring sugar, tea, and such things to South Sudan. We didn't have money but we paid them by trade, with things we grew . . . Then they came back to kill us, to set fire to the houses and kill the men and take the cows . . .

*But her narrative then evolves into a powerful life story of her new life after the original violent disaster:*

They took us. The Arab militia took the women and children . . . They grabbed us and tied us all together by the neck, with a rope. We walked. We didn't know where they were taking us . . . They gave us no food or water, nothing. It was very hot . . . I thought we would die.

We walked north. I didn't know where we were going, but when we arrived there, we heard that they called it Ad-Da'ein. When we got there, they put us in a big place that looked like a market. They sold horses there, food and spices, anything a market sells. It was a small town, and we weren't in the jungle any more. We were in the desert . . . All the people there were Arabs, and all wearing *jallabiyas* . . .

The men that captured us went to talk to the people who were in the market. They came and called us one by one: 'You need to go with this person . . .' When someone came and called you, you couldn't



say no, because they could kill you . . . A man named Mohammed Adam put me on a camel and tied up my hands. I didn't see him pay for me, but he was talking with the people who brought us . . .

Mohammed Adam took me to his house. When I got to that place they made me a slave. Mohammed Adam had a wife, Fatima, and two children, and his house was different than the houses in my village; it was like a big tent, something they could move, but they never moved when I was there. In the day, Mohammed Adam went into town . . . Fatima didn't work or go anywhere. . . .

I worked from morning until night. I didn't speak Arabic, only Dinka, so Mohammed Adam pointed and showed me how to do things. I cleaned the floors and took care of the cows all day. I carried water on my head from the well. It took twenty minutes to go to the well, and they would tell me to come right back. I couldn't run away. I couldn't. I didn't know how . . . I was twelve years old. When he called me, the only word I heard was '*abeeda, abeeda*'. That means slave . . .

When I wasn't working I would just sit. I would sit in one spot and the family would sit in another . . . They gave me leftovers when they finished eating. They just threw some flatbread down or left a bowl of soup. Sometimes I ate. Sometimes I was sad and angry, so I didn't really feel hunger . . .

I slept in the kitchen, in a small place on the floor. They just put some dirty clothes down, and I slept on them. I didn't have any clothes of my own, really . . . I didn't think about clothes; I thought about my family . . . Sometimes I cried all day and all night . . . I was with Muhammed Adam for ten years, and I didn't meet anyone else from South Sudan during that time . . .

They were religious people. They taught the children the Koran, and I saw them call the children to sit down together and pray. They tried to teach me the Koran, too . . . They taught me to wash my hands and feet in the Islamic way . . . When I was twenty and I was grown up, Mohammed Adam tried to rape me. One night he came and grabbed me. When I said no and pushed him off, he stabbed me with a knife in my right leg. I started crying, and he left. He was worried about his wife. He was a religious man, and she would have been angry about it if she had found out. I thought maybe the next time he would kill me. I said to myself, 'No more.' I started running. I said, 'Maybe God is with me and I can run' . . . My leg was bleeding, but I ran, and ran, and ran.



Other post-disaster projects followed the 9/11 attacks in New York. The vast 'September 11 Digital Archive', launched by simply asking users to 'share their story', is now housed by the Library of Congress; and a major oral history project was led by Mary Marshall Clark from the Columbia Center for Oral History. She discusses it in an edited volume, *Listening on the Edge*, which includes reflections by earlier well-known oral historians on interviewing in socially and politically difficult contexts.<sup>12</sup> In Latin America, oral historians document the fight against military coups and dictatorships, and the struggles of the Indian peasantry. In Australia and North America oral historians support struggles for the land rights of indigenous peoples.

Particularly remarkable is the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up by the post-apartheid government in South Africa in the hope that making public accounts of victimisation and appeals for amnesty in a court-like setting would help to mitigate the bitterness created by many decades of racism, and allow the country to move forward. As Archbishop Tutu put it, 'You can only be human in a humane society. If you live with hatred and revenge in your heart, you dehumanise not only yourself, but your community'. By no means did everybody welcome the commission's proceedings in this spirit. Notably, the Biko family refused to accept the granting of an amnesty to Steve Biko's murderers. But for others its effect was transforming. Baba Sikwepere had been permanently blinded by a police shooting. After he had told how he had been shot in the face for questioning a police decision, he said, 'I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story. But now—it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story'. The Truth Commission was certainly a highly imaginative new political purpose for narrative memories.<sup>13</sup>

Today most projects set up their own websites or attach themselves to existing websites. Digitisation brings immense advantages, both in making news of project activities available worldwide, and also, if they wish, for providing direct access to their archives. It has also brought some complications, of which the most important is how to resolve the contradiction between this new openness and the fact that many interviewees make remarks about other people which they would stand by, but not wish to be broadcast.

On the whole the biggest archives, such as the Columbia Center for Oral History in New York, which hold thousands of interviews, have tended to have rather dull and cautious websites. This is also true of some of the largest community collections, such as the Shetland Archive in the northern isles off Scotland. Hence at the end of this book, in 'Websites', after our print Bibliography, we have selected a number of mostly smaller well-designed websites which all include not only their project plans but vivid examples selected from their interviews in text and audio. The websites are fascinating in themselves, but for us they again confirm the remarkable variety of different forms of social commitment which have been developed by oral historians over the last thirty years.

## Power in oral history

This said, we should be careful not to be dazzled into forgetting some of the hard lessons which were learnt in the earlier years of the oral history movement. Perhaps most important of these is the issue of power in the interview situation. Most often it is the oral historian, the professional, who chooses who to interview, and who decides whether or not to archive the recording, whether to publish extracts from it, or whether to make it available in its entirety on the internet. There have been telling criticisms of a relationship with informants in which a middle-class professional determines [cuts] what is discussed and then disappears with a recording of somebody's life that they never hear about again—and if they did, might be indignant at the unintended meanings imposed on their words. There are clear social advantages in the contrasting ideal of a self-selected group, or an open public meeting, which focuses on equal discussion and encourages local publication of its results; and of individual recording sessions which are conversations rather than directed interviews. But there are also drawbacks in the alternative. The self-selected group will rarely be fully representative of a community. It is much more likely to be composed from its central groups—people from a skilled working-class or lower-middle-class background. The local upper class will rarely be there, nor will the very poor, the less confident, especially among women, or the immigrant from its ethnic minorities.

The aim should be a historically critical account, rather than an exclusive, parochial celebration. A truer and socially more valuable form of local oral history will be created when these other groups are drawn in. Its publications will be much more telling if they can juxtapose, for example, the mistress with her domestic servant, a mill owner with the mill-workers, or a hospital patient with his or her nurses and doctors. It will then reveal the variety of social experience in the community, the groups which had the better or the worse of it—and perhaps lead to a consideration of what might be done about it. Local history drawn from a more restricted social stratum tends to be more complacent, a re-enactment of community myth. This certainly needs to be recorded, and a self-sufficient local group which can do this is undoubtedly helping many others besides itself.

But for the radical historian it is hardly sufficient. History should not merely comfort; it should provide a challenge, and an understanding which helps towards change. For this the myth needs to become dynamic. It has to encompass the complexities of conflict. And for the historian who wishes to work and write as a socialist, the task must be not simply to celebrate the working class as it is, but to raise its consciousness. There is no point in replacing a conservative myth of upper-class wisdom with a lower-class one. A history is required which leads to action: not to confirm, but to change the world.

In principle there is no reason why local projects should not have such an object, while at the same time continuing to encourage self-confidence and the

writing of history from within the community. Most groups will normally contain some members with more historical experience. They certainly need to use tact; to undervalue rather than emphasise their advantage. But it is everybody's loss in the long run if they disown it: their contribution should be to help the group towards a wider perspective. Similar observations apply in the recording session where the essential need is mutual respect. A superior, dominating attitude does not make for a good interview anyway. The oral historian has to be a good listener, the informant an active helper. As the rural social historian George Ewart Evans puts it, 'although the old survivors were walking books, I could not just leaf them over. They were persons'.<sup>14</sup> And so are historians. They have come for a purpose, to get information, and if ultimately ashamed of this they should not have come at all. A historian who just engages in collecting haphazard reminiscence will collect interesting pieces of information, but will throw away the chance of winning the critical evidence for the structure of historical argument and interpretation.

The relationship between history and the community should not be one-sided in either direction, but rather a series of exchanges, a dialectic, between information and interpretation, between educationists and their localities, between classes and generations. There will be room for many kinds of oral history and it will have many different social consequences. But at bottom they are all related.

Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow-workers. It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact—and thence understanding—between social classes, between ethnic groups, and between generations. And to individual historians and others, with shared meanings, it can give a sense of belonging to a former home or workplace or generation. In short, it makes for fuller human beings. Equally, oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for a radical transformation of the social meaning of history.

# 2

## Historians and Oral History

The extensive modern use of the term 'oral history' is new, like the audio recorder, and it has radical implications for the future. But this does not mean that it has no past. In fact, oral history is as old as history itself. It was the first kind of history. And it is only quite recently that skill in handling oral evidence has ceased to be one of the marks of the great historian. When the leading professional historian of mid-nineteenth century France, Jules Michelet, professor of the Ecole Normale, the Sorbonne, and the Collège de France, and chief historical curator of the National Archives, came to write his *History of the French Revolution* (1847–53), he assumed that written documents should be but one source among many. He could draw on his own memory: he had been born in Paris in 1798, within a decade of the fall of the Bastille. But for ten years he had also been systematically collecting oral evidence outside Paris. His intention was to counterbalance the evidence of official documents with the political judgement of popular oral tradition:

When I say oral tradition, I mean national tradition, which remained generally scattered in the mouths of the people, which everybody said and repeated, peasants, townsfolk, old men, women, even children; which you can hear if you enter of an evening into a village tavern; which you may gather if, finding on the road a passerby at rest, you begin to converse with him about the rain, the season, then the high price of victuals, then the times of the Emperor, then the times of the Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Michelet was clearly skilled at listening, and drawing an informant out. He also had distinct ideas about the areas in which oral evidence was more, or less, reliable. As a scholar in his own time he was exceptional; but he was certainly not peculiar. Yet within a century the historical profession had so far turned its back on its own traditional skills, that Professor James Westfall Thompson commented on Michelet's passage, in his monumental *History of Historical Writing*, 'this may seem like a strange way of collecting historical data'.<sup>2</sup> How did this

reversal come about? What were the stages by which oral history lost its original eminence?

### The scope of oral tradition

One of the underlying reasons becomes clear as soon as we look at the scope of oral tradition in preliterate societies. At this stage all history was oral history. But everything else had to be remembered too: crafts and skills, the time and season, the sky, territory, law, speeches, transactions, bargains. This broad view was later taken up in UNESCO's pioneering archiving work from the 1960s, which led—not without considerable initial internal hesitation—to their 1998 proclamation of the importance of 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. Oral tradition itself was also very varied. Jan Vansina, in his classic *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (1965),<sup>3</sup> divided African oral tradition into five categories. First there are formulas—learning formulas, rituals, slogans, and titles. Next there are lists of place names and personal names. Then come public and private poetry—historical, religious, or personal. Fourthly there are stories—historical, didactic, artistic, or personal. Lastly there are legal and other commentaries. Not all of these can be found in all African societies. Official poetry and historical stories, for example, arise only in larger societies with a relatively high degree of political organisation. Nevertheless, in most societies there is normally a considerable range of oral evidence.

The social importance of some of these oral traditions also resulted in reliable systems for handing them down from generation to generation with a minimum of distortion. Practices such as group testimony on ritual occasions, disputations, schools for teaching traditional lore, and recitations on taking office could preserve exact texts through the centuries, including archaisms even after they had ceased to be understood. Traditions of this type resemble legal documents, or sacred books, and their bearers become in many African courts highly specialised officials. In Rwanda, for example, genealogists, memorialists, rhapsodists, and *abiiru* were each responsible for the preservation of different types of tradition. The genealogists, *abacurahwenge*, had to remember the lists of kings and queen mothers; the memorialists, *abateekerezi*, the most important events of the various reigns; the rhapsodists, *abasizi*, preserved the panegyrics on the kings; and the *abiiru* the secrets of the dynasty. 'Without us the names of kings would vanish into oblivion, we are the memory of mankind', the praise singers justly claimed: 'I teach kings the history of their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old, but the future springs from the past'.<sup>4</sup>

There were also village tradition bearers, who, more often than the court specialists, have continued to hand down traditions into the present. They had their equivalents in many other cultures, as in the Scandinavian *skald* or the Indian *rajput*. A dramatic encounter with one such West African *griot* has been described

by Alex Haley in his account of the rediscovery of his own ancestry subsequently given great publicity in the semi-fictionalised form of *Roots* (1976). His family had a tradition rare among black Americans—of how their first ancestor came to the colonies as a slave, including a few details: how he had been captured when chopping wood, his African name had been Kintay, he called a guitar a ‘ko’ and a river ‘Kamby Bolongo’; how he had landed at ‘Naplis’ and worked under the English name Toby for Mas’ William Waller.

For this black family descent in America itself, Haley was able to provide proof from archival researches, down to an advertisement in the *Maryland Gazette* of October 1767 for ‘fresh slaves for sale’ off the *Lord Ligonier* and a transfer deed between the brothers John and William Wailer of ‘one Negro man slave called Toby’. But all this followed the high moment of his search, back across the Atlantic—a moment in which it now seems enthusiasm may have gone further than the evidence warranted. His ancestor’s language had been identified as Mandinka and ‘Kamby Bolongo’ as the Gambia River; and then, in Gambia, he found that there was an old family clan called Kinte. So far so good.

Then after a search, a tradition bearer of the clan, or *griot*, was located in a tiny, distant hamlet in the interior. Accompanied by interpreters and musicians, Alex Haley eventually reached him: ‘And from a distance I could see this small man with a pillbox hat and an off-white robe, and even from a distance there was an air of “somebodiness” about him’. The people gathered around Alex Haley in a horseshoe to stare at the first black American they had seen. And then they turned to the old man:

The old man, the *griot*, the oral historian, Kebba Kanga Fofana, 73 rains of age, began now to tell me the ancestral history of the Kinte clan as it had been told down across the centuries, from the times of the forefathers. It was as if a scroll was being read. It wasn’t just talk as we talk. It was a very formal occasion. The people became mouse quiet, rigid. The old man sat in a chair and when he would speak he would come up forward, his body would grow rigid, the cords in his neck stood out and he spoke words as though they were physical objects coming out of his mouth. He’d speak a sentence or so, he would go limp, relax, and the translation would come.

Out of this man’s head came spilling lineage details incredible to behold. Two, three centuries back. Who married whom, who had what children, what children married whom and their children, and so forth, just unbelievable. I was struck not only by the profusion of details, but also by the biblical pattern of the way they expressed it. It would be something like: ‘and so and so took as a wife so and so and begat and begat and begat’, and he’d name their mates and their children, and so forth. When they would date things it was not with calendar dates, but they would date things with physical events, such as . . . a flood.

So step by step the old man recounted the history of the Kinte clan: how they had come out of Old Mali, had been blacksmiths, potters, and weavers, had settled in the present village, until, roughly between 1750 and 1760, a younger son of the family, Omoro Kinte, took a wife, Binta Kebba, by whom he had four sons, whose names were Kunta, Lamin, Suwadu, and Madi.

By the time he got down to that level of the family, the *griot* had talked for probably five hours. He had stopped maybe fifty times in the course of that narrative . . . And then a translation came as all the others had come, calmly, and it began, 'About the time the king's soldiers came'. That was one of those time fixing references. Later in England, in British Parliamentary records, I went feverishly searching to find out what he was talking about, because I had to have the calendar date. But now in back country Africa, the *griot* Kebba Kanga Fofana, the oral historian, was telling the story as it had come down for centuries from the time of the forefathers of the Kinte clan. 'About the time the king's soldiers came, the eldest of these four sons, Kunta, went away from this village to chop wood and was seen never again'. And he went on with his story. I sat there as if I was carved of rock.

Alex Haley did, after a few moments, pull out his own notebook, and show the interpreters that this was the same story that he had himself heard as a child from his grandmother on the front porch of her house in Tennessee; and there then followed a spontaneous ceremony of reconciliation with his own people, in which he laid hands on their infants, and they took him into their mosque and prayed in Arabic, 'Praise be to Allah for one long lost from us whom Allah has returned'.<sup>5</sup>

For a number of reasons, the identification of Kinte is much more doubtful than Alex Haley believed in that moment. His *griot*, who lacked the full traditional training, was not an ideal tradition bearer, but like a good *griot* was searching the genealogical store in his mind for the evidence needed for an audience, and he may have had an idea in advance of what Haley wanted. Subsequently, there have been variations in minor detail when he has repeated his testimony. More importantly, the African and American generations fit awkwardly—although this could be due to a telescoping not uncommon in oral tradition—and the time fixing reference is very weak for an area in which European soldiers had been present for a long time. But we can easily find other instances of accuracy of oral tradition in non-literate societies if we look elsewhere; for example, to ancient Greece, where the accuracy of description of details of obsolete armour and name lists of abandoned cities, preserved orally for six hundred years before the first written versions of the *Iliad* were circulated, has been vindicated by classical scholarship and archaeology.

Nevertheless, Haley's story does bring home with rare power the standing of the oral historian before the spread of documentation in literate societies

made redundant such public moments of historical revelation. We can no longer distinguish, like the Swahili, between the 'living dead', whose names are still recalled in oral tradition, and the absolutely forgotten. The modern genealogist talks to family members but then searches for documentary proof in private silence in a record office. Memory is demoted from the status of public authority to that of a private aid. People still remember rituals, names, songs, stories, skills; but it is now the document which stands as the final authority, and the guarantee of transmission to the future.

It is important not to exaggerate the abruptness of this change, or the sharpness of its cultural consequences. We do not go along with the binary oppositions proposed (without much empirical support) by Walter Ong and his followers, contrasting an unadaptable, uncreative, conservative 'oral man' without an individual sense of truth or identity, as against the innovating scientific and rational modern man. Jack Goody, although persuaded of the crucial importance of changes in methods of communication, was as strongly opposed to the inflexibility of such sterile binary oppositions. Leroy Vail and Landeg White in their impressive study of southern African praise poems and dance rituals argue powerfully against such a 'continuation of the old stark dichotomy between Westerners and Others, between "us" and "them", in the fresh guise of a psychologising literary theory'.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, it is just those public and long-term oral traditions which were once the most prestigious which have proved most vulnerable. By contrast, personal reminiscence and private family traditions, which are rarely committed to paper just because most people do not think them of much importance to others, have become a standard type of oral evidence. And it is normally only among social groups of low prestige, such as children, the urban poor, travelling communities, or isolated country people, that other oral traditions such as games, songs, ballads, and historical stories are now collected.

Thus some of the strongest communal memories are those of beleaguered out-groups. The Gaelic-speaking crofting communities of north-west Britain remember the eighteenth-century Highland sheep clearances which drove them out of their old townships to the sea's edge, as if they had been yesterday. In France the royalist families of the Vendée handed down their story of resistance to the Republic for 150 years. Still more remarkably, in the Protestant mountain valleys of the Cevennes, in the late twentieth century family traditions still yielded a more accurate interpretation than contemporary documents of the unprecedented, and hence misreported, guerilla war of the Camisards ('whiteshirts') in 1702–1704, in which their peasant ancestors successfully held at bay the royal army of Louis XIV and secured the survival of their faith. The changing social standing of the bearers of oral tradition is thus clearly related to its long-term decline in prestige and, conversely, to its current radicality.<sup>7</sup>



## Oral evidence in written histories

In Western Europe this came about very slowly. In tracing this story, a fundamental difficulty is that before the twentieth century we have to rely only on printed sources. These do reveal the fluctuating attitudes of historians to oral evidence and the gradual rise of explicit oral histories based on listening with respect. We do not, however, attempt here to trace the development of markedly different forms of interviewing, such as criminal investigations or religious confessions. Oral historians do not offer to forgive sins or condemn criminals. These other techniques have interesting histories, but we believe it will be more helpful here to stick to our own.

The first written histories probably go back three thousand years. They set down existing oral tradition about the distant past and gradually also began to chronicle the present. Just because it began so early in Europe, this stage is more easily observed where it happened more recently: for example in the systematic collecting of historical traditions from commoners by the third-century Chinese royal historian Sima Qian and from noble families ordered by the Japanese emperor in the eighth century, the assembling of memories of the prophets in the ninth-century Muslim world, or the precious documentation of preconquest Aztec history and culture from the memory of old men by Sahagun and the Spanish Franciscan friars in mid-sixteenth-century Mexico.

However, we do know that from quite an early stage there were a few outstanding European historical writers who tried to evaluate their evidence. The method of Herodotus, for example, in the fifth century BC was to seek out eyewitnesses and cross-question them. By the third century AD we can find Lucian advising the would-be historian to look for his informant's motives; while Herodian cites enough of his sources to suggest the order in which he rates them: antiquarian authorities, palace information, letters, senate proceedings, and other witnesses.

Similarly, in the early eighth century Bede, in the preface to his *History of the English Church and People*, carefully distinguished his sources. For most of the English provinces he had to rely on oral traditions sent to him by other clergy, but he was able to draw on the records at Canterbury, and he even secured copies of letters from the papal archives through a London priest who visited Rome. But he was surest of the evidence for his own Northumbria, where 'I am not dependent on any one author, but on countless faithful witnesses who either know or remember the facts, apart from what I know myself'.<sup>8</sup>

Bede's attitude to evidence, and his assumption that he could be most trusted where he had been able to collect oral evidence from eyewitnesses himself, would have been shared by all the most critical historians into the eighteenth century—not to mention the many less meticulous chroniclers and hagiographers who stood between them. Neither the spread of printing nor the secular rationality of the Renaissance brought any changes in this way. This is perhaps less surprising when it is realised that the typical scholar heard, rather than

himself read, the printed books which became available. And when the truth mattered most, it had to be spoken. The popes pronounced their final words on Catholic doctrine *ex cathedra*: and in both the Christian and Muslim worlds the courts—which had quickly enough discovered how easy it was to forge a written charter—continued to insist that witnesses must be heard, because only then could they be cross-examined. Even accounts had to be checked aloud, or ‘audited’, each year.

Moreover in practice the best-known historians remained rather less careful than Bede. Guiccardini in sixteenth-century Italy, for example, avoids the direct quotation of documents, and assumes his own participation in the times he describes is a sufficient guarantee of truth. Clarendon’s *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* (1704) carries a similar tone, although he does occasionally refer to reminiscence, and he did trouble to look at the journals of the House of Commons for the ten years when he was not a Member. Bishop Burnet’s *History of His Own Time* (1724) is less magisterial, but again assumes the prime value of oral evidence, which he handles with a notable care. He cites the authors of his stories regularly, and when his witnesses disagree he sets them against each other. Printed authorities, by contrast, he assumes to be inferior: ‘I leave all common transactions to ordinary books. If at any time I say things that occur in any books, it is partly to keep the thread of the narration in an unentangled method.’<sup>9</sup>

It is perhaps more surprising to find little immediate change, at least in the attitude to evidence for recent history, amongst the historians of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Voltaire was certainly cynical enough about the ‘absurd’ myths of oral tradition from the remote past, recited from generation to generation, which had been the original ‘foundations of history’: indeed, the remoter their origin, the less their value, for ‘they lose a degree of probability at every successive transmission’. He rejoiced that ‘omens, prodigies, and apparitions are now being sent back to the regions of fable. History stood in need of being enlightened by philosophy’. From modern historians he demanded ‘more details, better ascertained facts’. But although for his own works he collected both oral and documentary evidence, he rarely cited his sources and his general comments suggest a lack of distinction between them. He boasted in his *History of Charles XII* (1731), for example, that he had ‘not ventured to advance a single fact, without consulting eyewitnesses of undoubted veracity’. After its publication, he cited as an indication of his reliability a letter of approval from the king of Poland, who ‘himself had been an eyewitness’ of some of the events described. Similarly, in his *History of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great* he named at the start ‘his vouchers, the principal of which is Peter the Great himself.’<sup>10</sup>

For this work he had the assistance of documents selected and copied by the Russian officials and sent to his home in Geneva. Voltaire, while retaining a special regard for personal witness, reveals curiously little awareness of the possible

bias either in a monarch's own judgement of his reign, or in a set of documents preserved and even selected by the royal officials themselves.

Voltaire was, moreover, a historian with many distinguished admirers. James Boswell recorded a breakfast discussion in 1773 between Samuel Johnson, who had left the codifying of the English language and the delights of London to seek the direct experience of a primitive society in the Scottish islands, and two leaders of the Edinburgh Enlightenment, the lawyer Lord Elibank, and the philosopher-historian William Robertson, principal of the university.

Johnson, it should be noted, had earlier championed the significance of ordinary people for biography, asserting that 'more knowledge may be gained of a man's real character, by a short conversation with one of his servants, than from a formal and studied narrative, begun with his pedigree, and ended with his funeral'. But at the breakfast the conversation turned to the last great revolt of the Scottish Highlands against English rule, the 1745 rebellion. Johnson agreed that this 'would make a fine piece of history', but countered Elibank's doubt 'whether any man of this age could give it impartially' by citing Voltaire's method in his *Louis XIV*: 'A man, by talking with those of different sides, who were actors in it, and putting down all that he hears, may in time collect the materials of a good narrative. You are to consider, all history was at first oral'. And he was firmly backed by the Scots historian, who also knew Voltaire: 'It was now full time to make such a collection as Dr Johnson suggested; for many of the people who were then in arms, were dropping off; and both Whigs and Jacobites were now come to talk with moderation'.<sup>11</sup>

It is no accident that this remarkable early call for an 'oral history' project came at this moment. They stood at the edge of a period of great change in the nature of historical scholarship. Behind it lay the cumulative effects of two centuries of printing: an explosion in historical resources which was both quantitative and qualitative. We may take, for an example, *A New Method of Studying History: recommending more easy and complete instructions for improvements in that science*, published by Langlet du Fresnoy, librarian to the prince of Savoy, in 1713, and subsequently translated into Dutch, German, and English. As it happens there is nothing very new in the method itself which Fresnoy puts forward—he even asserts that those historians who combine 'hard study, and a great experience of affairs' are considerably superior to those 'that shut themselves in their closets to examine there, upon the credit of others, the facts which themselves were not able to be informed of'.<sup>12</sup> Much more remarkable is his second volume, for it consists entirely of bibliography, listing altogether some ten thousand titles of historical works in the major European languages. The production of such a list indicates a substantial community of scholars. It also shows the development of basic professional resources.

An English historian, for example, could now make use of a series of county and local histories, biographies and biographical collections, and travellers' accounts. Printed sets of church inscriptions, manuscript chronicles, and

medieval public rolls were being published. Especially ambitious was the first national biography, *Biographia Britannica* (1747–66), with altogether 4,600 pages in seven volumes. In Bishop William Nicolson's *English Historical Library* he also had available a critical bibliography. The apparatus for writing history from the closet was being assembled: it was becoming possible for some historians at least to dispense with their own fieldwork, and rely on documents and oral evidence published by others.

Nevertheless, the immediate effect of the immense expansion of printed sources which continued through the eighteenth century was a positive enrichment of historical writing. Voltaire could reasonably insist that a good modern historian pay 'more attention to customs, laws, mores, commerce, finance, agriculture, population. It is with history as it is with mathematics and physics. The scope has increased prodigiously'.<sup>13</sup>

One can see the long-term impact of change particularly well in Macaulay, whose *History of England* (1848–55) was in terms of sales probably the most popular nineteenth-century history book in the English language. As a practising politician, and a master of style, Macaulay might be seen as an heir to Guiccardini and Clarendon. But perhaps the most brilliant passages of his book are those in which he gives the social background, from the way of life of the country squire to the condition of the urban and rural poor. He uses as his raw materials contemporary surveys, poetry and novels, diaries, and published reminiscences. He also makes particularly interesting use of oral tradition. In stories of the highwaymen who 'held an aristocratical position in the community of thieves, anecdotes of their ferocity and audacity, of their occasional acts of generosity and good nature, of their amours, of their miraculous escapes . . . there is doubtless a large mixture of fable; but they are not on that account unworthy of being recorded; for it is both an authentic and an important fact that such tales, whether false or true, were heard by our ancestors with eagerness and faith'.

He quotes at length a broadside street ballad which he calls 'the vehement and bitter cry of labour against capital', and argues that evidence of this kind must be used for social history. 'The common people of that age were not in the habit of meeting for public discussion, or haranguing, or of petitioning parliament. No newspaper pleaded their cause . . . A great part of their history is to be learned only from ballads'.<sup>14</sup>

As a general historian, Macaulay drew not simply on a wider range of published sources, but also on the development of a whole series of other modes of historical writing. One of the authorities he cited in using oral tradition was Sir Walter Scott. As a young man, before he began writing novels, Scott was a Border Country lawyer, and one of his first publications was a *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802), a set of popular ballads which he had collected from country people with his friend Robert Shortreed. His own interest had in turn been partly awakened by a still earlier collection, Bishop Percy's *Reliques of*

*Ancient English Poetry* (1765). But he could have chanced on others. Perhaps best known was William Camden's *Britannia* (1586), which includes chapters on the development of the English language, proverbs, and names, as well as poetry. It is one of the founding works of the historical study of language and folklore. There was also the contrastingly radical work of the Newcastle populists, John Brand and Joseph Ritson, who saw the study of popular culture as a duty of 'the friends of man', and combined the collecting of oral tradition with schemes for encouraging popular self-expression in a simplified spelling of English based on the spoken vernacular language.<sup>15</sup>

Scott went on to make a still more important contribution to a second new form of historical writing, the historical novel. Here again he collected much of the oral evidence which he needed himself. He visited the Highlands, 'talking to Jacobites who had taken part in the '45 Rebellion'. Scott recognised through conversing with these old men what had really happened as a result of the '45. Culloden saw the end of a culture; the dispersal or the destruction of the Highland clans, a tribal society, and an older, fundamentally different way of life. 'The old men he talked to were truly historical documents; and contact with them helped to give his writing that veracity which informs earlier novels like *Waverley*, *The Antiquary*, *Rob Roy*, and *Guy Mannering*'. It was to honour his sources as much as to tease himself that he prefaced some of his novels with Robert Burns's warning lines:

A chiel's amang you takin' notes  
An' faith he'll prent it.<sup>16</sup>

Both as a note-taker, and in the form of the historical novel itself, Scott set the pattern for some of the major imaginative works of the nineteenth century. Dickens, for example, deliberately set many of his novels in the London world which he could remember from childhood, and when he could not draw easily on oral memory, as for *Hard Times*, set out for special fieldwork. Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* draws much of its drama from her knowledge of local memories of the Luddite rising. George Moore's life story of a domestic servant, *Esther Waters*, owes its realism to his habitual chatting below stairs in country houses and elsewhere. George Borrow came to understand the East Anglian gypsies in a similar way. In France, Émile Zola sought the material for *Germinal* from his talks with the miners of Mons. Later on in Britain, Arnold Bennett was another great note-taker, and his *Clayhanger* was again a reconstruction of a remembered world. Closer still to Scott was Thomas Hardy, with his shrewd observation of traditional country customs, and ability to use them as illustrations of conflict and change within the whole social structure. But this is looking ahead and to a stage when, to their own loss, historians were less prepared to learn from novelists.

### The rise of auto/biography

A third type of historical work which had expanded especially fast from the end of the seventeenth century was the biographical memoir. In this the use of oral evidence remained, of course, an assumed method. The growing popularity of memoirs brought interesting extensions in scope. First, there were a number of projects for collections of biographies which aimed to represent whole social groups, rather than simply exceptional individuals. The most famous of these projects, John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, although known in his lifetime, was not in fact published until two centuries later, in 1898. Aubrey, who wrote that from boyhood 'he did ever love to converse with old men, as Living Histories', was an impoverished country gentleman, forced to turn his hobby into a living as an antiquarian research assistant working for others. In the course of this he found time to put together stories and information from innumerable sources to compose a biographical portrait of his social circle, the seventeenth-century intelligentsia, as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

A more obscure example on a local level was Richard Gough's *Human Nature Displayed in the History of Myddle* (1833), in Shropshire, which had been written in 1706, and has recently attracted the interest of historians. In his preface to its republication W. G. Hoskins calls it 'a unique book. It gives us a picture of seventeenth century England in all its wonderful and varied detail such as no other book that I know even remotely approaches'. Gough started by discussing the buildings of the parish; but once he reached the parish church he used its pews as the framework for a social survey, taking each pew-holding family in turn, discussing their origins and their occupations, and relating with relish either their successes or their failings—drink, bribery, and whoring. This information, moreover, is not merely illustrative; for its value has also emerged, in a modern historical study, in establishing basic demographic facts, and correcting the misinterpretations which would otherwise have been made from more conventional sources, such as wills and registers. In the frankness with which he documented scandal, Gough is perhaps unique; but his focus on people rather than institutions provides one of the first instances of a valuable minority form of local history.<sup>18</sup>

Still more striking, and undoubtedly a reflection of the early social and political emergence of the working class in Britain, was the remarkable nineteenth-century flowering of a very varied individual working-class autobiography: intellectual, political, or personal. It had several sources. One was the life published as a moral example. The religious autobiographies of mid-seventeenth-century Puritan sectarians were the first from the lower classes, and the groups of *Spiritual Experiences* published included, still more rarely, some testimonies by women. Stories of conversion and rescue were again collected in the eighteenth century from the Protestant Camisards in France and from old dissenters and Methodist pioneers in Britain: in the 1820s one local historian

of northern Wesleyanism not only secured a resolution by Conference that it should be a duty of every superintendent to collect testimonies of zeal and sufferings from early Methodists, but chose as the frontispiece to his own book a sketch (by himself) of ninety-year-old Richard Bradley who had been one of his own 'living oracles'.<sup>19</sup>

Other mid-nineteenth-century lives were edited by religious pamphleteers, introduced by parsons, or given titles like *The Working Man's Way in the World*. Morality was secularised by Samuel Smiles, who published biographical collections of engineers, ironworkers, and toolmakers as well as his classic, *Self-help: with Illustrations of Character and Conduct* (1859).

Quite a different vein was represented by the memoir of picaresque adventure. In the eighteenth century this normally implied gambling or sexual intrigue, but it could be extended into other forms of 'low life', and circusmen's or poachers' autobiographies later carried some of the same flavour. John Thomas Smith in his *Etchings of Remarkable Beggars, Itinerant Traders, and Other Persons of Notoriety in London and Its Environs* (1815) was an innovator in his books of portrait sketches linked to autobiographical snippets. There was a continuing audience for this kind of biographical writing, even up to the oral history revival, such as Clive Murphy's series of *Ordinary Lives* which he recorded in the 1970s, with subjects including a Salvation Army hosteller, an ex-chorus girl, and a street lavatory attendant.

There was a convergence of these two autobiographical approaches in the mid-nineteenth century, as the working classes made their political presence felt, and they came to be seen as a political problem. The semi-autobiographical works of the journeyman engineer Thomas Wright—*Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes*, *The Great Unwashed*, and *Our New Masters* (1867–73)—provided information for the middle class which was comforting as well as colourful. There are signs, too, of a concern in some authors to retain something of the liveliness of working speech forms in print.

At the same time, the working-class movement itself began to produce autobiography, with the early *Memoir of Thomas Hardy* (1832), on the French revolutionary years, followed before long by classics such as Samuel Bamford's *Early Days* (1848) and Chartist autobiographies like *The Life and Times of William Lovett* (1876), although the labour political biography eventually settled into a rather narrow form. The early emergence of a masculine working-class autobiography in Britain can therefore be linked closely to working-class activity, first in religion and then in politics. In France, working-class autobiography was similarly stimulated by political events, although it remained less strong than in Britain. In Germany, on the other hand, no tradition either of the social novel or of working-class autobiography was established in the nineteenth century. Only in 1904 did the socialist deputy in the Reichstag, Paul Göhre, launch the first series of autobiographies with the deliberate intention of revealing to middle-class readers both the conditions of ordinary life and that working-class people



shared 'human thoughts and feelings, and reacted to joy and suffering in the same way they did'.<sup>20</sup>

In North America, by contrast, autobiography was a long-standing and strong tradition, going back to Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, founders of the republic. Later there were crucial examples by thinkers and poets, men and women, including Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Gertrude Stein. There was also an evolving genre of black autobiography. This began in the 1830s with slave narratives, often ghosted by a white writer, strongly Christian in style, and used to support the campaign for the abolition of slavery. The most famous of these is *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). Subsequently there were waves of black autobiographies in the interwar years of the Harlem Renaissance, and then again in the Black Power years of the 1960s–70s. As a whole, these autobiographies have a very particular style that reflects black experience and aspirations. The 'self' of black autobiography is not so much individualised as speaking for a whole group, 'a soldier in a long, historic march toward Canaan. The self is conceived as a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members. It is a conscious political identity . . . The mouth sets in determination; the humanity blossoms under the pressure of the boot into a fierce, tough flower'.<sup>21</sup>

### The professionalisation of history and social research

Lastly, among the new forms of historical writing can be seen, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the beginnings of an independent social history. At this stage there was no professional separation between the processes of creating information, constructing social theory, and historical analysis, so that they proceed sometimes together, sometimes apart. One cannot, as a result, separate the origins of an 'oral history' method from general developments in the collection and use of oral evidence. Two of the earliest achievements, for example, came from Scotland. In 1778 John Millar published his *Origin of the Distinctions of Ranks*, which puts forward a historical and comparative theory of inequality. He did not merely anticipate Marx by linking the stages in master-servant relationships with changes in economic organisation, but produced in his discussion 'of the rank and condition of women in different ages' one of the first historical explanations of gender inequality.<sup>22</sup>

This pioneering exercise in historical sociology depended on a wide variety of published sources, from ancient histories to the recent descriptions of local social customs by European travellers in other continents. Ten years later came a major step in the creation of source material, the first *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1791–99), a national collection of contemporary and historical social information carried out through the parish clergy and edited by Sir John Sinclair. There had been no investigation on a comparable scale in the British Isles since Domesday. Meanwhile, in England, one important model of social investigation was provided by the 'fieldwork' travels of Arthur Young, bringing together



both his own observations and interviews with others in his influential reports on the state of British agriculture. William Cobbett's later travels, documenting the often devastating social consequences of economic progress in agriculture, used the same method in reply to Young.

Others, less physically energetic, devised shortcuts that were to prove key methodological devices for the future. The first questionnaire has been attributed to David Davies, a Berkshire rector, who was investigating farm labourers' budgets, and sent out printed abstracts to potential collaborators, who he hoped might collect similar information in other places. And it was for another investigation, *The State of the Poor* (1797), that Sir Frederick Eden sent out one of the first modern interviewers: 'a remarkably faithful and intelligent person; who had spent more than a year in travelling from place to place, for the express purpose of obtaining exact information, agreeably to a set of queries with which I furnished him'.<sup>23</sup>

The nineteenth century was to see this process of development in fieldwork method, historical analysis, and social theory carried rapidly forward, but in a context of increasing separation and specialisation. This was even true within fieldwork methodology itself. The travelling investigation, for example, became a fieldwork specialism of the colonial anthropologist, and the survey, of the sociologist of 'modern' societies. And sharp differences emerged even between the forms of survey method used in different European countries. In France, Belgium, and Germany, as well as in Britain, the survey was first used by independent philanthropists, medical reformers, and sometimes newspapers, and was then taken up for official government investigations. But when the French began their first large-scale '*enquête ouvrière*' under fear of the revolutionary uprisings of 1848, they did not seek evidence directly, but through their well-organised local bureaucracy. And the German social surveys that were begun in the 1870s were invariably sent out to local officials, clergy, teachers, or landowners, for return in essay form, following the model of the French and Belgian '*enquêtes*'.

In Britain, by contrast, techniques for the direct collection of evidence were adopted. This began regularly with the launching in 1801 of the decennial census, carried out under central instructions by investigators dispersed throughout the country—thus establishing the national interview survey. Only the sum findings of the census were published. But the parliamentary social inquiries and Royal Commissions which increasingly came to be published as Blue Books were also commonly conducted through interviewing, although of a different kind. Sometimes an on-the-spot investigation was made, but normally witnesses were summoned before the inquiring committee and questioned by them. The exchanges and arguments between the committee and witnesses were often reproduced along with the publication of the official report. They constitute a rich repository of autobiographical and other oral evidence. And their potential as source material was quickly realised. The Blue Books were the basis

of Disraeli's descriptions of working-class life in *Coningsby* and *Sybil*. And they proved equally useful to Karl Marx.

Marx and Engels, in their more immediate political writings, normally drew substantially both on direct experience of their own, and on reports, written and oral, from their innumerable correspondents and visitors. Equally, Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* combines material from newspapers, Blue Books, and other contemporary comment with his own eyewitness accounts of working-class life. Engels had come to Manchester in 1842 to work in the English branch of his father's firm, and in his spare hours from the cotton mill was able to explore the industrial conditions of the city and to meet, with the help of a working-class girl, Mary Burns, some of the Chartist leaders.

For his culminating theoretical analysis, however, Marx relied on published source material. *Capital* is heavily documented with both bibliography and footnotes. Apart from occasional quotations from classical literature, Marx cites two types of source: contemporary economic and political theory and comment; and contemporary description, often including vivid anecdotes, from newspapers and from the parliamentary Blue Books. No doubt this decision of Marx to use only already published oral material, rather than carry out any new fieldwork, was partly due to personal taste, and partly to enable him to buttress his arguments with unassailable authorities. But given the influence which *Capital* was to have on the future of social history, it set a key precedent.

It is equally significant of the changing situation that such a choice was open to Marx. For we have still not exhausted the major new steps in the creation of oral source material for social history. In addition to the investigations of the government, social survey work was undertaken by voluntary bodies. By the late 1830s there were Statistical Societies in London, Manchester, and other cities, composed mainly of doctors, prosperous businessmen, and other professionals, which made important contributions to the techniques of collecting and analysing social information. They carried out local inquiries into working-class conditions, making pioneer use of the door-to-door questionnaire survey by paid interviewers, and publishing their findings in statistical tables prefaced by a brief report. In this form most of the original interview evidence was suppressed.

On the other hand, an alternative model was created by the newspaper investigation, which was developed in the 1840s, and culminated in the *Morning Chronicle* survey under Henry Mayhew. This inquiry, conceived in the wake of the great cholera epidemic of 1849, has been called 'the first empirical survey into poverty as such'.<sup>24</sup> Mayhew's aim was to demonstrate the relationship between industrial wage levels and social conditions. Instead of a door-to-door survey he therefore analysed a series of trades through a strategic sample. In each trade he looked for representative workers at each job level, and then took supplementary information from unusually well-paid workers at one extreme and distressed casual workers at the other. He obtained his information both from

correspondence and by direct interview, and for both he gradually developed a detailed schedule of questions.

Most striking was his actual interview technique. He seems to have felt a respect for his informants which was very rare among investigators of his time. His comments show both emotional sympathy and a willingness to listen to their views. Indeed, his changing standpoint shows that he was genuinely prepared to be influenced by them. No doubt this attitude helped him to be accepted into working-class family homes and receive their life stories and feelings. And, significantly, it was linked to an unusual concern with their exact words. He normally went to interviews accompanied by a stenographer, so that everything said could be directly recorded in shorthand. And in his reports he gave very substantial space to direct quotation. In Mayhew's pages, as nowhere else, one can hear the ordinary people of mid-Victorian England speaking. It is because of this that they continue to be read.

Despite his popularity, Mayhew had no direct successors. But with the rise of the socialist movement in the late nineteenth century, a new concern to understand both the conditions and the spirit of the working classes was felt both in Britain and in Germany. One result was the 'settlement' movement, which encouraged idealistic middle-class men and women to live among the poor, sometimes in groups as voluntary workers, but also alone, and even in disguise.

In England a number of 'glimpses into the abyss' inside common lodging-houses and workhouses were written besides the famous accounts of Jack London and, later, George Orwell.<sup>25</sup> In Germany Paul Göhre, while a young theology student, worked incognito in a Chemnitz machine tool factory to produce *Three Months in a Workshop* (1895), a study of factory culture which marked a turning point in German social inquiry, as well as setting Göhre on the path which later led him to launch the first German working-class autobiographies.<sup>26</sup>

Robert Sherard also used clandestine techniques for his vivid accounts of industrial conditions in *The White Slaves of England* (1897): 'the factories I visited were visited by me as a trespasser, and at a trespasser's risk'. He generally avoided contact with employers, finding that they just laughed at his 'stories of grievances' in their 'luxurious smokingrooms'. A similar direct understanding of rural working-class culture is expressed in the respect for country people of George Sturt's *Change in the Village*, and still more in Stephen Reynolds' books on the Devon fisher-people with whom he shared a house, *A Poor Man's House* and *Seems So!* Reynolds' sympathy was carried to an explicit 'repudiation of middle-class life' in the belief that the simpler lives of the poor were fundamentally 'better than the lives of the sort of people I was brought up among'.<sup>27</sup>

Few, of course, would have gone this far. But something of the new sympathy and understanding can be found even in the most formidable and influential of late nineteenth-century English social investigations, Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1889–1903). Booth used a variety of methods, including participant observation, taking lodgings incognito in a working-class

household, although for his main survey of poverty he did not use direct interviews, but relied on reports from school visitors. He took a great deal of oral evidence for his religious inquiry, but this was chiefly from clergy. For all its richness, his seventeen-volume masterpiece thus lacks the immediacy of working-class speech.

Seebohm Rowntree, in developing Booth's method for his own study of York, *Poverty* (1901), did undertake direct interviewing, although his report was in the statistical tradition, avoiding quotation. But his later *Unemployment* uses direct quotations from interviewers' notes very effectively, and although this remains well short of Mayhew's standard, it provided an important early instance of the twentieth-century sociological survey, which frequently combined tables and interview quotations. Another less well-known pioneering work is the cultural study *The Equipment of the Workers* (1919), carried out by a high-minded adult education group at the St Philip's Settlement in Sheffield, using both a quantitative sample frame and a selected number of deeper qualitative interviews incorporating life histories. It is an odd book, but again an example of a method which might have been, although in the event was not, taken up at this time by historians.

A second line of influence from Booth's social survey leads more directly into history. One of his team of investigators was the young Beatrice Webb. Her contributions on dock labour and the sweated tailoring trade are the best industrial analyses in Booth's whole series. She also had early experience in door-to-door interrogation as a rent collector for Octavia Hill. Thus when she came to write her first independent historical study, *The Co-operative Movement in Britain*, and soon after, with Sidney Webb, their classic *History of Trade Unionism* (1894), she undertook the collection of oral, along with documentary, evidence in a highly systematic way.

From the start, Beatrice combined searches through records with visits to co-operative societies and interviews with leading co-operative personalities. Later she evolved with Sidney a method of occasional intensive fieldwork forays, setting up headquarters in lodgings in a provincial town for two or three weeks, and 'working hard; looking through minute books, interviewing and attending business meetings of trade unions'. Although at first Sidney preferred documentary work, being 'shy in cross-examining officials, who generally begin by being unwilling witnesses and need gentle but firm handling', they apparently hit upon a devastating technique of joint interview, in which they battered from either side the object of their attentions—sometimes a political opponent, sometimes an official who had not devoted much thought to the underlying implications of his official actions—with a steady left-right of question, argument, assertion, and contradiction, and left him converted, bewildered, or indignant, as the case might be.<sup>28</sup>

In their published histories, the Webbs cited only documentary sources. But they depended heavily on their interviewing both for their overall

interpretation and for their treatment of facts. Each fieldwork visit resulted in an evaluation of a particular organisation, and a set of penetrating portraits of its personalities. The Webbs were careful to pass on their method to the school of British labour history of which they were the founders. Page Arnot, for example, followed it for his histories of the miners' trade unions. The notes on interviewing which Beatrice Webb published in *My Apprenticeship* still command respect. And it must surely be her example which inspired the leading economic historian, J. H. Clapham, in 1906, to call for the training of interviewers to collect 'the memories of businessmen' which were, in his view, 'the best original authorities' for recent economic history: and 'with them often die some of the most valuable records of nineteenth century history'.<sup>29</sup> But nothing came of this.

It is no accident that this innovative historical work by the Webbs was part of a lifetime dedicated to social change and practical politics. Where other notable experiments in the use of oral material by historians can be found in this period, the context is typically exceptional, and often literally at the frontiers.

#### IMPERIALISM AND ORAL TRADITION

*Sir George Grey was inspired to collect his great corpus of Maori myth, Polynesian Mythology (1855), by his experiences in confronting the Maori rising of the 1840s in New Zealand:*

To my surprise . . . I found that these chiefs, either in their speeches to me or in their letters, frequently quoted, in explanation of their views and intentions, fragments of ancient poems and proverbs, or made allusions which rested on an ancient system of mythology . . . The interpreters . . . could rarely (if ever) translate the poems or explain the illusions . . . Clearly, however, I could not, as Governor of the country, permit so close a veil to be drawn between myself and the aged chiefs whom it was my duty to attach to British interests and the British race . . . Only one thing, under such circumstances was to be done, and that was to acquaint myself with the ancient language of the country, to collect its traditional poems and legends, to induce their priests to impart me their mythology, and to study their proverbs.

*Sir George Grey, Polynesian Mythology, and Ancient Traditional History of the New Zealand Race as Furnished by their Priests and Chiefs (London; n.p., 1855), vii–viii.*

Thus as the British expanded their imperial control in Africa, missionaries and colonial civil servants would begin recording local native traditions, and

by the 1900s, especially in Uganda and among the Nigerian Yoruba, historical writing extensively drawn from their own oral traditions flourished among the conquered people themselves. In late nineteenth-century South Africa, 'countless missionaries and colonial officials gathered information about the people over whom they exercised authority, partly to understand them and partly to control them'. Among them, James Stuart recorded hundreds of interviews between the 1890s and the 1920s, creating an incomparably rich archive of the history of the Zulu people which was later translated and published in five volumes.<sup>30</sup>

### JAMES STUART, PIONEER OF SOUTH AFRICAN ORAL HISTORY

*James Stuart (1868–1942) grew up among Zulu speakers and in 1889 became an official government interpreter in Swaziland. From 1895 he was a magistrate, and from 1909 assistant secretary for Native Affairs in Natal. He retired in 1922 to Britain, writing 'readers' in Zulu. He published a book on Zulu praise poems and A History of the Zulu Rebellion, based partly on undocumented information 'gathered in interviews with participants'. But he also preserved voluminous notes of his interviews as part of his ambitious scheme to record the history, social customs, and oral literature of African peoples: 'My object is to collect native custom so universally and thoroughly as to become an authority on it and compare that with existing legislation etc., etc. All will then be bound to come to my well to drink' (1, xiv). He interviewed in English and Zulu, switching between the two languages. His notes usually give the background of informants, sometimes recording the testimony verbatim, sometimes in telegraphic form. The immense handwritten collection was given to the Killie Campbell Africana Library in Durban, from which the University of Natal have translated and published five volumes, 'only a portion'. This must be one of the richest early documents of colonial oral history.*

*Some of the stories focus on Zulu customs, while others mingle facts and myths in an intertwining of British and Zulu culture. For example, in July 1900 Stuart talked to a Mr Antel, who had worked for five years as clerk to the British captain Walmesley. Antel told Stuart 'The Story of Nomanzi'. This started with a truly biblical image. In the aftermath of a local skirmish with shootings between two Zulu groups, Walmesley crossed over the nearby river—'and as he was being rowed back by one of his Hottentot servants, he saw a very young kaffir (Zulu) baby, about one year old, clinging to the reeds and in the water. The river was in flood at the time. The baby was a little girl. Walmesley directed the Hottentot to take the child into the boat. The Hottentot at first demurred, asking what could be the use of saving such rubbish, and suggested its being allowed to drown. Walmesley insisted*

and furthermore ordered the man to take off his coat and wrap the child in it, which the man did.'

*So Walmesley saved the child's life. Subsequently, having no children of his own, he adopted her, calling her Nomanzi. He and his wife set about bringing her up in European style. Nomanzi 'was taught everything in the house; she could play the piano, cook, and though treated as a menial to some extent, she wore European clothing and was treated exactly as a European and lived in and with the Walmesleys'.*

*The Walmeleys were therefore truly shocked when Nomanzi, now a grown woman, fell in love with Sifile, 'a native induna, a Zulu', who asked their permission to marry. They asked her, "but will you go and live at Sifile's like ordinary Zulu women in spite of all your careful bringing up, discard your dress, and forget the new manners and customs you have learnt?" "I do not mind having to do this", she said. "Since you say this, then you like Sifile and no longer care for us." "I like you, all of you, but I like Sifile too," replied the girl'.*

*On reflection, the Walmeleys accepted her choice. But at this point they bargained Zulu style, demanding twenty head of cattle 'to show Sifile what a high value [they] placed on Nomanzi'. Sifile produced the cattle, and within three weeks married Nomanzi.*

*In a final twist, some twenty years afterwards Captain Walmesley died. Scott, his executor, was assisted by Antel, who insisted that following Walmesley's wishes, the cattle were returned to Nomanzi and Sifile.*

*The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Evidence*, vol. 1 (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1976–2001), 1–2.

There were also American parallels. Thus, in the Pacific, the missionary Sheldon Dibble organised his seminary class into a student research group, sending them out to 'the oldest and most knowing of the chiefs and people' armed with questions to elicit 'the main facts of Hawaiian history', for his *History of the Sandwich Islands* (1843). At the same time in Ohio, where frontier settlers were still fighting the region's Indians for possession of the land, John Dabney Shane, a Presbyterian minister, transcribed his notes on his interviews with some four hundred white settlers. And most ambitiously, in the 1860s H. H. Bancroft, whose family firm were the largest booksellers, stationers, and publishers in the American Far West, decided to collect material on a very large scale for his historical studies of the recently colonised Pacific coast of California. Over a period of fifty years he employed altogether six hundred assistants, who built up, indexed, and abstracted his library. In addition to buying all the documents he could find and sending his agents to harass financially



embarrassed families and corporations, he mobilised a whole army of reporters to extract conversations from surviving witnesses. Bancroft himself claimed that his library included

two hundred volumes of original narratives from memory by as many early Californians, native and pioneer, written by themselves or taken down from their lips . . . There were a thousand, five thousand witnesses to the early history of this coast yet living, whom, as before intimated, Mr Bancroft resolved to see and question, all of them possible; and a thousand he did see, and a thousand his assistants saw, and wrote down from their own mouths the vivid narratives of their experiences.<sup>31</sup>

Bancroft's methods clearly had many weaknesses, and he proved unable to write up the material he collected in a convincing enough form. But in his willingness to use oral evidence, he set a precedent which was subsequently followed both in serious scholarship and in popular local journalism. Frederick Jackson Turner partly reached his famous thesis on the significance of the open frontier in this way. Similarly, from the 1920s it was a regular policy of the *Arizona Republican* to collect stories for publication from 'old timers' at annually organised pioneers' reunions. And certainly Bancroft himself had been able, through his own private wealth, to organise one of the most elaborate purely historical research enterprises of the nineteenth century, anticipating some of the giant public and privately funded projects of a hundred years later.

It may perhaps be a salutary warning that, although his library now forms the centre of the great Berkeley campus of the University of California, as a historian Bancroft is now largely forgotten. In this he stands in sharp contrast to another pioneer of oral history, the French historian Jules Michelet. Michelet is rightly remembered, and more needs to be said at this point about his use of oral evidence.

### **History for Michelet and for von Ranke**

Michelet is a remarkable figure: both the leading professional of his age, and a great popular historian; and as imaginative in seeing the possibilities of documentary archives, as of oral tradition. Besides this, he was one of the first historians to bring an understanding of the land and landscape into his writing. His influence was diffuse. One can see it in W. G. Hoskins, following *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955) along the hedgerows; or in France, the great medievalist Marc Bloch combining his searches in archives with the study of field patterns, place names, and folklore, tramping round the French countryside talking with a peasantry who in the early twentieth century still worked the land with some of the means and spirit of their medieval predecessors.



Michelet himself used oral evidence, especially in his *History of the French Revolution* (1847), where he realised that the official documents preserved only one side of the political story. In 1846 he had also published *Le Peuple*, a remarkable essay on the impact of mechanisation on the social classes of France. Its preface contains a striking, indeed passionate, statement of how he came to his method, and gained from it. He had been collecting information outside Paris for ten years, starting with Lyons, and then moving to other provincial towns, and into the countryside. 'My inquiry among living documents', he wrote, 'taught me many things that are not in our statistics . . . The mass of new information I have thus acquired, and which is not in any book, would scarcely be credited'. This was how he had first noticed the immense increase in the use of linen articles by poor families, and from this deduced an important shift within the structure of the family itself:

This fact, important in itself as an advance in cleanliness . . . proves an increasing stability in households and families—above all the influence of woman, who, gaining little by her own means, can only make this outlay by appropriating part of the wages of the husband. Woman, in these households, is economy, order, and providence . . . This was a useful indication of the insufficiency of the documents gathered from statistics and other works of political economy, for comprehending the people; such documents offer partial, artificial results, views taken at a sharp angle, which may be wrongly interpreted.<sup>32</sup>

Michelet felt exceptionally at ease with this kind of research. This was partly because of his early life in a Parisian printer's family. Interviewing brought him back close to his own social origins, from which he had been separated through his education. 'I have made this book of myself, of my life, and of my heart. It is the fruit of my experience . . . I have derived it from my own observation, and my intercourse with friends and neighbours; I have gleaned it from the highway'. He seems to have been considerably happier talking to poor people than he was with the social class into which he had risen:

Next to the conversation of men of genius and profound erudition, that of the people is certainly the most instructive. If one be not able to converse with Beranger, Lamennais, or Lamartine, we must go into the fields and chat with a peasant. What is to be learnt from the middle class? As to the *salons*, I never left them without finding my heart shrunk and chilled.<sup>33</sup>

Even so, it had been far from easy for Michelet to reach an open recognition of such feeling. As a young man, competitive, moving upwards through education, he had become intensely withdrawn. 'The fierce trial at college had altered my character—had made me reserved and close, shy and distrustful . . . I desired

less and less the society of men'. His rediscovery of others and of himself came through his teaching at the École Normale:

Those young people, amiable and confiding, who believed in me, reconciled me to mankind . . . The lonely writer plunged again into the crowd, listened to their noise, and noted their words. They were perfectly the same people . . . [My pupils] had done me, without knowing it, an immense service. If I had, as a historian, any special merit to sustain me on a level with my illustrious predecessors, I should owe it to teaching, which for me was friendship. Those great historians have been brilliant, judicious, and profound; as for me, I have loved more.<sup>34</sup>

Nineteenth-century historians were not given to self-analysis. Michelet therefore provides, in the few, vivid paragraphs of this preface, a powerful indication of an increasing barrier to the practice of oral history: class. The nineteenth century was everywhere an age of increasing class and status consciousness. Historians were themselves evolving into a close profession, recruited through education. The very few who made their way into it from relatively humble backgrounds were much more likely to remain, because of the difficult experience of social mobility, withdrawn, like Michelet in his early adulthood. Among these Michelet was exceptional: few shared either the political commitment or the personality which enabled him to break back into easy contact with the people. The exclusive professionalism exemplified in Germany was to prove more compelling. And the very fecundity of production of secondary oral sources made it more possible, by the mid-nineteenth century, for a great historian to write without the use of any 'living documents'.

Michelet himself knew this as well as any man of his time. In 1831 he had been appointed chief of the historical section of the National Archives of France, an immense collection which had been brought together when the French Revolution 'emptied the contents of monasteries, castles, and other receptacles on one common floor'. He used it for his own *History of France*, and his afterword to its second volume provides an equally telling psychological insight, this time into the personality of the archival historian. It is a species of fantasy hymn:

The day will be ours, for we are death. All gravitates to us, and every revolution turns to our profit. Sooner or later, conquering or conquered come to us. We have the monarchy, safe and sound, from its alpha to its omega, . . . the keys of the Bastille, the minute of the declaration of the rights of man.

As for me, when I first entered these catacombs of manuscripts, this wonderful necropolis of national monuments, I would willingly have exclaimed . . . 'This is my rest for ever; here will I dwell, for I have desired it'!

However, I was not slow to discern in the midst of the apparent silence of these galleries, a movement and a murmur which were not those of death. These papers and parchments, so long deserted, desired no better than to be restored to the light of day: yet they are not papers, but lives of men, of provinces, and of nations . . . All lived and spoke, and surrounded the author with an army speaking a hundred tongues.

As I breathed on their dust, I saw them rise up. They raised from the sepulchre, one the head, the other the hand, as in the Last Judgement of Michelangelo, or in the Dance of Death. This galvanic dance, which they performed around me, I have essayed to reproduce in this work.<sup>35</sup>

The notion that the document is not mere paper, but reality, is here converted into a macabre gothic delusion, a romantic nightmare. But it is nevertheless one of the psychological assumptions which underpin the documentary empirical tradition in history generally, and not in France alone. In a much more careful, veiled form, for example, one may find the same dream in that early masterpiece of English professional scholarship, F. W. Maitland's *Domesday Book and Beyond* (1897). 'If English history is to be understood, the law of Domesday Book must be mastered'. Maitland looks forward to a future in which the documents have all been reorganised, edited, analysed. Only then, he writes, 'by slow degrees the thoughts of our forefathers, their common thoughts about common things, will have become thinkable once more'. And the dream is there in the title itself. 'Domesday Book appears to me, not indeed as the known, but as the knowable. Beyond is still very dark: but the way to it lies through the Norman record'.<sup>36</sup>

It was this documentary tradition which emerged during the nineteenth century as the central discipline of a new professional history. Its roots go back to the negative scepticism of the Enlightenment as well as to the archival dreams of the Romantics. We have already met the Scottish historian William Robertson at breakfast with Dr Johnson. Robertson, in his *History of the Reign of Charles V* (1769), publicly reprimanded Voltaire for his failure to cite sources. He had himself gone to unusual lengths to base his *History of Scotland* on original documents, and was able to cite seven major archives, including the British Museum, although 'that Noble Collection' was

not yet open to the public . . . Publick archives, as well as the repositories of private men, have been ransacked . . . But many important papers have escaped the notice of (others) . . . It was my duty to search for these, and I found this unpleasant task attended with considerable utility . . . By consulting them, I have been enabled, in many instances, to correct the inaccuracies of former Historians.

Archival research at this stage is thus seen essentially as a distasteful corrective duty, rather than a creative skill. And it is the same negative scepticism which

leads Robertson to reject out of hand the entire oral tradition of early Scottish history, dismissing it as 'the fabulous tales of . . . ignorant Chroniclers'. The history of Scotland before the tenth century was not even worth study. 'Everything beyond that short period to which well attested annals reach, is obscure . . . the region of pure fable and conjecture, and ought to be totally neglected'.<sup>37</sup>

It is less easy to see why this sceptical approach should have triumphed in the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, the same romanticism which breathed life into the documentary method also set going folklore collecting all over Europe, and recovered for the great epics and sagas of oral traditions the respect which they deserved. In Britain the folklore movement developed independently of professional history, on a local antiquarian or literary basis, largely amateur, and adopted its own special evolutionary theory of 'survivals' from Darwin. In France and Italy, where interest could be traced back at least to the eighteenth-century philosopher-historian Vico, folklore became a much more respected branch of scholarship. But it gained its greatest hold in Scandinavia and in Germany. Here, as in Britain, there had been earlier instances of collecting and publishing, but this initial antiquarianism was succeeded by the sophisticated methodology of ethnology, using a historical-geographical framework for systematic documentation and comparison. In this form it has, as we shall see, made a direct contribution to the modern oral history movement. At the same time it came to be seen as an important way of recovering a lost national spirit and culture, not only in Scandinavia, but also in Germany.

Equally important, the Romantic movement led in the philosophy of history to a widespread acceptance of the importance of cultural history and the need to understand the different standards of judgement of earlier epochs and, eventually, other societies. This was again especially true of Germany, where the narrowly confident universalistic rationalism of the Enlightenment had been resisted almost from the start, most notably by Herder, with his belief that the very essence of history was in its plenitude and variety. Here already were the first steps towards a cultural relativism.

However it was from Vienna that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the modern understanding of individual personality through psychology originated, carrying with it the implications of a less judgemental, more relativist attitude towards individuals in history. German philosophers of history unfortunately took little consistent interest in psychology. But the possibility of a new understanding of the historical value of individual life stories was certainly there, and at least one German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey, came at times very close to it, as is demonstrated in some of his reflections on the *Meaning in History*:

Autobiography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us. Here is the outward, phenomenal course of a life which forms the basis for understanding what has produced it within

a certain environment . . . The person who seeks the connecting threads in the history of his life has already, from different points of view, created a coherence in that life which he is now putting into words . . . He has, in his memory, singled out and accentuated the moments which he experienced as significant; others he has allowed to sink into forgetfulness . . . Thus, the first problem of grasping and presenting historical connections is already half solved by life.<sup>38</sup>

How was this opportunity lost? What led the documentary method to its narrowing, scarcely mitigated triumph in the very same decades through German example? This is a question which needs to be more fully explored. But part of the explanation undoubtedly lies in the changing social position of the historian. The development of an academic historical profession in the nineteenth century brought with it a more precise and conscious social standing. It also required that historians, like other professionals, should have some form of distinctive training. Both the research doctorate and the systematic teaching of historical methodology are derived from Germany. Research training was begun by Leopold von Ranke after his appointment in 1825 as professor at Berlin. Ranke was already thirty, but he was to live to the age of ninety, and during the succeeding decades his research seminar became the most influential historical training ground in Europe.

He was in some ways an old-fashioned figure, a sceptic as much as a romantic despite his fascination with medieval Germany. It was a rejection of Scott's novels as factually unreliable which first led him to resolve that in his own work he would avoid all fabrication and fiction, and stick severely to the facts. But in his first great masterpiece, the *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations* (1824), despite his famous destruction of Guiccardini's credibility and his dictum that history should be written *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* (as it really was), he also declared himself opposed to research for its own sake; it was only in the final stage of his work that he had resorted to archives for confirmation.

Moreover, although the *History of the Popes* (1837) was based on a more active approach, he certainly never shared the positive fascination with archives of his contemporary Michelet. Indeed, later in life he evolved a routine which avoided any direct contact with archives. Documents were brought to him in his own home by his own research assistants, who would read them aloud. If he so instructed, the assistant would make a copy of the document. Ranke would work each day from 9:30 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. with his first assistant, and from 7:00 p.m. with his second, in between taking a walk with a servant in the park, dinner, and a brief sleep.

What mattered most was the relentlessness of his systematic, critical spirit. He directly trained more than a hundred eminent German university historians. In his research seminar, although they were allowed to choose their own topic, he set them on to medieval documentary work simply because

that was the most difficult to master. And when professional training began to spread, first to France in the 1860s and later elsewhere in Europe and in America, it was founded on Ranke's assumptions. C. V. Langlois and Charles Seignobos of the Sorbonne opened their classic manual, *Introduction to the Study of History* (1898), with the unqualified statement: 'The historian works with documents ... There is no substitute for documents: no documents, no history'.<sup>39</sup>

The documentary method not only provided an ideal training ground, but also offered three other key advantages to the professional historian. First, the test of a young scholar's ability could become the writing of a monograph, the exploration of a corner of the past, perhaps minute, but based on original documents, and therefore, in that sense at least, original.

Secondly, it gave to the discipline a distinct method of its own, which—unlike the use of oral evidence—could be claimed as an expert specialism, not shared by others. This self-identification around a distinct method like the archaeological dig, the sociological survey, the anthropologist's fieldtrip, is typical of nineteenth-century professionalism and had the added function of making the evaluation of expertise an internal matter, not subject to the judgement of outsiders.

Thirdly, for the increasing number of historians who preferred being shut up in their studies to mixing with either the society of the rich and powerful or with ordinary people, documentary research was an invaluable social protection. By cutting themselves off they could also pretend to an objective neutrality, and thence even come to believe that insulation from the social world was a positive professional virtue. Nor is it accidental that the cradle of this academic professionalism should have been nineteenth-century Germany, where university professors constituted a narrow patrician middle-class group, particularly sharply cut off through their isolation in small provincial towns, political impotence, and the acute hierarchical status consciousness of Germany, from the realities of political and social life.

In Britain the full development of these tendencies came relatively late. Eminent late nineteenth-century scholars like Thorold Rogers and J. R. Green did not trouble to footnote their main works, and even the *Cambridge Modern History*, launched by Lord Acton in 1902 as 'the final stage in the conditions of historical learning', was intended to be without footnotes.<sup>40</sup> The academic establishment was still widely linked both through kin and personal careers with London society and the political world. Thus Beatrice and Sidney Webb, in the midst of their political work for the Poor Law Commission, were also writing the chapter on social movements for the *Cambridge Modern History*; while R. C. K. Ensor, who wrote the highly successful Oxford volume *England 1870–1914* (1936), had spent most of his life in journalism, politics, and social work. It was not until the post Second World War expansion of the universities that the research doctorate became the standard method of entry into the historical

profession. Its full advantages, and disadvantages, are therefore a comparative novelty to British historians.

By this stage the ideal moment of the documentary method had already passed. It always had its critics. Even Langlois and Seignobos warned against the 'mental deformations' which critical scholarship had led to in Germany: a textual criticism lost in insignificant minutiae, separated by a chasm from not just general culture, but the larger questions of history itself. 'Some of the most accomplished critics merely make a trade of their skill, and have never reflected on the ends to which their art is a means'. They also commented on the ease with which a 'spontaneous credulity' of anything documented can develop and argued for both analytic criticism and comparative evidence for establishing facts: 'It is by combining observations that every science is built up: a scientific fact is a centre on which several different observations converge'. Their first point is repeated by R. G. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* (1946), who condemns a training that 'led to the corollary that nothing was a legitimate problem for history unless it was either a microscopic problem, or else capable of being treated as a group of microscopic problems'.<sup>41</sup>

### The ebbing of documentary credibility

If such comments had force then, they have still more today in a rapidly changing world which demands explanations for its own instability. An escape from major problems of historical interpretation into myopic specialisation is increasingly difficult to justify. The documentary tradition has thus found itself increasingly on the defensive in the face of the growth of the social sciences, with their claims to superior powers of interpretation and theory.

Still more critically, the documentary school faces a shifting of its very foundation, for the document itself has changed its social function in three ways. First, the most important communications between people are no longer made through long-lasting documents (if they ever were) but orally, by meeting, or by phone or text messages. Secondly, letters, probably the most important documentary source since the eighteenth century, have been replaced by e-mails—which rarely survive when computers are changed. Thirdly, the record itself has lost its innocence (if it ever had one); it is now understood to have potential value as future propaganda.

The stages of this change were shrewdly discussed by A. J. P. Taylor, the prime master of the modern English documentary school. They first presented themselves in the documentation of diplomatic history:

The historian of the Middle Ages, who looks down on the 'contemporary' historian, is inclined to forget that his prized sources are an accidental collection, which have survived the ravages of time and which the archivist allows him to see. All sources are suspect; and there is no reason why the diplomatic historian should be less critical than his colleagues.



Our sources are primarily the records which foreign offices keep of their main dealings with each other; and the writer who bases himself solely on the archives is likely to claim scholarly virtue. But foreign policy has to be defined as well as executed . . . Public opinion had to be considered; the public had to be educated . . . Foreign policy had to be justified both before and after it was made.

The historian will never forget that the material thus provided was devised for purposes of advocacy, not as a contribution to pure scholarship; but he would be foolish if he rejected it as worthless . . . The same is true of the volumes of memoirs, in which statesmen seek to justify themselves in the eyes of their fellow countrymen or of posterity. All politicians have selective memories; and this is most true of politicians who originally practised as historians. The diplomatic record is itself drawn on as an engine of publicity. Here Great Britain led the way . . . [in the parliamentary Blue Books; followed in the 1860s by France and Austria, and later by Germany and Russia.]

Specially favoured historians were also allowed access to the archives to write their histories. Next came the fuller publications from archives by governments, normally either to justify or to discredit their predecessors. The first of these great collections was the French series on the origins of the 1870 war, published from 1910 onwards; but 'the real battle of diplomatic documents' opened at the end of the First World War with the Russian publication of the secret treaties, and then successive series issued from Germany, France, Britain, and Italy.<sup>42</sup>

From the 1920s, therefore, no diplomat could possibly forget that any document which he eventually retained might later be used against him. The original record must therefore be as judicious as possible, and periodic weeding of the files was always desirable. It was similar with home documents. Richard Crossman, former Cabinet minister, observed:

I've discovered, having read all the Cabinet papers about the meetings I attended, that the documents often bear virtually no relation to what actually happened. I know now that the Cabinet Minutes are written by Burke Trend (secretary to the Cabinet), not to say what did happen in the Cabinet, but what the Civil Service wishes it to be believed happened, so that a clear directive can be given.

Ian Cobain has recently described the more astonishing tampering with official archives, part of a systematic policy across the British Empire, as the colonies were winning their independences after 1945. In order to encourage good memories of British rule and ignore the harshest evidence, authorities removed large numbers of documents—at least two kilometers of shelving—and hid them in a secret archive in Britain, unlisted and untraceable. Others were simply burnt. Fake documents were then created to fill the gaps.<sup>43</sup>



In the decades before the First World War, however, such tampering was only beginning. Equally important was the fact that this was the golden era of the personal letter. When dealing with the post First World War period, Taylor himself has argued for the use of 'nonliterary sources . . . The more evidence we have, the more questioning we often become. Now we have recording instruments for both sight and sound'. But he saw such needs in contrast to an earlier period:

The seventy years covered by this book are an ideal field for the diplomatic historian. Full records were kept, without thought that they would ever be published, except for the occasional dispatch which a British statesman composed 'for the Blue Book'. It was the great age of writing. Even close colleagues wrote to each other, sometimes two or three times a day . . . Now the telephone and the personal meeting leave gaps in our knowledge which can never be filled.<sup>44</sup>

We have arrived, in short, at the age of the telephone and the recorder: a change in methods of communication which will in time bring about as important an alteration to the character of history as the manuscript, the printing press, and the archive have in the past.

It looks, too, as if it may be a swifter change. The technological basis has certainly evolved with great rapidity. The first recording machine, the phonograph, was invented in 1877, and the steel wire recorder just before 1900. By the 1930s a considerably improved version was good enough for use in broadcasting. A decade later magnetic tape was available and the first tape recorders of the reel-to-reel type sold on the market. The much cheaper cassette recorders came in the early 1960s. From the 2000s this was supplanted by digital recording, with its much greater editorial facility. Today it is practicable for any historian to consider using a recorder in collecting evidence. This transformation of technology provides one reason why the modern oral history movement has its origins in many countries in nationally funded enterprises, yet has more recently been growing equally fast as a form of diffused local and popular history.

### **Patterns of the revival of oral history in English-speaking countries: North America**

Let us turn then to the pattern of the revival. We will begin with the cradles of oral history in the English-speaking world.<sup>45</sup> Here North America has seen the most explosive growth of all. The antecedents of the movement there go back many years. H. H. Bancroft's interviewing of the 1860s was succeeded by other intermittent work on the frontier settlements, and the American Folklore Society dates back to 1888. American autobiography has been a flourishing form, and not confined to the elites. For example, in 1906 Hamilton Hold, managing editor of the *Independent*, published a collection of working-class brief lives, mostly based on interviews with his journalists. He called it, perhaps provocatively, *The*

*Life Stories of (Undistinguished) Americans as Told by Themselves*, but suggested that these 'lifelets' could be significant both politically and sociologically. He had read Charles Booth and Jack London. His collection included stories from many migrants from both Europe and the Far East, now working in sweatshops, peddling on the streets, as nurses and cooks, in the woods and in the fields. Perhaps the most remarkable story is of a 'negro peon' who went as a free black to the South, only to find himself forced to work with convicts, while his wife became the mistress of the plantation owner, who made them give their son away.

A collection of stories like this makes it easier to understand the great breaking away of American urban sociology from its English-influenced origins to the Chicago studies of the 1920s, like Harvey Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, vibrant with direct observation and interpretation of city life, and centrally concerned with documenting and explaining it. In these early years the Chicago sociologists were remarkably inventive in their methods, making use of direct interviewing, participant observation, documentary research, mapping, and statistics. They developed a special interest in the life history method for studying two aspects of urban social problems.

The first was a practical contribution to criminology. Clifford Shaw's masterpieces, such as *The Jack Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story* (1930) and *Brothers in Crime* (1938), used a mere few of many hundreds of life stories which he collected from the youth of Chicago's inner city slums. Shaw's technique can be traced back not only to Henry Mayhew's lives of London criminals, but also to the traditional seeking of confessions from convicts on the scaffold or—as the reformers renamed the prison—in the penitentiary.

In Britain John Clay, the prison chaplain at Preston, encouraged inmates to write or dictate 'short narratives of their lives, their delinquencies, their self convictions, and their penitence', believing such stories to illustrate 'a history of which we are yet too ignorant, the actual social and moral state of our poor fellow subjects'. Clay published some of the stories he gathered in his prison reports from the 1840s, using them to argue in support of the separate cell system. Similarly in America in the 1900s Judge Ben Lindsay of Denver used 'life speech' confessions as a means of treating youths in his model juvenile court, and Dr William Healey, founder of the Institute for Juvenile Research, which Shaw later led, and originator of the psychiatric case conference, used a parallel 'own story' technique both for therapy and for seeking understanding of delinquents' own attitudes. The crucial influence of this life story approach in social casework and therapy today is so fundamental that it is taken for granted, but was then new. Equally Shaw's books, setting life stories with great care in their family and social context, showed so convincingly that delinquency was not just the outcome of pathological character but a response to social deprivation that eventually they seemed redundant: the point was taken.<sup>46</sup>

The second focus, long-term social change, overlaps more obviously with oral history, drawing on older informants, but as much by persuading them to write autobiographies or diaries, or lend letters, as by life story interviewing. Thus Thomas and Znaniecki in their massive pioneering account of immigration, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–20), gave an entire volume to the *Life Record of an Immigrant*, a specially solicited written autobiography which provides a link between studies on social disorganisation in Poland and the origins of emigration, and on the Polish community in Chicago. Znaniecki continued to work in both Poland and America. He founded the distinctive ‘humanistic tradition’ in Polish sociology, which uses public competitions to collect written ‘memoirs’ on particular themes. It was developed by radical social commentators to demonstrate the plight of the Polish peasantry and unemployed in the 1930s (and inspired a similar British volume of *Memoirs of the Unemployed* collected through a radio appeal in 1933).<sup>47</sup> In post-war Poland, memoir competitions became an astonishingly lively form of popular culture. A continuation of American interest can be seen in John Dollard’s early study, *Criteria for the Life History* (1935). But direct links with more recent life story sociology are surprisingly rare. Polish work is little known in the West; the Chicago school, despite such a promising beginning, before long became a victim of professionalisation among sociologists, and retreated from the immediacy of the city around it to the security of research doctorates based on statistical analysis and abstract general theory.

Its legacy was not forgotten. It found a brilliant popular parallel in the work of the Chicago broadcaster and oral historian, Studs Terkel. A tailor’s son who came from New York to Chicago as a child, jazz enthusiast, believer in ‘socialism with a human face’, Studs worked as an actor and entertainer before he found his vocation for sixty years as the host of a radio talk show. Beginning with *Division Street: America* (1967), a vivid portrait of Chicago itself, he has moulded his conversations with ordinary citizens to form a series of bestselling books, each confronting big issues: war or work, unemployment or race, people’s hopes and dreams.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, in academic research, Shaw’s own Institute launched a fertile revival of life stories in the sociology of deviance with the publication of *The Fantastic Lodge: The Autobiography of a Girl Drug Addict* (1961), edited by Helen Hughes from recordings made with Howard Becker.

Another link with the present is through American anthropology. The interwar years were a period in which the general tendency in anthropology was strongly influenced by Malinowski’s argument that oral traditions, just because their key function was to justify and explain the present, had virtually no value as history: myth was ‘neither a fictitious story, nor an account of a dead past; it is a statement of a bigger reality still partially alive’. Although his views applied more to oral tradition than to direct personal life story evidence, they undoubtedly inhibited any move in this direction too.<sup>49</sup> The European anthropologists who had scattered for their fieldwork to the

remotest corners of the colonial empires rarely showed concern for the actual words of their informants.

In America, however, anthropologists working among North American Indians and in Mexico were also in contact with the development of psychology and sociology, and took up the life history method. Thus the work of Oscar Lewis and Sidney Mintz from the 1950s can be traced back, through Leo Simmons' *Sun Chief*, an oral history project jointly sponsored by the anthropologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists at Yale, to Paul Radin's *Crashing Thunder* (1926), an American Indian life story inspired by the need 'of obtaining an inside view of their culture from their own lips and by their own initiative'. These antecedents include Ruth Landes' brilliant portrayal of nomadic Canadian Indian hunting people in *The Ojibwa Woman* (1938), which includes a rare early collection of women's life stories.<sup>50</sup>

Most striking of all was an experiment launched under government sponsorship to fight unemployment in the New Deal: the Federal Writers Project of the 1930s. An astonishing series of life story interviews was collected right across the country from former black slaves, workers, and homesteaders, the richness of which only more recently came to be fully appreciated. Much of this material remained long unpublished, but one contemporary selection, published in North Carolina and edited by W. T. Couch under the title *These Are Our Lives*, shows a remarkable understanding of the radical potential of oral history. Sociology, Couch argued, had been 'content in the main to treat human beings as abstractions', or when case histories were used, to dissect them as 'segments of experience' in the analysis of particular problems such as social maladjustment. But it would be possible, 'through life histories selected to represent the different types present among the people', in appropriate proportions, to portray an entire community. His own collection of life histories was intended to represent for their region 'a fair picture of the structure and working of society. So far as I know, this method of portraying the quality of life of a people, of revealing the real workings of institutions, customs, habits, has never before been used for the people of any region or country'.<sup>51</sup>

Despite such anticipations, it was from another direction that the key step in the modern movement came: political history. 'Oral history', the (American) Oral History Association declared, 'was established in 1948 as a modern technique for historical documentation when Columbia University historian Allan Nevins began recording the memoirs of persons significant in American life'. The Columbia approach, originally a privately financed 'great man' recording project, proved immensely attractive to both national foundations and local fund givers, and especially to retiring politicians. With a much broader scope, at its fiftieth anniversary in 1998, celebrated with the issue of a CD of excerpts, the Columbia Center for Oral History archive, with now over eight thousand testimonies, is probably the world's largest national oral history collection. It includes more than a thousand life story interviews with leading figures in

American philanthropy, government, media, health, and science, and special collections on the New Deal, the civil rights campaigns, and the women's movement. Indeed, through the 1950s and 1960s it was 'oral history' in America. It was only from the 1970s that the oral history method was vigorously taken up for labour history, Indian history, the civil rights movement, black history, and folklore, and in the 1980s extended into new fields like women's history. The largest collection in the United States today, holding an international collection of thirteen thousand interviews, is in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

The North American scene is now one of both variety and vitality. As early as 1971 in the United States and Canada together there were reported to be 100,000 recorded hours of interviews collected, and more than a million pages of transcript. In the 1990s a survey of Canada alone revealed some 1,800 collections in 350 repositories. These figures reflect the sheer resources that have made such a scale of fieldwork possible. Both countries have lively associations. In the United States the Oral History Association was formed in 1966 and has some 1,200 members, with annual meetings that typically bring together academic and local work, and publishes the *Oral History Review*. There are also regional associations, and cross-border links with the Canadian Oral History Association, formed in 1974, and its lively journal, which is now online, enabling the inclusion of audio clips alongside text. Canadian oral history has been notably significant in supporting the cultures and material rights of Canada's First Nations peoples, the Innu and the Inuit. And Concordia University in Montreal, with its 'Stories Matter' website and its pioneering work on migration and digitisation in oral history, is now one of the most innovative oral history centres worldwide.

More than anywhere else, in North America oral history collecting and publishing has become a part of popular culture. One consequence is that an exceptionally high proportion of American oral historians are providing support services as local or national archivists.<sup>52</sup> In terms of publications, there are many books on local history and also about popular music and musicians, especially jazz. There is a series of memories of racing drivers, and delightful nostalgic books like *Counter Culture* (2009) on waitresses in independent coffee shops.<sup>53</sup> But alongside community work, especially from the 1980s onwards, there was also a growing academic current, especially in women's history, labour history, and gay history, clearly reflected in the papers and bibliographies of the *Oral History Review*. Particularly through the influence of Ron Grele, later head of the Columbia programme, who founded the *International Journal of Oral History* in 1980, drawing attention to perspectives from anthropology and from Europe, American oral history became a more reflective and outward-looking movement.

Meanwhile oral history had been developing strongly in other parts of the world, and gradually connecting to make an international movement, which

was symbolised by the founding of the International Oral History Association in 1996. Developments outside the English-speaking world have often had different priorities, reflecting their different histories. Thus in Latin America oral history has been particularly actively involved with political struggle and resistance to authoritarian regimes, while in ex-Communist regions the prime concern of oral historians has been to break through official silences and propaganda to reveal the real experience of their peoples.

### **Australia and New Zealand**

Within the English-speaking world, despite many common influences there have also been differences. Oral history in Australasia has been perhaps closest to the Anglo-American patterns, influenced by both American and British practice, and by a broad-based commitment to create a distinctive national culture. The start of oral history here began early. Beginning in 1957 Hazel de Berg began recording prominent Australian artists and writers, and this became the starting point for the now substantial oral history collections at the National Library of Australia in Canberra. Most states, and a number of museums, such as the Migration Museum in Adelaide, also hold oral archives. Wendy Lowenstein began recording labour history in the 1970s. The Oral History Association of Australia was founded in 1988, holding regular national and state conferences and publishing a journal.<sup>54</sup>

From 1986 the Social History Unit of the Australian Broadcasting Commission began a weekly oral history radio series. There was a massive injection of national funding for the 1988 bicentennial of white settlement, when individuals and communities were encouraged to document their histories and identities, and a national project recorded six hundred interviews focusing on ordinary life in the 1930s. There were also projects funded by the states in the 1980s: by New South Wales on migration histories, and by South Australia on the cultural context of unemployment. The New Zealand Oral History Association was founded in 1987, and here too radio work has been important.

Australian oral history began with a strikingly radical tone, but over time the early celebration of the white working class in Wendy Lowenstein's *Under the Hook* (1982) was succeeded by Alastair Thomson's reflective works on memories of war in *Anzac Memories* (1994), and then in *Moving Stories* (2011) on migration.

In both Australia and New Zealand there has also been an increasing pre-occupation with the oral histories of indigenous communities, especially on land rights. This partly reflects national shame at the extent of the massacres and brutality with which the indigenous inhabitants of Australia were pushed aside to make way for the white settlers. The lead here has been taken by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra, which both collects and publishes Aboriginal histories. Through its family and community history programmes it assists in putting people in touch with lost

family members. The website of the 'Stolen Generations' project tells the stories of the forced abduction of children from mixed parents for adoption by white families, as part of a deliberate policy of eradicating their Aboriginal cultural heritage.

This rescue work with essentially social ends contrasts with the situation in New Zealand, whose indigenous culture survived much more intact, including the well-established oral history of the Maori. Thus Raymond Firth, the future classic anthropologist of the Pacific Islands and Malaysia, who was born in 1901 and grew up on a New Zealand farm, as a teenager was already reading books about the Maori, debating land court decisions, visiting Maori buildings, learning the Maori language, and making Maori friends.<sup>55</sup> Today, a renewed wider oral history, crossing cultures, both academic and community-based, flourishes in New Zealand.

### **The British Isles: Ireland, Wales, and Scotland**

Lastly, back to the British Isles. Even here, despite much in common, there have been some contrasts too, especially as a result of differences in attitude to folklore and oral tradition. A strong interest had developed in folklore, mainly on an amateur basis, but in England folklore studies have never escaped from the stigma of amateurism. From the 1950s to the 1970s the most important centres were the Dialect Survey based at Leeds University and the subsequent Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at Sheffield. But in Ireland and Wales, and to a lesser extent in Scotland, folklore was reinforced through association with minority Celtic languages and nationalist movements.

The Irish government had begun to assist recording before 1930, and then set up the Irish Folklore Commission (1935–70). Its collectors have worked throughout the republic, recording stories, ballads, history, and prophecies, so that the archive holds over one hundred thousand items, although it is only partly catalogued. Irish folklore studies have been strongly attacked for their over-romanticisation of the past by Hugh Brody in *Inishkillane* (1973). But they have a popular audience, as indicated by books like Kevin Kearn's *Dublin Street Life and Lore* and by local projects like the Clare Oral History and Folk Group.<sup>56</sup> From the start, the Folklore Commission had direct links with Swedish ethnological and folklorist scholars, and also made use of recording machines.

In Wales, the main centre became the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans. In Scotland, systematic collecting was led from the Edinburgh University School of Scottish Studies, whose archive was started in 1951 by two poets, Calum Maclean and Hamish Henderson, originally with a predominantly Gaelic and literary focus but later also drawing in social and English language material. Currently it holds more than nine thousand recordings. Regrettably, as in Dublin, it long proved difficult to make much of the collection publicly available, but fortunately in recent years more has been digitised and made accessible.



More recently, the most significant Irish work has focused on the controversial role of women in the republic, especially the pushing of married women out of work and the suppression of sexuality through the denial of abortion, backed by the Catholic Church. Jenny Beale, a feminist activist and teacher, was the standard-bearer with her *Women in Ireland: Voices of Change* (1986), since followed by other books on women in the house and out at work.<sup>57</sup> There have also been two major works from Northern Ireland: one on storytelling, by the folklorist Henry Glassie, and the other on the 'troubles' and political violence, by Graham Dawson.<sup>58</sup>

Scottish oral history work has covered a much wider range of themes. Early on it was centred on the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh, particularly through the leadership of Eric Cregeen, who had been appointed as a social historian there in 1966 and was already researching rural cultures in Argyll and Tiree. When the Scottish Oral History Group was formed in 1978, Cregeen became first chairman, and Christopher Smout, who was researching family and sexuality and illegitimacy in the rural north-east, became president. But quite soon the focus had shifted to the major cities, inspired especially by labour history and women's history. Today Scottish oral history's most vigorous mixture, both of academics and townspeople, and of themes, is to be found at the Oral History Centre of Strathclyde University in Glasgow.

Various influences pushed Scottish oral history work in this direction. One was the success of *Odyssey*, the immensely popular radio series created by Billy Kaye, first broadcast by Radio Scotland in 1980–82, in which working-class Scots were juxtaposed with traditional folk music, without a narrator. A second was the availability of state funding. Thus with Manpower Services support, Dundee Oral History Project, which was coordinated by Graham Smith, undertook reminiscence work with elderly residents of the city and at the same time created educational packs for schools. Since the 1990s there has been even more generous Heritage Lottery Funding—according to one calculation, £4 million towards more than a hundred projects. A third factor has been the sustained strength of both labour oral history and women's oral history. There has been other important work—on leisure, on science, on religion, on rural cultures, on migration—but the driving forces have been for labour and women.<sup>59</sup>

With labour history much was owed to the organising abilities of Ian MacDougall, historian and teacher, who was secretary of the Scottish section of the Society for Labour History. He published well-edited books of testimonies himself, celebrating working-class activism and keeping commentary sparse, rather like the work of Robert and Helen Lynd in North America. Another early success was Joan Smith's project with the militant Harry McShane—which resulted in the most insightful of all the Red Clydesider autobiographies, *No Mean Fighter* (1978).<sup>60</sup>

There has been a steady stream of work since then, most recently with Ronald Johnston and Arthur McIvor in *Lethal Work* and *Miner's Lung*, looking at the



tragic health consequences of asbestos and coal mining, and Andrew Perchard in *Aluminiumville*, looking at the destruction wrought on the environment by global business.

Women's history sometimes overlapped with labour history, as with Neil Rafeek's *Communist Women in Scotland*, many of whom were active trade unionists. There was also involvement in the women's suffrage movement. Bob Cant has documented lesbian experiences. Annmarie Hughes has argued that 'the interwar years were a period of extreme gender antagonism' and a growing level of abuse and violence, which reflected men's challenged masculinity in an era of mass unemployment.<sup>61</sup> From the late 1970s there were support centres such as the Glasgow Women's Studies Group and the nearby Stirling Women's Oral History Project run by Jayne Stephenson, who also edited their booklets. She later used this material to write critically on religiosity among women.

One other major theme is the social life of the countryside, which in Scotland varied a great deal between regions. An outstanding early study was Ian Carter's *Poor Man's Country* (1979), about the farm servants of the north-east and the culture of the bothy ballads. Lynn Jamieson and Claire Toynbee used recorded childhoods from all across Scotland for their *Country Bairns* (1992). Finally, there are the coastal fishing communities. In the 1970s I spent many weeks recording in Aberdeen and the north-east, the Western Isles, and Shetland, for *Living the Fishing*, trying to understand the connections between work, gender, child-raising, and local forms of religion—which proved hard to untangle! The sharp local variety can make comparisons especially illuminating, but each of these rural cultures is rich and fascinating—as indeed Lynn Abrams has shown in her suggestive monograph on women in Shetland.<sup>62</sup>

The last major theme is migration. With Scotland this is usually seen in terms of outward migration, for example to Canada, where there are more Gaelic speakers than in Scotland itself. But there were always in-migrants too. Italians came as part of the ice cream trade, and as Wendy Ugolini has shown, even their grandchildren had a difficult time in wartime. But by far the biggest group of migrants were from Ireland. Mark Boyle has recorded Irish Catholic experiences and tried to interpret them with a framework taken from Sartre's colonialism, which fortunately does not overwhelm his vivid material. I particularly liked the story of a migrant's return to visit his relatives in Ireland.<sup>63</sup>

#### THE MIGRANT RETURNS HOME

*'Interviewee 54' said that his paternal grandfather had come to Scotland from County Meath in Ireland in 1907. He himself was from the third generation in Scotland, born in 1937. He recalls his first visit to the family home in Meath, aged eleven:*

I went to my uncle's, I think it was 1948, and the place was like a midden . . . We had left the shores and expanded ourselves and done well. So we were looked upon as being sort of toffs even . . . So we arrived up with cases and my uncle, who was quite old at the time and his wife, they had wellies on, big wellie boots. There were hens and chickens running about the place and his wife had a long black skirt, all old fashioned stuff. She'd got herself tidied up for us coming . . . So we arrived and we had tea, and all the cups were cracked and a wee bit unwashed even. So we were to sleep in the best room, but it turned out it was the only room. All the walls were white-washed and insects were crawling up. So we went into this big room and we lay down. They all went away and sort of peeked in and, 'have a nice night' and all the rest of it. And the hens outside were all squeaking. So I took the sheets off and the blankets. I felt they were a wee bit wet, sort of damp. So I'm lying in the dampness here . . .

But so what. We couldn't care. This was the first night, we'd arrived in the old country, and it was going to be great. This was where your grandfather was born . . . They were telling stories into the night . . . This was where I hailed from. It was a dump to everyone else but I felt dreamy about it.

Mark Boyle, *Metropolitan Anxieties: On the Meaning of the Irish Catholic Adventure in Scotland* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 135.

## The British Isles: England

This brings us back to the last phase of the story in England from the 1940s to today. Here, as in Scotland, the coming to power of the working-class movement in the 1945 Labour government and the popular confidence from the long post-war boom years brought, if more slowly, a parallel change at home: a quickening interest in labour history, by the 1960s broadening into social history, paralleled by a new enthusiasm for working-class autobiography, and later for television series using ordinary people's memories, like Stephen Peet's 'Yesterday's Witness'.

Before that, the 1950s were the high moment for radio. The story of radio has been neglected because as a medium it is ephemeral, and while the BBC's written archives are ample, the audio archives are patchy and hard to access. There had been a little recording of ordinary people's voices in the interwar years, most often as 'characters'. But at this stage broadcasters were not ready for naturalism, or recording outside the studio. Their words would usually be recorded, then transcribed, edited, and then read back by the interviewees themselves or by an actor. Recording was then very formal, and people were expected to dress well to enter the studio.

In the post-war radio scene the influence of Studs Terkel was increasingly important, not only in North America but also in Australia and Britain. One notable British radio producer in the 1950s was Dennis Mitchell, with his beautiful studies of places based on people talking. Tony Parker started his work recording the voices of criminals on radio. But without doubt the climax of post-war radio was the *Radio Ballads*, in which two talented radical producers, Charles Parker and Philip Donellan, combined interviews with working people—most famously miners and fishermen—with folksongs by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. These programmes focused on the heroic dimension of workers and manual work. But such programmes were expensive and time-consuming to produce, and were not continued when the funding priority was switched to television in the 1960s.

Nevertheless, good work continued on local radio into the 1970s and 1980s, backed by the new wave of popular enthusiasm for local history: most notably Billy Kaye in Scotland and Carl Chinn in Birmingham. BBC London was particularly important as the first station to give space to black speakers. Its shows were often produced with a black host, Alex Pascal. Another important channel in the 1970s and 1980s was hospital radio, provided for patients through internal radio stations, often broadcasting stories and memories which could appeal to older patients.

In the 1950s some historians became aware through their own radio activities of the remarkable resources of the BBC Sound Archives, which had been founded in the 1930s. The crucial influence came, however, through a new sociology of the 1950s concerned not just with poverty but with working-class culture and community in its own right. Some of these classic studies, such as Peter Townsend's *The Family Life of Old People* and Brian Jackson's and Dennis Marsden's *Education and the Working Class*, made an effective use of individual working-class memories, while Richard Hoggart's semi-autobiographical *The Uses of Literacy* sought to interpret working-class forms of thought in speech and oral tradition. With Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), this new sympathy was matched with a history which sought 'to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" handloom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity', seeing their ideas instead as 'valid in terms of their own experience'.<sup>64</sup>

This convergence of sociology and history was encouraged through the founding of the new universities of the 1960s with their interdisciplinary experiments, and the rapid expansion of a sociology which was showing an increasing concern with the historical dimension in social analysis. The potential of oral history was brought home through the popular success of Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (1969), a blend of literature, history, and sociology based on interviews from Suffolk country people. Nor is it an accident that one of the most significant books using oral evidence was to be a historical

study of the relationship between religion, economics, and class consciousness by a sociologist, Robert Moore's *Pit-men, Preachers and Politics*. Thea Vigne and I started our own national interview survey of family life, work, and community before 1918, which was to be the basis of *The Edwardians* (1975), from the sociology department of Essex University in 1968. We drew on the sociological experience of colleagues such as Peter Townsend and were given the financial support of the newly established Social Science Research Council.

Since then oral history has grown steadily in Britain. The Oral History Society was formed in 1973, and within six years had some six hundred members, rising to more than a thousand in the 2000s, its journal *Oral History* circulating internationally. From the start, the larger new projects have tended to be in social history, funded by government research councils, and strongly shaped by sociological influence. The link with sociology has remained strong, although, as the journal *Auto/biography* demonstrated, much sociological interest has radically shifted from the empirical to the subjective and introspective, and even to fiction—a parallel with the recent tendency to self-biography among anthropologists; a reorientation even sharper than the parallel changes in oral history itself.<sup>65</sup>

Earlier, one particularly important step was in military history, for the Imperial War Museum set up its own generously funded Department of Sound Archives, becoming a model for museum work. The growth of the oral history movement also brought renewed activity in those branches of history which, for different reasons, had retained at least a minority tradition of oral fieldwork: recent political history, labour history, and local history.

In recent political history the change has been least obvious, because although often not cited, there has been continuous use of the interview as a method of exploration, discovering documents, and checking interpretation. A modern political biographer would always seek to learn from conversation with a subject, just as, for example, John Morley did from the ageing Gladstone. David Butler could even write that his *Electoral System in Britain 1918–51* 'owes more to the personal recollections of the surviving protagonists than to any published lives or historians'. But the advent of the tape recorder provided a more systematic method of collecting interview evidence. Thus Nelson Mandela acknowledges at the start of his majestic autobiography, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, that his writing draws on his 'many hours of interviews' with his collaborator Richard Stengel.<sup>66</sup>

With labour history the line of development from the Webbs is clearer. There has been a great deal of activity in this field, including substantial projects. Oral evidence has from the start been one of the distinctive marks of the History Workshop movement, which began out of working-class labour and social history at Ruskin College, Oxford, inspired above all by Raphael Samuel, and has widened its range to address itself, in its journal's words, 'to the fundamental elements of social life—work and material culture, class relations and politics, sex divisions and marriage, family, school, and home'. Its workshops in the

1970s especially encouraged the spread of oral history into family history and women's history. Professional historians had neglected women's history especially in the 1950s and 1960s, which was a major spur to its revival, propelled by second-wave feminism and under the banner of Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden from History*.<sup>67</sup>

There has also been a great growth in local history, although the pattern of development is much less easy to trace. The roots go back especially far in rural work. Gough has been mentioned as one type; folklore collecting provided another. A remarkable example was also set by the Women's Institute histories from the 1920s. These were village surveys, based partly on the example of the Scottish Statistical Accounts, but equally—through the influence of C. V. Butler—on Rowntree's social surveys. Joan Wake's *How to Compile a History and Present Day Record of Village Life* (1925) was written for the Women's Institute surveys, and gives excellent advice both on documentary research and the use of interviews to collect information from old people: on farming methods, tenancies, wages, trades and industry, transport, emigrants, schools, clubs, friendly societies, trade unions, health, food, religion, and crime; old stories, folklore, songs, and games; and personal reminiscences. 'Why not have "reminiscence parties" when each in turn would recall and relate his or her experiences, while someone took them down in shorthand?' she suggested. While focusing wholly on women remained rare, an important precursor of later women's history was an essay collection by 'Co-op Working Women', *Life as We Have Known It* (1931), with an introduction by the famous feminist novelist Virginia Woolf, and published by the Woolfs' own Hogarth Press.

After the Second World War, Women's Institutes or Old People's Welfare Councils in many counties sponsored essay competitions; extracts have been published in collections such as Pat Barr's *I Remember* as well as in local booklets. It is partly from this strong tradition of local history, as well as from his understanding of folklore and of work experience, that the work of George Ewart Evans springs, especially in his first book, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* (1956). In its title and introduction this village study in fact constitutes the first appeal for the present English oral history movement.

Since the 1970s, however, there has been a still stronger flowering of local community history projects in the cities. Many of these projects have proved short-lived, but others, such as Bradford Heritage Recording Unit or Southampton City Heritage, Milton Keynes' Living Archive, QueenSpark in Brighton, or London's Eastside Community Heritage, flourished over many years. Originally, their projects were typically about the white working class, but they quickly broadened into wider approaches, including especially with ethnic minorities and migrants in the cities. While some projects have been self-supporting, most have been funded initially through urban aid, and then, during the mounting unemployment of the 1980s, through skills training for

the Manpower Services Commission, and most recently, from the community-focused Heritage Lottery Fund.

British oral history in the twenty-first century remains a strong current despite having suffered, along with so much other cultural activity, from the continual paring down of funding. It has continually fertile research currents based in sociology, social geography, and cultural studies as much as in history. We choose here two outstanding examples as indications of its continuing vitality. The first is the remarkable work of Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher on the ordinary experience of marriage and sexuality in twentieth-century Britain in their sensitive and cogent book, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution*. The second is the imaginative contribution of two British historians, Catherine Merridale and Orlando Figes, to the understanding of the troubled history of twentieth-century Russia.

In short, life stories are being recorded at every social level, from refugees, orphans, or the blind, typically by national or local charities, to elite projects, most often through National Life Stories at the British Library, on bankers, painters, and sculptors. The earlier enthusiasm for labour history has waned, and the energy has shifted towards women's history and work with socially marginal groups. There is new oral history work on shopping and consumption: for example, the Tesco project at the British Library, or two books on London markets, one on Spitalfields by the mysterious anonymous 'gentle author',<sup>68</sup> another on Portobello.

#### PORTOBELLO MARKET: WHAT MAKES PEOPLE COLLECT?

*Nicholas has been dealing in antiques for thirty-five years.*

I've never dealt in anything commercial . . . I deal in things that are interesting . . .

There's nothing like the smell of an old book. They smell differently from century to century because of the paper that was used, the leather that was used. I always think the older books have this lovely kind of organic aroma to them; they'll smell vaguely of smoked meat. By the time you get to the nineteenth century they stop making them with rag paper and make them with wood pulp and the leather was tanned at high speed in very acidic conditions. And in the nineteenth century they had gas lighting which put sulphuric acid into the atmosphere which reacted with the tanning agents in the bindings of books and the stuff that was used in the wood pulp paper, which is why that deteriorates so quickly. I've had occasions when I've opened the covers of a book and parts of the pages start falling out like confetti because the books have essentially rotted.

Whereas I'll show you one here . . . This book will be celebrating its five hundredth birthday next year and look at that paper—it's as tough as nails! . . .

What makes people collect? Well that's a very good question. Some people just buy an antique because it happens to be something that goes in the house. Other people collect because they have a tremendous aesthetic sensibility . . . In a sense your collection is a reflection of your identity. And maybe, sometimes, you need that. Maybe it's a sort of insecurity that makes you want to have those things because you feel 'Who am I? Why am I here?'

Blanche Girouard, *Portobello Voices* (Port Stroud: History Press, 2013), 37–38.

Oral history also has a lively documentary tradition on television, a position in history teaching for young children in schools, and since the 1990s a strong archival base at the British Library.

One may note two important shifts of the 1990s. One was the cross-disciplinary interest in all the forms of autobiographical memory, which was symbolised by the launching of the Routledge series *Memory and Narrative*. The other was the increasing concern by social science funders that significant interviews from both earlier and current projects should be archived as a resource for future researchers, a national policy for which Qualidata at the University of Essex—now part of the UK Data Archive—became the action unit.

Oral history, in short, has grown where there was a surviving tradition of fieldwork within history itself, as with political history, labour, and local history, or where historians have been brought into contact with other fieldwork disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, or dialect and folklore research. Its geographical distribution also reflects the availability of money for fieldwork: hence the high concentration of activity in North America and north-west Europe. For the same reason, government sponsorship, especially of folklore collection, but also through unemployment schemes, radio archives, and social science research councils, has been key influences in most countries. In the United States, by contrast, some major government projects exist, but they chiefly concern the military forces and the experience of war. As a result, private funding has been dominant, much of it supporting admirable work, and through the diversity of funding sources making oral history less vulnerable to changes in national government policy, such as when the Manpower Services Commission's schemes were abolished in Britain. On the other hand, the risk with private funding is that there will be too great an emphasis on the recording of just those people who are most likely to leave written records, the national and local elites. There are even American oral history projects on the fund-giving foundations themselves. Thus



the patterns of sponsorship—and, it could be argued, the political assumptions which lie behind them—have also been key factors in shaping different national developments.

There is, however, one more factor: the nature of opposition. The system of private funding in America has had, in this respect, the happy consequence of allowing oral historians to go their own way, loosely attached to local universities, colleges, and libraries; although less fortunately it led for many years to the typical American oral historian's being primarily an archivist and collector rather than a historian as such. In Britain, by contrast, a sharper struggle for resources and recognition was inevitable. With the onset of economic recessions and public spending cuts in the mid-1970s, any new claimant for scarce public funds was bound to meet opposition. Even the Social Science Research Council, from cautious support, had by 1976 switched to an openly hostile policy of 'containment'.<sup>69</sup> In the research world, fortunately, this proved a very temporary setback. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that in subsequent university cuts, the newest developments proved most vulnerable, the core disciplines most secure, and the well-established political and economic history of the safely remote past best able to protect itself. And there are also other countries, notably including Italy and India, in which the wind of oral history, even at its strongest, never seems to have even rattled the bulwarks of academic conservatism.

Where such opposition succeeds, the main damage is to professional historians themselves. They leave oral history to be developed principally within institutions by sociologists and researchers on culture, and in the community by either lay historians or aid workers. Professional historians thus miss the stimulation both of interdisciplinary work, and also of contact with their own basic constituency, and they will allow oral history to evolve in ways which disregard their own needs and standards.

Thus the widespread inadequacy until recently of archival facilities for sound materials, and the consequent destruction of a high proportion of the oral evidence which was collected, has resulted in some very serious losses. No interview material in any form has survived from the excellent early studies made with new immigrant groups in Britain from the 1930s to the 1960s, drastically truncating evidence about the experience of migration in those decades.<sup>70</sup> While in advanced countries, such as Sweden, Canada, Australia, and the United States, federal and state archives have been collecting oral history material as part of their regular programmes since the 1950s, few European countries have followed such examples, and in Britain it was only in the 1990s that the British Library became a national focus for oral history collecting and archiving.

Nevertheless, in the long run it seems most likely that the current forms of hostility to oral history will dissolve, and professional historians will return to their earlier view of the acceptability of oral evidence as one of many kinds of historical source. The change in methods of communication which has ousted the paper document from its central role makes this ultimately difficult to avoid.



So does the revelation to historians, with the collapse of the Nazi and then many of the Communist regimes, that official documentation can be systematically designed to conceal the truth and to mislead, so that in such contexts memory becomes essential in opening up silences, and frequently can be more trustworthy than contemporary documents. And the opposition turns out on closer examination to be united by feeling rather than principle. Principles are cited, but they are contradictory, and derive from two extremes of the profession.

There are, first, schools of researchers in both social science and history which rest on the belief that truth can only be sought through quantification. In social research, the lion's share of funding goes to survey research units, which in practice interact minimally with the lone craft researchers who typically carry out in-depth research. Survey researchers do well enough on their own not to need to look beyond their quantitative frameworks, except when speculating for explanations for their figures; and in a world in which the computer is the prime symbol of technical progress, it is indeed probably easiest for them to ignore the sometimes awkward questions which are raised by qualitative life story research—let alone by post-modernism—which could challenge confidence in their practice.

In Britain since the 1960s there has been increasing antagonism between British social researchers who use qualitative and those who use quantitative methods, to the point that it has been very hard to get funding for mixed methods projects. While historians continue to use mixed methods, social scientists have preferred to emphasise disciplinary purity, even though this means that they undermine the power of their research to interpret society. This one-eyed mutual hostility appears to be special to the British situation. In the past, mixed methods were normal, and they have remained so in the United States, exemplified by the continuing fruitful 'life course' work of Glen Elder, or family sociologists like Andrew Cherlin and Frank Furstenberg. We can only hope that a more broadminded approach eventually returns in Britain.<sup>71</sup>

Although less well endowed, there are also historians, chiefly in economic history and demography, who wish to disregard any qualitative evidence which is not open to statistical analysis. As a school, they can be traced back to the 1920s when economic history was establishing its autonomy, and social history was moving from the impressionist elegance of G. M. Trevelyan towards the more severe standards of Georges Lefebvre, with his slogan, *Il faut compter*. More recent quantitative history has presented itself, under the new banner of 'cliometrics', as the path to a truly scientific history.

But such high claims have themselves brought disillusionment. Statistical history can no more unravel the past unaided than sociology can provide answers to all current social problems. Like the *Annales* school in France, the best economic historians and demographers have of course always recognised this. Since the 1970s there has been a reaction within sociology itself against a predominantly statistical methodology in survey analysis, and a return to life story interviewing

in the field which has brought sociology closer to oral history. Thus the earlier extravagant hopes of the neo-positivist statistical school now look increasingly dated. One can see more clearly how far Michael Anderson's analysis of *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (1971) is distorted by sticking to a rigid economic model of the family which allows, for a half-Catholic town in the decade of Chartist unrest, neither political, nor religious, nor psychological factors to be considered. And the daring acrobatics of an economic historian like R. W. Fogel, who will construct data when he cannot find it, and aspire to re-evaluate the entire experience of slavery with sets of tables, now seem sorties which reveal more of the pitfalls of the method than its strengths. It is difficult to believe that economic history and demography, which through their closeness to the social sciences are naturally more familiar with the interviewing method than most branches of history, and have indeed already produced some notable supporters of oral history, will remain long-term obstacles to its advance.<sup>72</sup>

The worldwide professional old guard once looked more formidable. But the situation is in practice less fixed than it may appear. The traditional historian, partly because he is suspicious of theories and prefers to construct his interpretation from individual pieces of evidence gathered wherever he can locate them, is at heart an eclectic, a jackdaw. If he is suspicious of oral evidence, it is chiefly just because until very recently it was, to an extent which now seems difficult to recall, either hidden or unrecognised by him.

Arthur Marwick, in his *The Nature of History* (1970), included a very catholic discussion of historical sources in his chapter on 'The Historian at Work', ranging from the accepted hierarchy of primary and secondary written sources to statistics, maps, buildings, landscape, imaginative literature, art, customs, and 'the folkways of the period'. He even argued that 'a history based exclusively on non-documentary sources, as say the history of an African community, may be a sketchier, less satisfactory history than one drawn from documents; but it is history all the same'. Yet he included no reference whatsoever to oral evidence as such. It seems unlikely that he would have written a similar passage more recently without discussing both the interview method and oral tradition.<sup>73</sup>

The awareness of these potential sources is now widespread, and awareness itself brings a degree of acceptance. In addition, oral history projects have created increasing numbers of archives, which are being used by research students and cited in their theses, frequently with the encouragement of their supervisors. For this new generation, then, oral evidence is again counted among acceptable sources. And since it can be cited in their theses, they have become generally willing, when this seemed potentially worthwhile, to consider collecting such evidence themselves in direct fieldwork.

Equally important, we have moved forward from the experimental years in which there were only elementary guides to using oral history. There is now a range of excellent professional guides to practice. At the same time there have been progressive advances in thinking about the interpretation of oral evidence,

and in shaping a professional theoretical approach to oral history—most recently and notably in Lynn Abrams' *Oral History Theory* (2010).

The fact is that the opposition to oral evidence is less founded on principle than on feeling. The older generation of historians who hold the chairs and the purse-strings are instinctively apprehensive about the advent of a new method. It implies that they no longer command all the techniques of their profession. Hence the disparaging comments about young men tramping the streets with tape recorders, and the grasping of straws to justify their scepticism: usually a reminiscence (it should be noted) about the inaccuracy of either their own or some other person's memory.<sup>74</sup> Beyond this there is—and not only among older scholars—a fear of the social experience of interviewing, of the need to come out of the closet and talk with ordinary people. But time will temper most of these feelings: older generations will be succeeded, and an increasing number will themselves know the positive social and intellectual experience of oral history.

The discovery of 'oral history' by historians which is under way worldwide is, then, unlikely to be obscured. And it is not only a discovery but a recovery. It gives history a future no longer tied to the cultural significance of the paper document. It also gives back to historians the oldest skill of their own craft.

# 3

## Reaching Out

### Other Cultures

Oral history has also developed strongly in many other parts of the world, further from the immediate influence of Anglo-American practice, with its own roots and often with distinctive forms that can provide us with valuable influences. Two immediate cautions: First, we do not intend through this geographical division to make any conceptual distinctions, but primarily to serve as a practical way of giving space for a worldwide review of oral history work beyond the English-speaking world. A second caution: we should remember that especially in much of Africa and Asia, where we have fewer contacts with local oral historians, we will be looking at developments through the partial lens of work available in English. Throughout, we need to bear in mind the constraints imposed by resources. Let us then circulate the globe, asking, where has oral history grown most strongly? And how have the intellectual contributions to the reviving use of oral evidence varied from place to place?

#### **Africa from south to north**

Thus, for example, we can contrast the development of oral history in two countries that were both part of the former British Empire, South Africa and India. Both are extremely unequal societies, in which English has been a minority language of the governing classes, both during and after the colonial period. Hence there has been an immediate linguistic barrier inhibiting popular oral history. But there has been a much stronger effort to overcome these barriers in South Africa than in India.

In South Africa, although liberation for the majority only came after Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, oral history has long flourished. In the colonial period, from the late nineteenth century onwards, there had been much collecting of local oral histories by missionaries and government servants, especially of the Zulu people, who fought the British army so formidably in order to protect their lands and culture. But the British were struggling to control not only Africans and also migrant Indians, but their white rivals the Afrikaners. After the 1948 election, the Afrikaners secured forty years

of dominance, introducing a harshly segregated and brutally unequal apartheid state. Although some earlier British policies had been segregationist, there was a powerful reaction by British progressive opinion against the stark realities of apartheid, and for five decades sustained campaigning to end it. The British Left played a big part in fighting and internationally isolating, and so finally economically breaking, Afrikaner South Africa. Thus while in India British influence on oral history was conservative, in South Africa it was a more progressive force. During this period many outstanding South African intellectuals sought refuge in Britain: for example, the sociologist Stan Cohen and the historian Colin Bundy—who for a while was secretary of the British Oral History Society. When the African National Congress won power, oral history took a key role in cultural thinking. It provided one channel for the tremendous outpouring of harsh memories of the oppressions of living under apartheid.

But the new government also wanted the separated ethnic peoples to work together to create a truly democratic multiracial society, and for this they set up a major experiment in the social and political use of oral history: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The horrifying confessions and tense confrontations that were made in this open hearing for months through 1997–99 were not only made fully available as public text on the internet, but also continuously throughout the nation on television. It was in this context that the Oral History Association of South Africa was formed in partnership with the National Archives in 2006. This political history has made South African oral history a radical force. There has been nothing here to match the celebration of the old imperial elites in India. Instead there have been three important currents of activity.

The first relates to oral tradition. There seems to be a lack of work with the Indians who are a large presence in Natal—indeed, Natal was Gandhi's original political home base. But with Africans, apart from the Zulu, South African historians who began with Vansina's method of treating oral performance as a form of transmitted document found his approach hard to apply. Here African oral traditions co-existed and interacted with literate cultures, and with many groups they were not performed—they survived rather as a form of passive memory. Still more importantly, as other historians were finding elsewhere, to be socially relevant, oral forms needed to be fluid and creative: they were rarely fixed. In a migrant society that was now being battered by segregationist restrictions and false removals, the stories had to keep changing if they were to maintain meaningful social messages. Isabel Hofmeyr's striking study of male and female story-telling in the rural Transvaal, *We Spend Our Lives as a Tale that Is Told* (1993), makes this point very cogently.

The second is the development of a new social history. This begins with work on rural black people in the Transvaal by a group of historians and sociologists at the University of Witwatersrand. Tim Keegan's *Facing the Storm* (1988) tells the life stories of four small farmers. They portray the sheer cruelty of white

repression: both the recurrent legal depredations to steal away their small gains in income, and the physical savagery. Ndae Makume describes being beaten in a storeroom by four whites, stretched out over a wine barrel and tied head and foot by pegs and thongs to the ground, in revenge for having 'contradicted what the white man said, as if you were on the same level as he'. Barney Ngakane's father had to move simply because it became known that he was more productive than a neighbouring white farmer. But the other message is how they never gave up: striving to find new lands to replace the farms they had lost, and to get education for their children. Even when the farm yields became too small for survival, they migrated to the cities in a spirit of optimism. 'We wanted to be gentlemen . . . We wanted to wash, to be clean and well-dressed'—to wear 'rag-time trousers' like their friends who had returned from Johannesburg.<sup>1</sup> Charles Van Onselen followed this with *The Seed Is Mine*, a painstaking reconstruction of the life of one black sharecropper and his migrant extended family—a masterpiece of micro-history.

Along with this there was work in the towns, beginning with Belinda Bozzoli's edited volume on *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal* (1983) and then her *Women of Phokeng*, drawing on long and extensively quoted life stories from a small Transvaal town, interpreted for both the cultural meanings and the historical facts they can convey. And in time, interpretations of memory have become subtler: so that most recently Sean Field has published two notable books on Cape Town, the first exploring its diversity of cultures, the second investigating the role of violence in memory, drawing on interviews from ethnically different Cape Town neighbourhoods and from refugee migrants to the city, and partly using psychoanalytical thinking.<sup>2</sup>

An important third element is the attempt at democratic practice in oral history work. It is notable that not all the early pioneers of oral history in South Africa were white: they include Magema Fuze, who wrote *Abantu Abamnyama* (1922), a history of the Zulu people which reads like a form of oral testimony.<sup>3</sup> In this spirit Belinda Bozzoli in *Women of Phokeng* opens with a set of brief biographies and photographs of her key informants, and presents her interviewer as a co-author. From 1977 she was the main force behind the Witwatersrand History Workshop, modelled on the Ruskin History Workshops in England, which launched an ambitious outreach programme aiming at black and white workers, migrants and rural dwellers. At its peak the 1984 Workshop held an open day with films, workers' theatre, and lectures, attended by a largely black audience of some thousand people.

These activities resulted in the popularisation of oral history research in both schools and the trade unions. There was also an Oral Documentation Project launched at Wits that has recorded more than a thousand people in the region. The Workshop model inspired the Western Cape Oral History Project, led by Colin Bundy and Bill Nasson (who worked with District Six), which became the Centre for Popular Memory at Cape Town University (2001–14), and the Natal

Worker History Project, as well as a series of briefer projects, for example on mineworkers or on migrant criminal organisations. Most recently this approach has been taken up by Philippe Denis and Radikobo Ntsimane in their handbook for local historians, *Oral History in a Wounded Country* (2008), which gives particularly useful advice on handling painful issues, and on local community work in black townships.

The same kind of participatory spirit can be seen in a Panos project in neighbouring Botswana with the San (or Bushmen), for which a group of thirty San people learnt the techniques of field recording and transcription and went on to collect hundreds of interviews, resulting in *Voices of the San* (2004), the first international publication in which the San were able to tell their own story in their own words.<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, there is the injection of an oral history dimension into South Africa's museums. The two most important are Robben Island and District Six, both by or in Cape Town, and both concerned with history still well within living memory. You reach Robben Island by boat in a half-hour ride across the open Atlantic, and once landed are greeted by guides who earlier served time here as prisoners. You find yourself herded into a small hall and suddenly the big metal door clangs shut behind you, and as the prisoner-guide leads you back into the years when Nelson Mandela served here you wonder if you can ever get out. You see his own cell and you can hear the experiences of other inmates through listening to 'Cell Stories'. Going to Robben Island is very powerful, unforgettable.

District Six must be the world's most famous neighbourhood museum. District Six had been an inner city mixed area, but in 1966 it was scheduled under apartheid legislation as a 'whites only' neighbourhood. By 1980 sixty thousand people had been forcibly removed. I have been there twice. The first time was in 1968, when you could still see a good many buildings, but it was impossible to talk freely with local black or 'coloured' people. It was the height of apartheid. People moved as if in constant fear, and always avoided catching your eye. When I returned in 2004 the buildings had gone, the site was almost entirely empty—but this time the people wanted to talk. Following the initiative of former local residents, the museum had opened in 1994 in an old Methodist mission. On the floor is a giant map of the former street plan, and local visitors are encouraged to sign their names onto the plan, marking their lost homes. The whole display tends to idealise the lost community. But before long I bumped into one of the museum's leading activists, Vincent Kolbe, whose view is unapologetic: 'It's a prejudiced museum, it's a biased museum, and it's the museum's policy to be biased'.<sup>5</sup> Vincent is a musician who enjoys discussion and debate, and we had a good talk. Then he invited us to his next gig at his home. We went, and joined a group of black, coloured, and white musicians making excellent music. That was something that could never have happened in 1968, one of those moments when the world seemed to have moved forward.

The pattern in the rest of the African continent is very different. There has been notable oral history work here, but almost all published work is by North

Americans and Europeans rather than by local historians. In the post-colonial era, the history of Africa, which had been that of the imperial powers, abruptly shifted its focus to the largely undocumented African nations. After independence its new nations needed a history of their own. From the 1950s, led by the Belgian scholar Jan Vansina—later based in Wisconsin—and John Fage and Roland Oliver from Britain, historians began to collect their own oral material in the field, alongside anthropologists, exchanging experiences of methods and interpretation with them. Vansina's work with oral tradition is a powerful example to which we refer many times. Originally he saw oral tradition in terms of fixed documents, and he and his school indeed showed how much forgotten social history could be rediscovered through this approach. But gradually Africanist researchers realised that very formal and stable oral traditions are unusual, and that the same themes can be re-shaped depending on their social context and the creativity of the performer. This has proved a lesson of much wider relevance. Thus the more recent work of Ruth Finnegan and Elisabeth Tonkin, both West Africanists, has encouraged us to look at oral performance in our own Western societies, and to see how different social contexts can generate distinctive genres of telling, thus helping to influence what is told.<sup>6</sup>

A second strand of current oral history work comes from non-government organisation (NGO) projects seeking to understand how cultures are affected by and can best survive environmental changes and political disasters. The outstanding contribution has come from Panos (now continued as Oral Testimony Works)—notably *At the Desert's Edge* (1991) and *Displaced* (2012). There is also a group of oral histories of women in nationalist struggles and wartime—their contribution and their suffering. Irene Staunton's *Mothers of the Revolution* (1990) has particularly graphic accounts of how women lived in constant fear of the abuse and killings by their own freedom fighters. Richard Werbner's *Tears of the Dead* traces the story of three generations of one Zimbabwe family, and how the land struggle with Europeans led from negotiation to guerilla war.<sup>7</sup>

A third mode is through life stories. With the notable exception of Pat Caplan's *African Voices, African Lives* (1997), recorded with a male Tanzanian smallholder, most are life stories of women and families, either singly or as a group. These cover many issues, including the legacy of slavery in East Africa and adapting to urban environments. The published versions also include vivid details about sexuality, whether female circumcision, abuse, sex as a bargaining counter, or how it relates to the female life cycle. How far the authors imposed these themes, which were certainly preoccupations of earlier anthropologists, is not clear. Marjorie Shostak says that all the !Kung women she met 'loved to talk and joke about sex'.<sup>8</sup>

There are also life stories recorded by anthropologists in Morocco that describe family relationships and sexuality in Muslim families.<sup>9</sup> But in this respect the life stories from East Africa are far more explicit. Of the studies from North Africa, perhaps the most touching is Helen Watson's vivid account of the families who live in Cairo's vast cemetery, *Women in the City of the Dead* (1992).



And again from Morocco, Aomar Boum, Saharan anthropologist, has sensitively explored the changing memories among Berbers and Moroccans of the former Jewish communities, mainly in the villages of the south-eastern Atlas mountains where she grew up. For the older generation, these are positive memories of people who were useful, and good neighbours, but for younger generations, sympathy has been undermined by the poison of the Palestinian conflict.<sup>10</sup>

### From the Middle East to Indonesia

In contrast with northern Africa, in much of the Muslim world from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia we have found surprisingly few signs of oral history activity by either locals or outsiders. The Middle East is different. In Turkey there have been archival initiatives in Istanbul, at the Women's Library on women's history, and other projects on urban communities and on migrants. Nadire Mater's *Voices from the Front* (2005) gives us a striking set of interviews with young Turkish soldiers conscripted to fight the Kurdish guerrillas. Though many such war selections are triumphalist, her interviews show how fighting confuses their identities. And there is also a notable example of oral history as a form of post-war reconciliation in the Foundation of Lausanne Treaty Emigrants, an association of descendents of the Greek and Turkish populations who were forcibly expelled on both sides of the Aegean in the 1920s, so that they went through similar experiences of post-war loss. Today the members collect oral history and organise field trips on both sides.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Nadjé Sadig Al-Ali's finely detailed social history *Iraqi Women* (2007) is so far an exception. More often the themes are of militant struggles in the shadow of Israel: Iranians celebrating heroes or critics of their revolution, Palestinians claiming recognition for the tragic and catastrophic loss of their land. In this context a rare attempt to present voices from two opposing sides is *Contested Land, Contested Memory* (2013), by the Canadian journalist Jo Roberts. Since the late 1970s Palestinians have been more active in oral history than any other Muslim community, with projects in Palestine, Israel, and the refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, very often initiated by village associations who want recognition and evidence for their claims to return. Palestinian village memorial books have documented over four hundred mostly lost villages since the 1980s, seeking to hold onto their social and also geographical memories through combining oral recollections with maps documenting Arabic place names of hills and rivers, fields and vineyards, settlements and ruins, which Israeli settlers have renamed in Hebrew.

There was an officially backed general oral history project to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Israeli declaration of independence, the *Nakba* (the catastrophe) in 1998, and from 2002 two archives with websites were launched, 'Palestine Remembered' and the 'Nakba Archive'. The Nakba Archive, which now has some five hundred filmed testimonies, was jointly founded by Mahmoud Zeidun and Diana Allan, who has since written a striking study of memory and

present-day life in the Palestinian refugee camp Shatila in Beirut. She found that in formal interviews for the archive or for NGOs the Palestinian master narrative of disaster, loss of land, and hope for return is still recounted, and remains a crucial way of mobilising support. But in informal discussion, especially with young people, a much more pragmatic perspective emerges. For them their marginality and lack of citizenship in Lebanon combined with drastic material needs is more salient. Thus Diana was challenged by Mahmud, a twenty-two-year-old factory worker, who now has an Australian passport and intends to emigrate:

What is the point of your research? . . . Foreigners like you come to the camp and do research. They ask questions about the Nakba, who died, what we felt, about the massacre, about our sadness, and it's like it's a thrill for them. We cry and they profit from our tears, but things stay the same for us. The electricity is still shit, we have no rights, and this kind of thing just makes us suffer more . . . We don't have the time to think about our culture or our history; we are dying in this struggle simply to exist.

There are also young Palestinian researchers using oral history, some focusing on past loss, others on newer forms of identity. Notable examples are Rosemarie Esber's *Under the Cover of War*, which uses both archives and interviews to show the systematic Zionist military campaign that forced Palestinians out of their villages before the 1948 declaration of Israeli statehood, and Dina Matar's *What It Means to Be Palestinian*, a rich and moving collection of stories from the 1930s to the 1990s, tracing the shifts from optimism to despair, and the adaptation to an identity with no sure geographical base—'a homeland has no borders'.<sup>11</sup>

For indeed, the power of Israeli national history is hard to challenge. More than any other nation, Israel has built its collective memory through making use of oral history. After the systematic destruction of Jewish communities under Fascism, oral evidence from witnesses of every variety became a vital part of a national and cultural struggle for survival. The first person to make audio recordings of survivor testimony was David Boder, who recorded 130 interviews in Displaced Persons Camps in 1946.<sup>12</sup> The Yad Vashem archive in Jerusalem was the first monument to this history. Subsequently this Israeli effort has been internationalised, generating much worthwhile research as well as spectacular manifestations like the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and the massive Shoah Foundation video recording programme. Initiated by film director Steven Spielberg and based in California, the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive now has 53,000 testimonies available through its website. A prime objective of this work has been straightforwardly descriptive: to document destroyed Jewish communities and their cultures and to identify surviving perpetrators and bring them to trial. It has been an impressive demonstration of how powerful cumulative memory can be as factual evidence.

But not surprisingly, Jewish oral history has not been limited to that. Some of the most innovative work has been carried out by oral historians who are professional psychologists. Thus Gadi BenEzer, in his *Ethiopian Jewish Exodus* (2002), graphically describes the Jewish culture in Ethiopia, with the dream of return to 'Yerusalem' in the 'promised land', the secret and traumatic journey of many, walking at night through the mountains under attack from bandits to refugee camps in Sudan, and finally reaching Israel. But it was only to find that the religious authorities challenged their Jewish identity, and that being black set them apart from mainstream Israeli society. He also gives helpful comments on cross-cultural interviewing, and how to interpret posture. And another psychologist, Amia Lieblich, began with a study of a kibbutz, and in the 1990s became co-editor of the reflective annual series, *The Narrative Study of Lives*.

Equally notable has been the work of Michael Gorkin. After training as a clinical psychologist in the United States, he returned to Israel in 1982, working as a student counsellor at the Hebrew University. There he came to the conclusion that 'if there is to be a chance for peace, it can only come through seeing and knowing Palestinians as they truly are'. So he set about recording the story of one Palestinian family in Israel, for three years visiting every week for up to three days, speaking Arabic with the older generation and Hebrew with the younger.<sup>13</sup> This resulted in *Days of Honey, Days of Onion*, a social and political history: daily life, weddings, illness, the 1947–49 war, the *intifada*. He went on to write a second study with three families, *Three Mothers, Three Daughters*, this time with Rafiq Othman, a Palestinian teacher, as co-author. One family was living in an Arab village in Israel, one in East Jerusalem, and one in a refugee camp on the West Bank. This project covers similar issues, but with the added advantage that the interviews are with three generations, a method that helps to show changes, such as increases in women's education and their ability to choose their own husbands. In an increasingly difficult context, these books stand out as both enlightening and caring.

Moving eastwards through the Muslim world, oral history activity becomes a rarity. A striking exception is the Citizens Archive of Pakistan, which since 2008 has worked in the cities of Karachi and Lahore recording those who remember the founding of Pakistan at the Partition of India, especially women and marginalised people. They create teaching materials for schools by combining their audio recordings with photos, film, and newspaper clippings, and they have organised a series of festivals and exhibitions. In south-east Asia, a cluster of nations led by the Chinese community in Singapore have official oral history archives. Oral history is also a prominent element in the excellent Chinatown Heritage Centre in Singapore. Their work ranges from community projects to recording entrepreneurs and other elites. In Cambodia there have been oral history projects on the persecution of Muslims and also more broadly of women by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. In Indonesia there has been a struggle to publicise memories of the political violence of the 1960s. Further east still, in the Pacific islands, the subject of so many early anthropological classics, there was

also life story work. Two are worth special mention as examples of contrasts in the life story genre. *Kiki* (1968) was perhaps lured towards sensationalism with his accounts of sex and hints at cannibalism. By contrast, *Elota's Story* (1978) is an argument against stereotypes of primitive life, the story of a complex, skilled, and sceptically philosophising human being.<sup>14</sup>

## India

By focusing on the the oral history activities of Muslim cultures, we have skipped by India. But the opportunities for oral history work in the Indian sub-continent are immense. Its huge and exceptionally diverse population is extremely rich in oral cultures, which urgently need to be recorded. Oral tradition still figures large in Indian popular culture, one current website romantically describing how centuries-old stories would be told to travellers, 'gathering around a fire lit on the sands of a river bank under the starry night, listening with rapt attention and amusement to the stories of wonder and awe of distant lands inhabited by exotic people, narrated by an elder'.<sup>15</sup> But maybe the caste system has inhibited the development of a national vision which could see people at all social levels as significant.

It is true that some British missionaries and administrators recorded local folklore and bardic poetry, such as James Todd in Rajasthan in the 1820s, or from the 1890s William Crooke in *North Indian Notes and Queries*, drawing on many local Indian teachers and officials. There was also some pre-Independence folklore recording by nationalists, such as Komal Kothari in Rajasthan. But for the British such collecting seemed less essential towards understanding the cultures they were working with, because in India the principal traditions were already available in well-developed written sources. The major sacred and historical texts had been in writing for centuries, and by the late nineteenth century were also translated into English. Hence there seemed less practical need for recording the oral cultures of the lower castes, which in any case were widely despised by the Indian elites.

Sadly, few British anthropologists recorded Indian life stories comparable with James Freeman's *Untouchable* (1979), the life of an outcaste, labourer, and pimp. The tone was set rather by Michael Mason's BBC radio, romanticising elite radio programmes on the 'heaven-born', the pre-Independence Indian Civil Service. The 'heaven-born' imperial administrators were pushed out in 1947 by the Indian nationalist movement after decades of campaigning, but after Gandhi's assassination there was no serious challenge to internal hierarchical social attitudes. There was not even an informal national network of oral historians until 2012, when *The Hindu* reported the forming of an Oral History Association of India, a 'first ever forum' bringing together 'an eclectic group of academics, filmmakers, activists and writers'. The association is currently based in Bangalore in southern India and led by Indira Chowdhury, who herself uses oral sources for the history of science in India.<sup>16</sup>

After Independence in 1947 the Nehru Memorial Library in New Delhi collected recordings with nationalists. But most Indian professional historians maintained their traditional boundaries, showing little interest in oral history. Hence much of the initiative for oral history work has come from outsiders.

One turning point was the forming of a group around *Subaltern Studies*, which was launched in 1982. Its leaders included, as well as Indians, David Hardiman, whose political accounts of peasant movements in western India were based on his notes taken from dozens of village informants. There has been some outstanding recent British work which has given explicit voice to Indians, especially with migrant Bangladeshis, from Caroline Adams' *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* to Katy Gardner's lyrical *Songs at the River's Edge* and most recently her *Age, Narrative and Migration*. Another British project from LSE and Cambridge has recorded 180 life stories in India, Bangladesh, and Britain, and extracts from eight can be read in the website 'Banglastories', prepared for school use. There is also a notable American oral history study by Beth Roy, investigating a rural riot between Hindus and Muslims, *Some Trouble with Cows*. There is a National Folklore Support Centre in Chennai, but perhaps the biggest enterprise is the American-funded Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology in Gurgaon, Haryana, which has an enormous, fully digitised collection including folk music and some interviews.

On the other hand it is striking—in contrast to the situation in most of Muslim Asia—that much of the most important oral history work by Indians is by and about women. In Mumbai the Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women—Sparrow—began in 1988 and has amassed a rich and diverse collection, including 550 oral histories, and with chirpy tenacity has succeeded in its struggle to secure accommodation and funding. And almost all of the few oral history books by Indian writers which bring home the fascination of India's changing world are by women. They focus on political struggle, war, and disaster rather than on broader social history, or gender, or family: for example, on women in the Communist-led struggle against the despotic feudal Nizam of Hyderabad, written by a women's writing group, and women's experiences of the brutality of the 1947 Partition of India, most notably Urvashi Butalia's best-selling *The Other Side of Silence*. Yasmin Saikia tells a similar powerful story about women in the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence; Ravinder Kaur interprets the narratives of Punjabi migrants now in Delhi; while Devika Chawla, cross-disciplinary literary anthropologist, cites telling reflections on the ambiguities of migrant identity. As Kirangi, an eighty-seven-year-old Partition refugee, told her:

The real mother is where you are born ... It is like losing a limb ... like you've lost a life that you would love to live over again ... But, would I be where I am, or *what* I am, had I not lost this home? I don't know the answer to that.<sup>17</sup>

Even in labour history the most important oral history contribution, *The Millworkers of Girangaon* in Bombay, comes from two women researchers. Lastly, Suroopa Mukherjee's *Surviving Bhopal* (2010) documents the continuing legacy of the 1984 Bhopal chemical factory disaster, when forty tons of lethal methyl isocyanate were accidentally discharged on the city, and the tactics of the global factory owners to 'gag' the evidence of survivors: a powerful political and environmental message for us all.

### Latin America and the Caribbean

Turning back across the Atlantic, we find an incontrovertibly vibrant oral history territory with Latin America. Here in the Spanish-speaking countries the lively and varied scene draws on several influences. Particularly striking is the long-standing link between the life story school in American anthropology, as in the work of Oscar Lewis and Sidney Mintz in Mexico and the Caribbean, and more explicitly political *testimonios*. Of course there is plenty of politicised oral history in other parts of the world—stories of independence struggles, of the Palestinian *Nakba* of women's movements, of wartime resistance—but it is above all here that it has developed into a specific form of life story. The key difference is that a *testimonio* is understood as not just one person's story, but embodying a collective experience and collective witness. This has caused considerable criticism.

The *testimonio* is a special Latin American type of life story, although in many other highly politicised contexts, whether of wars or liberation struggles or political revolutions, powerful collective memories develop, and help to shape individual life stories. In Guatemala the *testimonio* tradition goes back at least to the 1940s, and culminates with the most famous of them all, a best-seller published in ten languages, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, which was published from a life story recording made in 1982 by the Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos. Menchu saw it as a crucial part of her lifelong campaign for her people, for which she was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.<sup>18</sup>

The genre has been encouraged in Cuba, where a notable instance is Miguel Barnet's recording of Estaban Montejo, *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* (1968). Other examples include Domitila Barrios de Chungara's *Let Me Speak! Testimony of a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*, and Ricardo Valderrama's recording of a maid and a mountain shepherd in *Andean Lives* (1996). Especially striking is the story of a Mexico city laundress with a sharp turn of phrase, from civil war fighting to struggles in a tenement, published by Elena Poniatowska in 1969 and later translated as *Here's to You Jesusa!* The form has also been taken up in Black American writing, most powerfully in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), the story of her fight from an abusive rural childhood to success as a writer and activist.

### A WOMAN FOOT SOLDIER WITH THE CAVALRY: THE MEXICAN CIVIL WAR

*Elena Poniatowska's life story of Jesusa, a Mexico City washerwoman, published in Spanish in 1969 but not in English until 2001, is remarkable in many ways but perhaps most surprisingly in the glimpses she gives of cavalry warfare in the Mexican Civil War—a form of fighting which one might have thought was ended by the introduction of machine tanks in the First World War. As Jesusa recalled:*

Not many women went into battle: Pedro [Jesusa's cavalryman] took me even though he didn't have orders from General Espinosa y Córdoba: that's why he made me dress like a man, so they'd look the other way and not report me. He covered my head with a scarf and hat. Most of the women went into battle for the same reason I did, because their husbands made them; others went because they were trying to be men. . . .

I always carried a pistol in my belt, as well as a rifle because a cavalryman carries his rifle on the back of his horse. My job was to load Pedro's Mauser, mine and his; while he'd fire one I'd load the empty one so he could switch back and forth. We'd be riding . . . I was never scared. I don't know if I killed anyone . . . Fear doesn't exist for me. Fear of what? Just fear of God. He's the one who turns us to dust . . .

During the battles all you see are little figures fighting . . . If you don't have a good aim, the bullets go whistling past their ears and over their heads. But if you have a good aim, then the little monkeys fall down and stay down. Pedro was a good shot . . .

I never saw a dead person's face! No one would get down off their horse to look at the dead people. They were left there, dead or alive. We had to keep chasing the people who were up ahead. Usually the families didn't even know that their loved ones had been killed. The buzzards were their cemetery; after all, they were just piles of clothes lying there on the ground.

Interview with Jesusa, in Elena Poniatowska, *Here's to You Jesusa!* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 109–10.

With community work, outside Brazil probably the most impressive achievement has been by Hebe Clementi and Liliana Barela in Buenos Aires, with a series of neighbourhood projects drawing from regular discussion sessions in clubs, libraries, trade unions, and old people's centres. They have published local booklets and produced a regular bulletin.



Other important influences in Latin America include Mexico's impressive national oral history programme, recording social movements, politics, and culture, developed since 1959, and from the 1990s its national oral history association. The Indian peoples of the High Andes continue to re-interpret and re-create their centuries-old oral traditions to support their current struggles for their land, for economic and social survival. Notable recent work by anthropologists includes Andrew Canessa's account of history and social life in a Bolivian mountain village.<sup>19</sup> There is also social history work, such as Peter Winn's on the militant cotton workers in Chile whose radicalism unsettled Allende, Elisabeth Dore on Nicaraguan peasants and more recently on Cuba, Luz Gordillo on Mexican migrants to Detroit, and Cecilia Menjivar on Salvadorans in San Francisco. Michael Gorkin has recorded three generations of women in three families in El Salvador, and there is vivid evidence on women and sexuality in Haiti and Cuba from Beverly Bell and Carrie Hamilton, as well as a collection on women's movements across the continent, *compañeras*.<sup>20</sup>

Oral histories can sometimes also capture in a striking way the impact of surprising technological innovation on ancient cultures. Thus Gregorio Condori Mamami, a mountain villager from Peru, recalled how he had been told by his uncle that the end of the world would be heralded by a messenger eagle with a condor's head. Then one day he was out in the fields for the threshing season, with some some two or three hundred others, when suddenly for the first time he saw an aeroplane, 'a huge bird that looked like a condor, and which was shrieking like one of the damned'. He and the others were terrified, crying out:

'It's a divine miracle coming toward us', kneeling down and praying. So, I too, from the bottom of my heart, said, 'Oh, Lord, I'm no sinner—I always help my elders work their fields'. Fortunately the plane passed by harmlessly. But Gregorio gives us a sense of how his ancestors must have felt when they first encountered the Spaniards armed with guns centuries earlier.<sup>21</sup>

Overshadowing this is the need in so many Latin American and Caribbean countries to deal with harsh recent memories of dictatorships, civil war, and violent repression. Elisabeth Jelin's *State Repression and the Struggles for Memory* (2003) is a lucid discussion of different types of memory, changing contexts, and conflicts, such as national memory based on censorship and the counter-memories of human rights groups. Winifred Tate in *Counting the Dead* (2007) has interviewed both NGO activists and their military opponents, and shows how the army has tried to steal the language of human rights. The difficulties resolving past memories in divided societies like Argentina are brought home



by Daniel James' subtle life story of Doña Maria, a factory worker and labour activist who was an ardent Peronist, seeing Peron as a leader of the poor and his ten years of autocratic rule as a golden age. But probably the most active memory work has been in Chile, with long-standing marches commemorating the day of Allende's deposition, a national Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, and the site of the most notorious detention centre converted into a peace park.<sup>22</sup>

Oral history has flourished still more remarkably in Portuguese-speaking Brazil. This is an immense country, half a continent, stretched between huge cities, semi-desert, and jungle, amazingly varied in its cultures and histories, and its people divided between high technology and affluence on the one hand and poverty and illiteracy on the other. It also suffered years of harsh military rule, as well as ongoing civilian violence. In a very unusual study, *Violence Workers* (2002), Martha Huggins succeeded in interviewing police who were torturers or executioners, seeking an explanation for their violence in the bitter pains they have suffered in their own lives. But Brazilian oral history is far more varied.

Brazil's national oral history association, which is primarily academic, was founded in 1994 and since 1998 has published a handsome annual journal, *Historia Oral*, which became edited by Maria de Lourdes Janotti from the University of São Paulo, where there is currently a strong interest in public history. There are also regional associations and journals, and several manuals. Intellectual tradition goes back especially to the inspiring work of Ecléa Bosi on memory and society.<sup>23</sup> There are major political history programmes, such as at the CPDOC archive since 1975 in Rio—in this case focusing on political leaders and even the military—which have an added urgency in a continent where repeated political upheavals regularly destroy written documentation. Also in Rio is Labhoil, a visual and oral archive at the Universidade Federal Fluminense, which is archiving interviews recorded by university researchers.

In contrast to much of Latin America, there is no tradition of *testimonios* here, and single life stories are rare. In anthropology the most notable work is by José Sergio Leite Lopes on the north-eastern plantation sugar mills under paternalistic capitalism; while in sociology José Ricardo Ramalho has used life stories for a powerful book on prisoners. More recently there have been social history studies using oral history for a wide variety of topics. These include dwellers in *favelas* (urban shantytowns), with whom Antonio Montenegro has worked especially in the north-east; music and carnivals, including Matthias Röhrig Assunção on the evolution of the national dance *capoeira*, first developed as a secret fighting defence by slaves; women in trade unions and women in black families; spirit healers; drug users; factory workers; and Jewish and Italian immigrants.<sup>24</sup>

There has been a still more striking explosion in community work. The earliest projects with *favelas* were initiated in the 1980s in Recife, by Ana Dourado in Brasília Teimosa and Antonio Montenegro in Casa Amarela. Both these

districts started as illegal shantytowns, Brasília Teimosa originally of fishermen on land reclaimed from the harbour, Casa Amarela on the river marshes, and their struggles have been for recognition from the city government so that they could be provided with basic services. Establishing their own history helped to build up a sense of local pride and belonging, and also to win over the mayor. Other neighbourhoods then followed, setting up their memory departments. They have mostly published local booklets, and some, following the example of *Brasília Teimosa* (1986), are produced for the local school, illustrating testimonies with children's drawings.

Much more recently there has been a more extensive mobilisation of many groups—small communities of rural women, *quilombos* (villages founded by runaway slaves), indigenous tribes, city *favelas*, and youth, and some of them have discovered oral history as a way of creating their own story. There was a memory movement for *favelas*, with people producing booklets, newsletters, and radio programmes. Sometimes women's groups would exchange traditional medicines. Then after the socialist Lula became president in 2003 he appointed Gilberto Gil, the famous singer, as Minister of Culture. Gil turned conventions upside down, insisting that the most important culture was not in the city museums, but already existed among the people. The Ministry therefore recognised local groups and community projects as centres for culture, and in practical terms gave them some funding and multi-media recording equipment, and linked them up in a national network. At this point the Museu da Pessoa, which had already been independently organising a national network of community projects, was brought in, organising a national network of memory—*Memória em Rede*. In 2005–10 this network helped one hundred grassroots organisations to record stories from their area and also to train other organisations around them. This resulted in working directly with a whole wave of new *Museus de Favela*, another movement which had begun earlier: the first the Museu da Mare in Rio, and others in Porto Alegre in the south and Belém on the Amazon. Since the 'Local Memory at School' programme from 2001 the Museu da Pessoa has also been brought actively into education, helping to train teachers and nine- to eleven-year-old children to interview in their communities, so far working with 1,500 schools in thirty cities.

The Museu da Pessoa is itself one of the most remarkable elements in the worldwide oral history scene. Founded by Karen Worcman in 1992, from the start it was an independent venture, holding its material in digital form, and pioneering the use of multi-media. It was a digital museum from the start, even before the internet. It has so far carried out over two hundred projects, each of which typically has as outcomes a well-designed book with testimonies and photographs, an exhibition, or a multi-media display, also notably elegant. Several projects have involved setting up a museum, the first for the São Paulo football club in 1994, and another a 'virtual museum' for an iron-ore producing company. They have carried out over seventy projects with large companies,

including in 2002–10 with the national oil company, Petrobras, for which they created a website of a thousand testimonies and gave a hundred thousand workers copies of the project book. The Museu da Pessoa has also worked with trade unions on workers' memories and disappearing skills, on small traders, and for TV, for example, on immigration.

The Museu have reached out to encourage life story work still more broadly. In 1997 they established a section of their website to receive people's own life stories, or a group collection of life stories, adding photos and documents, written text, audio, and video. Typically nearly a hundred new stories are now received a month, and they have an additional fifty thousand visits a month. These are combined with photographs for an educational section for children and teachers, which receives thirty thousand visits every month. They have also been able to experiment with video recording booths, which capture brief stories. The first was in 1993, a temporary tent on the city metro, close to the platforms, where people were stopping to see photographs displayed, singing, and recording their testimonies. They have now had two hundred video recording booths all round Brazil.<sup>25</sup> There is, in short, both a remarkable popular appetite for oral history in Brazil, and also a creative professional response to the possibilities which it creates.

Lastly, we must not forget the English-speaking Caribbean. In Jamaica Erna Brodber was the pioneer, recording memories of slavery and freedom, and African survivals in religion, her work perhaps best expressed in her novel *Myal* (1988). Jean Besson has used family and community narratives for her work on the villages in Martha Brae valley, and the conflicting white and black versions of local history since the slave era. Elaine Bauer and I have written on Jamaican childhoods and transnational families in *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic*, and Mary Chamberlain on migration from Barbados in *Narratives of Exile and Return*.<sup>26</sup>

### Western Europe: After Fascism

From the Caribbean we turn back across the Atlantic to Western Europe. Along with the Americas, it holds the biggest concentration of oral history work to be found worldwide. It was here, beginning in Bologna in 1976 and Colchester in 1979, that the biennial international oral history conferences were held, up until the founding of the International Oral History Association which resulted in the holding of the first transatlantic international conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1998. But as these conferences show, there is now oral history activity right round the world. The conference series meeting-places have included Barcelona, Rome, Amsterdam, Göteborg, Siena, and Essen in Western Europe, Prague and Istanbul, Pietermaritzburg in South Africa, Sydney, New York, Bangalore in India, and in Latin America Guadalajara, Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro. From 1998 onwards the lively oral history strand of the European Social Science History Conferences has provided another important focus.

Within Europe the political context of historical work has also been a major influence, more remotely in the link between nineteenth-century nationalism and folklore collecting, but also directly on oral history. Thus the development of oral history in Spain had to wait for the ending of Franco's long regime, with the path first led by the English oral historian Ronald Fraser, notably in *Tajos*, about a coastal village, and *Blood of Spain* (1979), a landmark study of the Civil War in which he recorded the beliefs of both sides. From the 1980s there were clusters of research activity, especially in Madrid, led by Pilar Folguera, and in Barcelona, from where *Historia y Fuente Oral* was edited from 1989 by Mercedes Vilanova, with its strong links with Latin America and regular translations of papers in other European languages, thus building an important new channel of transatlantic influence.

Still more important has been the development of oral history in Italy, France, and Germany—different in each country, but each developing new theoretical and practical approaches to interviewing and memory distinctive from Anglo-Saxon practice. In Italy, where Fascism was crushed by the Allies with Partisan support in 1945, one of the origins of contemporary oral history was the network of local centres for documenting the Partisan story. The early post-war years also saw realist films about ordinary people, such as De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, and a clear precedent for oral history in Daniele Dolci's daring printing of Sicilian protests at poverty and corruption in his *Report from Palermo* (1956). Subsequently the perplexing political and social results of the post-war boom, with peasant immigration into the cities and changing working-class consciousness, created an interdisciplinary oral history fashion in the 1970s, as well as stimulating sustained research: notably by the sociologist Franco Ferrarotti on the slums and shantytowns of Rome; by Alessandro Portelli in his cultural interpretations of the steelmakers of Terni, insights which he was later to parallel across the Atlantic with the Kentucky miners in *They Say in Harlan County*; Giovanni Contini's archival and publishing work on Tuscan communities, such as the marble quarrymen of Carrara; and a cluster of social history studies of peasants, workers, and women in Piedmont and Turin.

It was from this last circle that Italy's oral history journal of the 1980s, *Fonti orali*, was edited by Luisa Passerini; and this circle included both Primo Levi, classic autobiographer of the Holocaust, and Nuto Revelli, most widely read of earlier Italian oral historians, whose powerful books of testimonies have moved, indicatively, from war and resistance to peasant poverty and, finally, to the memories of mountain peasant women.<sup>27</sup>

Oral history in Italy has had no strong network, although a national society has been formed with an online newsletter, but it has not been strongly backed by history departments. Its leaders have come from outside history—Luisa Passerini from philosophy, Sandro Portelli from American cultural studies. But they have been internationally influential in the interpretation of oral history,

showing how omissions, silences, and distortions can be read not simply as errors, but as signs of consciousness and meaning.

Since then Portelli has published a whole sequence of books exploring these and other theoretical issues in oral history with great creativity: probably the most influential is *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (1991). Passerini moved on from interpreting silences to writing her *Autobiography of a Generation*, that is of her own group of political young women in 1968, combining their interviews with extracts from the psychoanalytical diary which she had kept herself. Another classic study of memory and imagination in Italy is Giovanni Contini's *La Memoria divisa* (1997). Rural Tuscany has been a Communist stronghold and in 1994 the regional council commissioned a conference in Arezzo to commemorate the series of village massacres carried out by the German army in retreat. While most delegates willingly supported the Partisans, there was a vocal minority who blamed them for the massacres. Contini shows how this was related to differing political allegiances in the communes, and how the anti-Partisan Catholic right not only blamed Partisan shootings of the Germans for the massive retaliations, but choreographed memories with mythical additions, such as the story of the local priest who offered to lay down his own life if his parishioners could be spared.

Documenting Fascism was also a principal object in the Netherlands, where since 1962 oral history has grown from a well-organised co-operation between contemporary political historians, the International Institute for Social History, and Dutch radio, subsequently broadening into a wider social history and women's history. With Nanci Adler's work on the gulag these interests have extended to the Soviet camps. Memories have also been collected from the former colonial Dutch East Indies. And following the much-criticised Dutch involvement in the Bosnian catastrophe, Selma Leydesdorff has written movingly of the more recent traumas of genocide in Bosnia.<sup>28</sup>

It is much less clear why France, with a widespread interest in war and resistance history, and with the example not only of Michelet but of the sociological school of Durkheim (which drew together anthropological and folklore material), and even a remarkable pioneering work by Maurice Halbwachs on the social nature of memory to build upon, was not only late but also less sustained in developing activity in oral history. French fieldwork research on local folklore went back to the early nineteenth century, especially in the peripheral regions of Brittany and Provence; the systematic national study of dialect and peasant ethnology was established from the 1870s, and the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires in Paris was founded in 1937. Popular interest in oral history was awakened by Alain Prévost's *Grenadou: paysan français* (1966), a story of family life, farm work, and war in the northern countryside near Chartres, derived from tape recordings but thoroughly re-written. It was televised, and inspired a series of popular autobiographies in the 1970s, including the bestselling Breton life story by Pierre-Jakes Hélias, *Le cheval d'orgueil*, and Serge Grafteaux's *Mémé*

*Santerre*, about a miner's daughter.<sup>29</sup> So why did interest in oral history prove so transient?

One reason may be the extreme concentration of French academic research in specialised institutes in Paris, lacking links with local communities. Worse still, the Institut de l'Histoire du Temps Présent in Paris, which for a while experimented with oral history, abandoned this cause. To some extent this was because of the growing influence of an alternative approach which perhaps was more attractive because of its French origin, the encyclopaedic vision of Pierre Nora of 'lieux de mémoire', *Realms of Memory*, a catalogue of sources stretching from funeral monuments, museums and archives, cathedrals and paintings to forests and folksong, in which oral history had only the tiniest corner. Fortunately there are hints of possible change in the future: along with some continuing community activity, now there is a new project on war memories at Caen University, and the Archives Nationales have recently accepted over two hundred interviews recorded with former SNCF railway workers.

Although oral history has had its influence on French schools, community work developed less than in French-speaking Belgium. In the early post-war years there was a good deal of local activity in France commemorating the Second World War Resistance. This was not built on, partly because French pride in wartime resistance was deeply undermined by the powerful interview-based 1969 TV documentary by Marcel Ophüls, *The Sorrow and the Pity*, which brought out the extent of French collaboration with the German occupiers. Later on there was more evidence of this in Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour French documentary *Shoah*, based on his interviews in Poland. All this made remembering dangerous for many local communities.

Nevertheless, in research there have been two important poles of influence. One is from Philippe Joutard and his interdisciplinary group of linguists, ethnologists, and historians in the south at Aix-en-Provence. The other is the 'reconstructive' school of life story research in sociology, pioneered by Daniel Bertaux, and sustained by him not only in France but also in the international sociological community. He took this life story approach from Polish sociologists, with whom he was in active contact from the 1970s, and highlighted it in *Biography and Society* (1981). He originally described the method as 'ethnosociological', using in-depth interviews to understand the social context of action and how it changes. His most telling example was a study of bakers, men and women bound together as couples through their work. In his later work in Russia he recorded different generations in the same family as an indication of change. The technique is close to oral history, as may be seen by Bertaux's directive manual *Les récits de vie* (1997).

The method has been a fruitful influence on much social research in France, especially on families and on migration. Two notable instances include Gilles Chantraine's study of sixty prisoners, and Marie-Thérèse Têtu-Delage on how illegal Algerian migrants survive, based on forty life story interviews. Catherine

Delcroix's stories from a Moroccan family in a southern French city show their difficult struggles to make a better life, *Ombres et lumières de la famille Nuer* (1991), a powerful and understanding account which has reached a wide audience as a '*livre de poche*' (a miniature paperback). Equally remarkably, Pierre Bourdieu, France's leading theoretical sociologist of these years, eventually entered the field himself with *The Weight of the World* (1999), presenting a massive six-hundred-page collection of testimonies from right across France, ranging from the Communist shop steward of a Peugeot assembly plant who misses the days when they used to run the plant as a group themselves, to the boss of small company who wants to sleep with all his women staff; from a feminist activist helping battered women, to housing tenants and caretakers, journalists and police, small farmers and shopkeepers. Bourdieu recorded some of the interviews himself, and besides theorising on the multiplicity of perspectives in the book, he writes a very insightful account of the role which feeling and empathy play in an interview. All this fine life story work underlines what France might have also given through a wider involvement with oral history.<sup>30</sup>

In Germany the legacy of the Second World War has so dominated post-war memory or—equally important—silence about it that, in order to meet the challenge which this poses, a very distinctive form of life story work has developed. Overall, it is the most important alternative to the more standard approach of oral historians—although, as we shall see later on, many of its insights can be fruitfully considered within the more standard framework.

The late start of an oral history movement in Germany is itself explained by the impact of Nazism, which had discredited the folklore movement by espousing it, and at the same time destroyed the germs of a more fruitful approach to survey research which by the early 1930s had been pioneered in Marie Jahoda and Paul Lazarsfeld's study of the unemployed, *Marienthal* (1933). More importantly, Nazism left a generation ashamed of its own experience, and a nation more anxious to bury its past than to investigate it. Nevertheless, by the 1980s social history research on the Ruhr working class, attempting to understand their consciousness and relationship with Nazism, was led by Lutz Niethammer. Subsequently an Institute of History and Biography was set up in Hagen, and a very large social history archive developed, headed by Alexander von Plato. He also led an impressive project on forced labour camps, his thirty-two teams recording over six hundred interviews in twenty-seven countries.<sup>31</sup>

This stood between, on the one hand, a growing range of local history projects, and on the other, an organised network of theoretically and methodologically innovative life story sociologists, who, especially through the influence of Fritz Schütze and Gabriele Rosenthal, have developed an intensive 'hermeneutical' method, the 'narrative interview' or 'autobiographical interview'. This new approach was generated out of the difficulties of interviewing in a society in which most of the older generation now wanted to understate or obscure



the extent to which, when younger, they had participated in aspects of Nazism. As Schütze wrote, it was common for parents of his generation to have been involved with the Nazi movement as teenagers, and to have 'assisted or at least tolerated ... the assaults of the German military machinery'. Many claimed that they had not known about the Holocaust during the war, although they had seen the disappearance of their Jewish neighbours and may have joined in their harassment. This generation as a whole 'has to deal with its collective responsibility and guilt'. Although their first response had been to repress their memories, Schütze did not accept, as some psychologists were arguing, that Germans would never be able to mourn about or repent for the Second World War disaster and the victims of terror. He confronted this issue by developing the 'narrative interview'. It seems that he was influenced by Polish life story sociology, and also by the case study approach developed by Viennese psychologists. The key point was to come to more difficult issues in memory slowly, by separating the interview into three stages. In the first, the interviewee is invited to tell his/her story, and encouraged to do so uninterrupted; in the second, allusions and confusions in the text can be taken up; but only in the last part can new questions be asked—about what the interviewee knew about disappearances or the Holocaust or a nearby concentration camp, or what his/her parents were doing in 1944. Often, but not always, these interviews are treated as single case studies, and the transcription is analysed section by section by a research group. In this a key aim is to separate what the interviewee says happened from what he/she felt about it. This slow approach to interpretation gives more space for understanding the interviewee's reflections and meanings, including psychological dimensions, such as the collective guilt implied by the phrase 'We, the Germans'.<sup>32</sup>

This new and systematic approach to interviewing has proved influential: for example, it was used by Passerini in her early work in Turin, and in Austria by Reinhard Sieder for social history. Through the writing of Gabriele Rosenthal, and also in the late 1990s through SOSTRIS, a trans-European project on marginality and poverty, the 'narrative interview'—or 'biographical narrative interpretive interview'—was taken up by a group of life story sociologists in England, including Prue Chamberlayne and Tom Wengraf, and also the criminologist Tony Jefferson, who researched on deviance with the psychologist Wendy Hollway. Hollway and Jefferson, who are strongly influenced by psychoanalytic perspectives, call their approach the 'free association narrative interview'. Many of the ideas for conducting narrative interviews are directly relevant to oral history interviewing. For example, Hollway and Jefferson advocate asking as few questions as possible, with the interviewer becoming 'the almost invisible, facilitating catalyst to their stories'. But the interview structure has been much less taken up, and often is only partially followed, for example by no longer distinguishing the key stages, or by starting with a thematic question which reveals the researcher's agenda, rather than a fully open life story question. However,



when the model is followed thoroughly, it requires so much research time that only a few cases can be analysed, so that wider patterns are hard to discern. Thus it is encouraging to see Rosenthal and others looking at clusters of three-generational families in their comparison between the memories of Nazi victims and perpetrators. Lena Inowlocki has used this transgenerational approach too, as we have ourselves in *Between Generations* (1993). It provides a strong framework for looking at social change and transgenerational psychological issues.<sup>33</sup>

## Scandinavia

Wartime memory has been a much lesser issue in Scandinavia, particularly in Sweden, which remained neutral. Equally important, trade unionism still plays a significant and respected role in national life. Here the roots of contemporary work go back to the systematic folklore collecting of the nineteenth century as part of a search for national identity. The first archives for direct fieldwork were set up in Finland as early as the 1830s. The Finnish example was followed especially in Sweden. Students at the University of Uppsala formed dialect societies in the 1870s to collect provincial words and expressions which they feared were threatened with extinction. Already by the 1890s this collecting had been systematised into a national questionnaire interview survey, answered in a thousand different locations over the whole country, and by 1914 the Institute for Dialect and Folklore Research was founded with financial support from the Swedish Parliament. The scope of its collecting gradually widened into a national study of rural society, culture, and economy. And from 1935 the Institute made regular use of recording machines in its fieldwork—probably the first organisation to do so for the purposes of historical research.

Closely linked to this fieldwork was the special development of ethnology in Scandinavia as a central academic discipline in the social sciences, fusing social history and sociology. In Stockholm the 'Memory' section of the Nordic Museum Archive now provides a computerised national information service. There has been much oral history work carried out within the scope of ethnology, while at the Swedish Institute of Contemporary History at Södertörn historians hold regular witness seminars, bringing together key actors in an event, and some of these have been televised. But it was not until 2012 that Oral History in Sweden—OLIS—a national society of Swedish oral historians, was formed. Developments have been led by historians in Norway, and by sociologists in Finland, where there is also a Finnish Oral History Network founded in 2006. There had been early oral history studies, from the 1960s, of the folklore and social history of the migrant Roma in Finland.

After the war, in the 1950s, led by the Norwegian historian Edvard Bull at Trondheim, ethnological fieldwork collection was extended to the urban and industrial populations. By the 1970s ethnologists such as Sven Ek and Orvar Löfgren—whose focus shifted from fishing communities to urban and middle-class cultures—were using this earlier work to study long-term social change.

Labour history continues to flourish, especially at Trondheim, now led by Ingar Kaldal, who has written on Norway's coastal paper and pulp mills, crouched at the feet of spectacular mountains. Here academics are working with trade unions in the construction of a major heritage site at the Odda/Tyssedal smelter. In Sweden the Nordic Museum has built a vast collection about workers, and there is an ambitious museum of work history, Arbetets Museum, astride the river in the mill town of Nörrköping. There have also been important experiments in popular history, through the imaginative broadcasting services, and also the workers' factory history campaign launched by the Swedish writer Sven Lindqvist in his challenging book, *Grav där du står* (1978), with a tented travelling exhibition under the same title: 'Dig Where You Stand'.

The other key feature of Scandinavian work is the collection of written autobiographies through life story competitions. The method was initiated by Florian Znaniecki when he returned from America to Poland in the 1920s. Most often competitions were thematic, but sometimes they were open, asking: 'Tell me the story of your life'. Competitions flourished there, both before and after 1945, and developed into a major form of Polish culture, operating at both national and local levels.

#### A CALL FOR FINNISH WOMEN'S LIFE STORIES, 1995

*Life story competitions are a form of memory writing which have been especially developed in Scandinavia and Poland. Vanessa May launched a competition for women's life stories in Finland with a call to:*

Write a Story of your life. A lived, but an unwritten life becomes part of the invisible past. The daily life of the past vanishes . . . Our goal is to collect women's lives: the lived and the dreamed, thoughts and memories, daily life and realities. We want to collect the stories of women's own lives. All lives are worth telling.

Write freely! Write your life story as you yourself want to. Tell of your life: of its events and turning points, of the small and big events in your daily life, of the usual and the unusual . . . Write of childhood and adulthood, youth and old age. Tell of how changes in society have affected you . . . About joy and pain, about togetherness and loneliness.

*The competition proved rewarding both for those who sent in entries and as a source for May's study of lone mothers.*

Vanessa May, *Lone Motherhood in Finnish Women's Life Stories: Creating Meaning in a Narrative Context* (Åbo, Finland: Åbo University Press, 2001), 326.

From Poland the technique crossed the Baltic. The notable Scandinavian use of written life story competitions was especially encouraged by ethnologists. At the Nordic Museum regular essay competitions go back to the 1920s and oral history interviews with essayists were later added. The Norwegian Folklore Archive at Oslo University, which holds over 4,500 autobiographies, has been built from national competitions, especially in 1964, 1981, and 1995. Life story writing is also very popular in Finland, and the Finnish sociologist J. P. Roos has been influential, especially his *Suomailen elämä* (*Finnish Life*, 1987). One of the most interesting interpretations of a life story competition, principally in terms of genre, is by a Norwegian anthropologist, Marianne Gullestad. She describes her *Everyday Life Philosophers* (1996) as 'an experiment in one new way of doing ethnography in the interdisciplinary space between the humanities and the social sciences'.<sup>34</sup>

### South-Eastern and Eastern Europe

Moving south-eastwards, the dominating memory issues are of civil wars. In the former Yugoslavia the bitter memories of the wars of the 1990s are too raw and with criminal prosecutions an active possibility, also not an easy ground for local work in oral history. This makes Selma Leydesdorff's sensitive recording of the women survivors of Srebrenica, *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide*, the massacre where eight thousand Muslims were killed, as important as it is moving. There has also been a major collaborative project between the Universities of Rotterdam and Zagreb and NGOs, 'Post-Yugoslav Voices', which has archived four hundred video interviews for its website, 'Croatian Memories'.

In Greece a national oral history society was founded in 2012, and there is interesting social history work, for example on mountain villagers and on immigrants. Much earlier, there was folklore collecting in a romantic nationalist spirit, and in the 1930s Melpo Merlier recorded refugees from the former Greek city of Smyrna, now Izmir, which was lost in the 1922 war with Turkey. But memories in Greece are highly politicised, and bitter wounds have survived from the wars of the 1940s. Here oral historians are playing a key role in breaking silences. The worst issue from the Second World War and German occupation has been the responsibility for, or collaboration with, destruction of the major Jewish community in Thessaloniki, where 90 per cent of the city's community were killed. This was a taboo matter until the 1990s, when recording of survivors was begun by Erica Kounio-Amarilio, herself a survivor, and then by Bea Lewkowicz. Political antagonisms have also been a problem for Cypriot oral history. In *The Greek Gift* (1975) and *The Heart Grown Bitter* (1981) Peter Loizos has sensitively documented the lasting pain of his own family's former village neighbours, who lost their lands to the 1974 Turkish invasion. But a recent collection edited by Holger Briel suggests that attitudes may now be ready for change. He sees oral history as offering an 'alternative space' for a new narrative which accepts diversity, and his collection includes a positive chapter on mixed villages.<sup>35</sup>

The second issue was the very divisive history of the civil war (1946–49) which followed the liberation from the Germans. Many villages which had backed the wartime Resistance chose to fight on against the new right-wing government for a more progressive society. They eventually not only suffered defeat, but also expulsion to Communist Eastern Europe. The lead in breaking this silence was taken by Riki Van Boeschoten, first in a village ethnography, and most recently in her remarkable book with Loring Danforth on *Children of the Greek Civil War* (2012). The fates of the children—some thirty-eight thousand—who were evacuated by both sides certainly remains a highly contentious and political topic. The immediate motive was to protect them, but they were sent to hostels and schools where they received highly politicised upbringings, whether on the right or the left. Each side accused the other of kidnapping and indoctrination. The authors show the complexity of the truth: that many families did want their children evacuated, while certainly others did not. In most respects, they conclude, the practices of each side were similar. Here is research carried out with skill, drawing on many kinds of sources, retaining balance in the shadow of the towering anger of partisan historians which they powerfully convey.

One of the most telling oral history books from Eastern Europe is again about children. Zsuzsanna Körösi and Adrienne Molnar's *Carrying a Secret in My Heart* (2003) gives us the sad memories of loss and family silence of Hungarian children whose fathers were repressed and sometimes executed after the failed 1956 rising against the Soviets. The 1956 Institute in Budapest began collecting oral history from a discreetly progressive viewpoint in the 1980s, and at the same time in Poland the Karta Centre was set up with an oral history archive. In Poland there had already been workers' memory circles, and official encouragement of collecting the memories of leading Communist workers, most often in writing and sometimes recorded. In both countries the focus was now switched to recording socialist reformers, and in Poland especially the Solidarity movement. Karta has built up large archives on the opposition to Communism and the repressed. In 1996 it revived the earlier Polish life story tradition, organising annual competitions for schools. The 2009 theme was 'The Stigma of World War II'. Oral history is also an element in the new Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, where perhaps for the first time the persecution of Polish Jews by Poles as well as Germans is recognised.

After 1989 a strong oral history centre also developed in Prague, with an archive now of over 1500 interviews, led by Miroslav Vaněk, which has provided rich sources for his account with Pavel Mücke of Czech society since the 1940s, *Velvet Revolutions* (2016). This is unusual as an attempt to put oral history at the centre of a broad-ranging history of a whole society, ranging from work and family relationships to leisure, second homes, and politics. Equally unusually, they focused on three hundred interviews but set these oral histories against the society-wide evidence of opinion polls from the 1970s onwards, which has only recently become available. The insights from the interviews include

the impact of first journeys abroad when foreign travel became possible, the shock of finding the bright colours and cleanliness of Bavarian towns in contrast to the shabby grey of Czech urbanity, and also the surprising poverty in Germany's capitalist cities. But typically they do not remember Czech society under Communism in terms of social class. They saw the fundamental divide as being between 'Us' as non-Communists versus 'Them' as Communist Party members, the pragmatic reasons for joining the party, and the role of corruption and bribery in their lives.

In Bulgaria oral history was taken up by Daniela Koleva with a special interest in memories of the Communist period, contrasting generations and rural and urban dwellers, and then in attitudes to landscape and to religion. In *The Unfinished Revolution* (2010), James Mark ambitiously surveys contrasting forms of memory in this whole group of countries, from oral history to terror sites, statue parks, and 'memories of Red Army rape'. He points out that in contrast to pioneering Western oral historians, the new oral history in central and eastern Europe has focused on dissidents, intellectuals, and the persecuted rather than on 'oppressed classes'; and he calls for more reflection on the changing influences on memory after the collapse of Communism, and how this resulted in different re-shapings of autobiographical memory from different groups—such as Catholics and conservatives who downplayed their personal successes in the Communist era, fearing that they might be branded as collaborators with the regime.<sup>36</sup>

Oral history work has also developed in some of the countries which left the Soviet Union in 1989–91. Here the main issue in memory is the period of Soviet rule. In Latvia a national oral history project was set up immediately after the Soviet collapse in 1992, focusing on Soviet aggression and Latvian resistance to Russification, including fighters in the forests. Vieda Skultans has written a narrative analysis of Latvian life stories and terror, and how they compare with illness studies; while from Lithuania Dalia Leinarte suggests that women's memories show little pride in anything, not even work, and convey the impression that they saw themselves as 'observers rather than active participants in building socialism'. In Ukraine, on the other hand, where Viktor Susak has led oral history recording, it remained difficult, even after *glasnost*, to get people to talk at all, inhibited by the recent presence of the Soviet secret police and by former executioners still living in the villages.<sup>37</sup>

### **Russia: oral history in a culture of silence**

In Russia itself the story of the Great Patriotic War was seen as one of national pride and victory. And in the 1930s the Soviet government encouraged workers' memory circles as part of its effort to develop a new socialist society. Although typically published as a propagandising genre of optimistic heroic worker booklets which now seem travesties of oral history, original records of local activities have been found 'valuable' by Stephen Kotkin. But pride in the war itself involved multiple silences and denials: such as about the 1943 Katyn massacre

of Polish officers by the Russians, or the 1944 deportation of the Crimean Tartars.<sup>38</sup> And as Soviet rule and the repressive gulag prison system continued, for ordinary Russians, generation after generation, eventually for seventy years, silence was one key to social survival.

The first breach in public silence was the work of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was imprisoned himself in 1945–56 for privately criticising Stalin. His work became briefly known in Russia under Krushchev, who saw it as a valuable antidote to Stalinism, but after Krushchev was ousted, Solzhenitsyn was again persecuted, his writing drafts seized and destroyed, and then finally he was expelled from Russia from 1974 to 1990. Meanwhile he had been working on his massive masterpiece, the three-volume *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973–78), which draws on his own experiences and the memories he recorded from over 250 other prisoners. Banned in Russia, it was a sensational success, translated into thirty-five languages and selling some 30 million copies. Not surprisingly, he had no immediate followers in Russia. But the fall of Communism unleashed a tide of memories which for a period washed through television, as well as the more painstaking work at documenting the abuses of Stalinism, focusing on political oppressions, killings, and the gulag, which was begun by the Memorial movement in 1987. A year later Memorial organised a major exhibition on the concentration camps at the Moscow Palace of Culture, seen by thousands of people—where lone men and women could be seen holding up the names of lost parents, or with notices round their collars—‘Does anyone remember X Camp?’—just hoping for someone to share memories.

The early 1990s were years unusually favourable to autobiographical candour in Russia. And there was also an important growth of academic work, both by insiders and outsiders, building up a social history of everyday life under Communism. Unfortunately, in the Putin era Memorial is once again regarded as a dissident organisation, subjected to thefts of its disks listing names and to harassment of activists.<sup>39</sup>

However, even after Communism, the social context for oral history work in Russia has been especially remarkable in two ways. Firstly, this is a society in which secrecy and deception had been exceptionally pervasive. In Soviet Russia, for seventy years, remembering was dangerous, not only to yourself, but to your family and friends. The less that people knew about you and your family story, the better, because most information was potentially dangerous, and could be twisted into material for a denunciation. In the West, telling stories about yourself is commonplace, the currency of everyday conversation and the essence of intimate relationships. Yet Irina Sherbakova found in her interviews with gulag survivors that many of them not only concealed their prison years from their children, but even, if they married after their return from prison, from their own spouses. As a result, many people had little idea of their family story. As one Communist activist in the military put it, ‘We prefer not to talk about our relatives, who they are’. To discover an entrepreneurial or a Jewish ancestor could

lead to family disaster. Quite often families had old photo albums from which some people's images had been cut out—or perhaps just a set of medals on the chest, which told which side the grandfather had supported in the Civil War. And such habits die slowly.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, in the post-Communist era enough Russians were prepared to speak: and their testimony was crucial. For a second aspect of the Russian context is the exceptional unreliability of official written documentation. Most official statistics were shaped as much by what ought to have happened as by what had happened. Given the systematic deception by the Soviet ruling elite, we would not have known anything at all about the gulag but for the testimonies of survivors. If we want to understand living through Soviet Russia, we simply cannot do without the direct testimony of the Russians who lived through it. This untrustworthiness of written documentation applies to both the public and the family spheres. The forging of personal documents was often necessary to survival. And at an individual level there have been particularly dramatic confrontations between memory and written documentation through the opening of secret service files in post-Communist Eastern Europe. In *The File* (2012), Timothy Garton Ash provides a sensitive exploration of his own experience of opening his own STASI file on his visits to East Germany and then seeking explanations from those, whom he had often believed to be friends, who had reported on him.<sup>41</sup>

Communist Russia fascinated outsiders, and this has led to some notable oral history work. In the earlier years, one source of information was emigrants. The first American recording project began at Harvard in the 1950s. Subsequently Michael Glenny collected testimonies from three generations of emigrants, ranging from aristocrats to peasants. And unusually, Donald Raleigh started interviewing in Russia in the 1970s, recording sixty middle-class families who were spearheading the reconstruction of Soviet society.<sup>42</sup>

Not surprisingly, there has been far more oral history by outsiders in Russia since the fall of Communism. Tony Parker was one of the first, with *Russian Voices* (1991), a social history panorama at all levels. Even working through a translator, he was a dedicated listener, with a shrewd ear for detail. Thus while his men and women neatly convey their disillusionments with Russian sexuality, we hear of another form of ecstasy from Arcady Forminsky, who was for many years a driver for the Writers' Union. A keen reader of the *Fisherman*, Arcady describes how his greatest relaxation has been 'to go fishing, either in the Moscow River or to a lake in the countryside . . . In winter I take my little tent and little stool and I sit on the ice in the middle of the river'. And his 'greatest joy' is the new tube bait he has made. 'I have always been something of a scientist . . . When the fish takes the hook, it slides out of the tube and sticks up like this in the water. I tell you, when I see the little flag go up and can say to myself that such an invention was my own idea, it is a moment of pure happiness for me.'<sup>43</sup>

Two other books stand out as exceptional contributions. Catherine Merridale's *Ivan's War* (2005) is a gripping account of the wartime experiences of ordinary Red



Army soldiers in the Second World War. It was a messy war, with chaos in the early years, and later massacres and genocide on the German side and looting and rape by the Russians. But she puts all this in a clear framework. She draws on sources of all kinds: 'I have used every source I can find, from testimony to poetry, police reports to scarred woodland . . . I have worn out a passport and two pairs of boots in pursuit of Russia's war'. She makes particularly crucial use of oral evidence at the start of the war, and at the finish, with the return of the soldiers to civilian life. On the war itself, she found that many ex-soldiers stuck to a heroic form, purged of the nastiness of smashed bodies, which she interprets as a part of their post-war resilience. There is also much telling detail on private emotions, and she recounts one instance in which she was offered a direct comparison between written documents and oral memory, when one of her interviewees produced a bundle of written letters: 'Valya let me read her husband's wartime letters. She even invited me to dictate some of them into my tape recorder as she busied herself making tea. And then I noticed she was sobbing . . . "I don't mind the old letters. But they were such lies. All that stuff about love and homesickness. All the time he was with her, the German woman. They even had a child"'. So far from the loving romantic couple suggested by the letters, this man and wife consisted of a deceiving husband and a bitterly angry wife: 'Valya's rage was murderous'.<sup>44</sup>

Orlando Figes also showed extraordinary energy in his fieldwork for *The Whisperers* (2007). He draws on some 450 archived interviews as well as carrying out his own. He explored 'hundreds of family archives (letters, diaries, personal papers, memoirs, photographs, and artifacts) concealed by survivors of the Stalin Terror in secret drawers and under mattresses in private homes across Russia'. In each family, he carried out 'extensive interviews' with older family members. All this material he collected and housed with the Memorial project. He aimed in the book to look at the families of the generation born around 1920 and explore how living in a system of rule by terror affected intimate relationships. The shattering of some families is brought out especially by accounts of the incomprehension and non-acceptance of family members returning from the gulag. This a massive seven-hundred-page book with much riveting material, which gains dramatic coherence by Figes' focus on seven families. He begins and ends with Antonina Golovina: how she was branded as a class enemy because of her *kulak* peasant origin and exiled to Siberia as a girl. She survived by forging fake citizenship and other official papers and becoming a physiologist. She never told her husband she had been an exile, and in the same spirit her husband concealed the arrest of his own parents from her. Antonina presented herself as a committed Communist and medical professional, but at the same time was leading a lifetime of secrecy about her family: 'All my documents were false. I was terrified of being stopped by a policeman on the street. My passport was full of stamps and signatures that had been forged'.<sup>45</sup> Antonina's story indeed conveys the power of oral memory in Russia as a prime source of understanding.



## Japan and China

Lastly, there are again special issues for oral history in Japan and China. Here, too, oral history struggles against silences. In Japan the main issue is the legacy of Japanese atrocities in the Second World War: the slave labour camps of prisoners of war, and the imprisonment of women in military brothels known as 'comfort stations', where they were forced to serve the troops. This has resulted in a continuing battle which splits national memory. On the one hand, liberals urge the need for apologies and compensation to victims, to regain international respect; on the other hand, conservatives emphasise the wartime sacrifice of the Japanese fighting forces. Japan's major museums symbolise these opposing views. Peace museums in Hiroshima and elsewhere call for reconciliation, while in Tokyo the Yasukuni 'war shrine' gives defiant homage to the two and a half million military dead.<sup>46</sup> Understandably, there has been much ambivalence about oral history, either academic or popular, in a society still struggling to come to terms with the darker sides of its recent past.

Nevertheless there are other, less dramatic strands to Japanese oral history. The earliest comes from the national folklore movement. Here the pioneer was Kunio Yanagita, who began collecting stories with an ethnological eye in a traditional village in a mountainous rice-growing area, publishing them as *The Legends of Tono* (1910). He opens with a dance of the deer, but his stories are full of human discord and protest and are still valued in Japan: indeed, his mysterious ghost story of the Great Tsunami of 1896 was broadcast movingly on Japanese television after the 2011 tsunami.

More recently there has been a variety of oral history activity in social history. This includes local social history women's groups, such as one led by Miyako Orii in Tokyo with its newsletter *Oral History Workshop News*, or the books about an inland lakeside fishing community by its doctor, Junichi Saga, and also academic work now encouraged by the founding in 2003 of the Japanese Oral History Association and its journal. To this we can add Tamara Hareven's long-standing work with the artistic Kyoto silk weavers, exploring how craft and family have related. There are also significant studies of the Japanese abroad in North America and Britain, notably on the communication consequences of mixed marriages. Thus while a study of Japanese war brides in America emphasises their despairing cultural isolation, Sakai's study of London's Japanese banks suggests that cross-cultural marriages were crucial to the banks' functioning. The higher-grade male Japanese and British staff could find no form of meaningful communication. Hence the banks depended on lower-paid Japanese women, who had married Englishmen, in support roles. They had learnt to understand both cultures, and to interpret between the Japanese and English at the top.<sup>47</sup>

China is yet another story. Here the memory struggle has been between, on the one hand, celebration of the Revolution and its achievements, and on the other, hearing the usually silent voices of ordinary people, especially of those who have been victims of the regime's policies. Hence activity has primarily

depended on the fluctuating approaches of the Communist government and of its critics. There was a notable temporary phase, from 1958, with Mao's Great Leap Forward, when there was direct official encouragement of grassroots factory, brigade, and village history groups, including illiterate older workers, investigating the 'hard and glorious struggle of the working classes', stimulating workers to write and speak about their experiences, and to find their own literary creativity. This very open approach was succeeded in 1960 by a more structured programme for the Four Histories—village, family, factory, and commune local histories—which lasted another four years. This locally produced material could provide interesting sources, but it is not clear what has happened to it.<sup>48</sup>

The more continuously sustained national collecting of revolutionary memories began earlier in the 1950s, quite soon after the Communist victory, and won the support of China's premier, Zhou En-lai. It has continued ever since, led for many years by Yang Liwen of Beida University in Beijing, with projects originally on the pre-Revolution decades, the People's Liberation Army, and the Party itself, and broadening, beginning in the 1980s, to include the economy, science, culture, ethnic minorities, and women (with the Chinese Women's University in Beijing). By 2000 more than 300,000 people had been recorded, and a selection published in about 150 volumes, with titles including *A Spark Starting a Prairie Fire* and *Red Flag Floating in the Sky*. However, originally at least, the material was only readily available to trusted Communist cadres.

A more recent national base for oral history is the National Library in Beijing, which in 2011 launched the China Memory Project, led by Tian Miao, formerly director of the China Central TV programme *People*. It is filming life story interviews, producing high-quality documentaries on a variety of groups ranging from musicians, scientists, and artists to craftspeople and war veterans. There has also been an important project on women's history based at the China Women's University. In a careful comparison with the British 'Sisterhood and After' project, Margaretta Jolly and Li Huibo explore differences in focus, but leave one in no doubt of the richness of the Chinese interviews, the breadth of choice of interviewees, and the strength of official funding.<sup>49</sup> There are active centers also in other cities, including Shanghai.

At the same time there has also been a revived interest in oral history work in schools. In 2008 an Institute of Oral History was set up by Yang Xiangyin at Wenzhou University on the south-east coast, encouraging student projects in the city. In 2014 an annual *Oral History Studies* was launched, providing a forum for Chinese oral history research and for translations of Western oral history. Here and elsewhere there have been increasingly active contacts with academics from other countries, and a Chinese international oral history society has been set up to provide links throughout the Chinese diaspora. At the same time, there is a spread of non-academic popular oral history using internet websites, which are much less within official control.

Some of the best accounts of what was happening in China through these decades were produced by outsiders who were sympathetic to the aims of the Revolution and fascinated by it. The earliest was Edgar Snow, an unaligned international journalist, whose story of the Communist long march, *Red Star Over China* (1937), included a full life story interview with Mao himself at his insurgent headquarters deep in the northern countryside. (More than sixty years later Helen Praeger, with the support of Chinese radio, was still able to interview women survivors of the march, recording harrowing accounts of sufferings of hunger and of wayside childbirth.) Jan Myrdal also went to the northern Communist heartland for his *Report from a Chinese Village* (1965): a lively account of a village of impoverished cave-dwellers through life stories of its men and women. It is a kind of Chinese *Akenfield*, but includes more political voices, such as the woman pioneer, or the leader of the vegetable labour group.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time as Myrdal, William Hinton switched from driving a tractor for a UN relief agency to writing *Fanshen* (1966)—the word means ‘revolution’—vividly describing the oppressive old regime in the village of Long Bow, and how the peasants overthrew the landlords and divided up their land among them. This first account of the village now seems over-optimistic. But Hinton won a remarkable reputation in China. When he returned to Long Bow in 1971 after more than twenty years’ absence, walking the last ten miles, literally thousands of people lined the road to greet him, and he had to spend the whole of his first fortnight simply greeting people and shaking hands. He then set to work again interviewing villagers to produce a much longer and more complex book, *Shenfan* (1983). His achievement is unique in weighing the gains and losses of the previous decades, and in disentangling the confusing years of the Cultural Revolution, when Shanshi disintegrated into meaningless faction-fighting, hysterical propaganda, and eventually guerilla warfare. The outcome is an exceptionally convincing account of the villagers’ experience through an ever-changing situation.

Since then there have been many accounts of the Cultural Revolution based on personal testimonies, of which the best known is Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans*, a powerful account of the fate of three generations in the same family—which has sold 13 million copies worldwide.

Fen Jicai’s *Ten Years of Madness* (1996) is based on vivid written testimonies again from these years of chaos. He advertised for contributions in a newspaper and received some four thousand letters, an extraordinary demonstration of the wishes of ordinary Chinese people for their experiences to be publicly recognised.<sup>51</sup> But the earlier Great Hunger resulting from the chaos caused by Mao’s 1958 Great Leap Forward has had very little attention before Xun Zhou’s *Forgotten Voices of Mao’s Great Famine*.

### THE GREAT HUNGER IN CHINA, 1958–62

*Xun Zhou's voices cumulatively show how pressure for much more rapid change towards industrialisation led to violence, destructive short cuts, and finally food shortages and starvation. Crucially, a key element in this was the creation of false records of achievement by over-enthusiastic local Communist cadres—so that contemporary official records are often less reliable than retrospective memories.*

We were told that the pace of change was too slow, and that in order to achieve Communist goals more quickly, China needed a Great Leap Forward . . . The People's Communes were formed. Individual farmers were required to join the commune: 'Today we establish socialism, and tomorrow we wake up in Communism'. (Liushu)

Everything was collectivised . . . Individual houses were pulled down . . . We are tasked to pull down houses every day. I had to do it. In those days I had to do whatever the cadres told me to. If I dared to disobey their orders, I would be beaten up. (Wang Deming)

To make iron and steel, everything containing wood was taken away. People even fed coffins into the furnaces. You weren't given any warning in those days—the cadres would just suddenly appear at people's doors and then take everything away . . . When it was someone's turn to have their house demolished, the cadres would just call the family out and carry out the job straight away. Anything made of wood would be fed into the furnaces. (Lao Yu)

Ordinary people were not allowed to cook at home, and they had to eat at the collective canteen . . . Cadres came to our kitchen and blocked our chimney. (Wei Dexu)

The People's Commune was run like an army . . . We had to work day and night without a break . . . If anyone failed to turn up to work, they were deprived of food. On our way to work every day, the cadres stood by with a bamboo cane in their hand. If anyone was slow in walking, they would use the bamboo to beat that person. (Zhu Daye)

The villagers were first ordered to make iron and steel. They were then told to deep-plow the rice fields. The cadres told villagers to dig almost a metre deep. As a result, the soil was tilled upside down—the rich soil got buried underneath, and the poor soil sat on the surface. The crops suffered as a result, and so did the farmers. (Hushu)

At the time, there was also the so-called 'Wind of Exaggeration'. Local cadres talked up the amount of food being produced. In reality there was never as much food as they claimed. In those days, it was the cadres' job to exaggerate the amount. How could they become a cadre otherwise? (Li Anyuan)

After 1958 there was practically nothing left to eat at the collective canteen . . . Ninety-five per cent of the people in our village suffered from edema. Many villagers collapsed while out on the road . . . In those days if anyone was caught stealing food they would be beaten to death by the local cadres. (Hushu)

One morning three of us were pulling the cart, and I was on the right-hand side. Suddenly I found myself stepping over a dead body . . . The body felt very soft. I ran as quickly as I could. I was so frightened. While running back to our sleeping quarters, I looked under the bridge and saw a lot of dead bodies lying by the side of the river . . . Many people starved to death, and their bodies were washed down the river by floods. There were piles and piles of dead bodies. (Luo Guihua)

Xun Zhou, *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine, 1958–1962* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 64, 28, 110, 34, 40, 119, 123, 49, 147, 148–49.

Myrdal and Hinton set a pattern for Chinese village studies. One more recent example is Ralph Thaxton's *Salt of the Earth*, about three salt-making villages in Henan, central China, from the 1920s to the 1940s. He discusses his techniques in getting beyond local party ideologues, who thought of peasants as ignorant and illiterate, and that folk memories were based on fairy tales. He advocates group interviews as a way of checking exaggerated individual memories. Gail Hershatter focuses on women in four villages near to Xian, and the impact of socialism in terms of gender.<sup>52</sup>

Sometimes oral history about China has not been based on local fieldwork, but less satisfactorily on interviews with emigrants: for example, Anita Chan's *Chen Village* (1983). Michael Frolic's *Mao's People* is an attractive book based on the stories of sixteen refugees from all parts of China, some with dramatic stories, such as 'The Man Denounced by His Girl Friend'—and so condemned to many years in a labour camp. There are also books on Chinese women based on emigrants.<sup>53</sup>

Hong Kong has been the base for some of this work, which may have helped to stimulate its own oral history activity. The Hong Kong Oral History Archives Project was launched in the 1990s and has developed into the current ambitious Hong Kong Memory project for conserving cultural heritage, which includes its digital oral history archive, 'Voices of Hong Kong'.

The most remarkable feature of oral history in China, however, is the sustained campaign since the mid-1980s, in some instances risking punitive repression, to let the voices of ordinary Chinese men and women be heard. Partly because of the potential dangers, most often the interviews used have been noted rather than recorded, and freely edited. The short story writer

Zhang Xinxin and the journalist Sang Ye started travelling round China in 1984 and collected several hundred testimonies, publishing them first in magazine form, and then as *Chinese Profiles* or *Chinese Lives* (1986). This book includes people from all walks of life, thus conveying a clear sense of class differences, from party cadres to single old women, peasants, an ex-Red Guard, a prostitute, and a mountain gold digger. But it does recognise not only the pains of the socialist struggle but also the pride that many felt in it: as one worker put it, 'From morning to night, for the sake of our country and our families, we weave in and out of the traffic on our bikes to help modernise China. That makes me very proud. Naïve I may be, but that's honestly how it is'. The book was popular in China and became a key text abroad for understanding Chinese society. Finding his situation and the censorship of his work in China increasingly difficult, Sang Ye went to live in Australia in 1989, but he continued on to publish other oral history books, of which the best-known is *China Candid* (2006), again a diverse collection of lives, but focusing on fast-changing contemporary China.<sup>54</sup>

#### NEW CHINESE ENTREPRENEURS

*Liao Yiwu's The Corpse Walker (2009) presents a set of unconventional men and women who do not represent China as the authorities would wish. An edited version of his book has been a bestseller in China, but Liao works under the shadow of official disapproval. This interview with a new 'entrepreneur' takes us into the underside of China's economic growth. Qian Gubao recalled:*

When I started out, I was a little nervous and lacked confidence. I tried to do some honest business as a matchmaker for the women in my village. But it was really tough . . . Women growing up in the mountains had never left their native villages before. It was difficult to show up out of the blue and convince them to leave home and travel thousands of miles to marry a stranger. They wouldn't do it even when I threatened to kill their parents.

*So Qian resorted to much more deceptive strategies:*

I had no other alternative but to entice them with beautiful lies. First I told them that I was running a restaurant in the north and recruiting waitresses to help out . . . [Then] I had some fake identification cards made and claimed that I was recruiting workers for a textile factory in the north . . . I told all sorts of lies, and finally some of them worked. Soon I became bolder and bolder.

*He was able to develop a network for human trafficking:*

I set up contacts in several major cities in the north-west. My job was to transport the 'goods' to a certain location, and my contacts would 'distribute' them to the villages. Practice made perfect. My tongue became as slick as if it were soaked in oil, and I could easily lure a real goddess from heaven into marrying a human on earth. There were many women who would swallow my crap like it was the most nutritious food they ever ate. If they believed in my crap and ended up getting sold, it served them right.

*You were trading human flesh.*

Comrade, that is certainly not a nice way to describe it. I didn't run a brothel!

Interview with Qian Gubao in Liao Yiwu, *The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories, China from the Bottom Up* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 15–16.

*Sang Ye has also recorded comparable life stories—for example, this merchant, who moves from trading clothes to trading women:*

I started out mostly trading in clothing. You can make more profit on clothes, and you don't need any particular expertise. It all depends on how good a talker you are. If you're into something else, like watches, you really need to know how to fix the damned things. If you fuck up a person's watch, you have to pay for it. I didn't know any of that stuff . . .

Clothing was hard enough, since you had to go racing between Guangzhou and Beijing. You had to bring in the stuff from Guangzhou yourself; if you stayed in Beijing and depended on middlemen to bring the goods from Guangzhou, you'd be ripped off . . . Never got home till the middle of the night, and you'd be at it again at daybreak. And those trips to Guangzhou and back were sheer hell . . . I wouldn't waste money on a sleeper—couldn't get a ticket anyway—so I'd end up sitting or standing or crouching near the train door for the whole trip back to Beijing. By the time I got off a few days later, my legs would be swollen as big as loaves of bread. If you pressed the flesh, your finger would leave this big dent . . .

It was when I was working in clothing that a real opportunity finally presented itself. There was a time when the authorities allowed people to import secondhand clothing. To people outside

China it was just rubbish, but we started buying loads of clothing, mostly square-meter boxloads, at ten dollar or less a load . . . Getting secondhand clothes into Beijing wasn't so easy, though . . . Your only choice was to rent a truck yourself to haul the stuff all the way from the south . . . All in all, the trips went pretty smoothly. Whenever we ran into a blockade, you could usually get by with a bribe . . .

When we divided the cargo up, I didn't have time to open my sacks to see just what I was getting—just brought it straight back home. That's when I discovered, fuck me dead, most of it was 70, 80 per cent new, and the type of thing that was in fashion at the time! The only damned problem was that it was all filthy, and it stank to high heaven. I separated out the stuff that was too dirty to keep—things with oil stains or bloodstains or whatever—and sent it off to the recycling station. Then I mobilized my whole family to work with me to wash and iron the rest. We ended up with a fairly impressive wardrobe of clothes . . .

And boy, was it a profitable deal for me! . . . Night markets were particularly good, since no one could see what they were really getting. Back then people were completely fixated with new stuff from overseas, and there wasn't much of it around. I was in a good position because I was selling bona fide foreign clothing, just what amateur overseas Chinese and tarded-up girls around town were looking for . . .

Nowadays people are impressed if you can make a 50 per cent profit on a deal; back then I wouldn't think anything of 500 per cent. We were so hot we were just burning the place up.

Sang Ye, 'A Hero for the Times: A Winner in the Economic Reforms', *China Candid: The People of the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006): 16–18.

The dangers of speaking out make this kind of oral history work the most dramatic strand of contemporary oral history work in China. The best of it is fascinating to read. To give one example, Liao Yiwu's *The Corpse Walker* (2009), with its gallery of marginal men and women—the ex-landowner, the abbot, the human trafficker, the corpse walker—is creepily fascinating, and definitely not the picture of China which the authorities want to propagate. Liao Yiwu has already been imprisoned and tortured in 1990 for his support of the pro-democracy movement, and although the 'sanitised' Chinese edition of his book has been a best-seller, as he writes on he must be constantly aware of the shadow behind him. Nor is he the only one of these populist historians who has suffered victimisation. Sang Ye has emigrated. Zhou Qing, a writer who has set up his own independent Museum of Oral History in Beijing, combining testimonies and



photography, was also imprisoned for his support of the pro-democracy movement. And Yang Weidong, who has interviewed several hundred intellectuals, including some dissidents, has found his publications banned in China, many of his interview and tapes confiscated, and a security officer has even moved into the flat above him. We can only hope that the control of Chinese popular oral history loosens rather than tightens, so that its full potential can be realised as a force for social understanding, both within China and internationally.

China brings our world tour of oral history and life story work to a conclusion. There is an extraordinary wealth of activity right round the globe. This activity is cross-disciplinary, with historians, sociologists, ethnologists, and anthropologists taking the lead in different contexts. Depending on the history and social character of each country, and how history and politics have shaped the preoccupations of memory, oral historians emphasise different fields: for example, oral tradition and land rights, or colonialism and cultural ethnography, or political struggle and trauma, or gender, sexuality, and women's roles. The challenge of these different contexts has also resulted in the development of particular variations in life story method, such as the incorporation of collective memory in the Latin American *testimonio*, or the formal techniques for interview and analysis of the German narrative interview. All of these have been significant influences on the broad scope of current oral history practice.

Equally important, alongside these local currents has been the growth of transnational contacts and influences. Both *Oral History* and the *Oral History Review* regularly publish reports and reviews of work in many different countries. Since the 1990s the International Oral History Association has been meeting biennially on different continents. The European Social Science History Conference also meets biennially, with a notably strong oral history section. The International Sociological Association's Biography and Society Research Committee provides another forum, launched by the French life story group in 1978, but subsequently more a meeting ground for German narrative researchers. There are also a growing number of international journals which publish some oral history. One example is *FQS*, published from Berlin since 1999 in German, Spanish, and English, which focuses on qualitative sociological methods, ranging from oral history to computerised analysis.

Beyond this, however, increasingly there has been a range of other parallel practices under different titles, sometimes including oral history work and sometimes not, which offer useful new contexts, perspectives, and approaches, to which we must next turn.

# 4

## Parallel Strands

Oral history has always occupied an interdisciplinary position. Oral historians relate primarily to historians and social researchers—anthropologists, sociologists, and ethnologists. They also have important links with psychology, and with literary studies. There could be another link, too, with cultural studies, but perhaps because there has been little overlap in terms of fieldwork practice, this has been little developed. And since the 1990s the network of cross-disciplinary relationships has become much more complex through the development of new research approaches. Some of these, such as memory studies and the new digital media, are openly inclusive of oral history activities, others less so. It is a strength that typically these new approaches are in themselves interdisciplinary. It is less helpful that the words used to name them—‘narrative’, ‘memory’, ‘auto/biography’—overlap confusingly, concealing bundles that may or may not combine different strands of activity.<sup>1</sup>

### Visual media

We begin with how oral history has related to varying forms of visual media. Painting and sculpture have been art forms since the earliest centuries of human society, and because those first artists have left us no words or sounds it reminds us how visual expression can be very powerful alone and in itself—but also mysterious. Even looking at a cave painting, you want to understand why the artist painted those animals: for hunting, for religion, for both? Hence we can get more out of exhibitions from any period with a spoken or printed commentary. And with exhibitions of more recent work, oral history can prove to be very effective with audio commentaries from the artist, critics, family, and friends. A striking example was the National Portrait Gallery’s retrospective of Lucian Freud in 2012. You could stand looking at a portrait, usually a nude, and listen to the feelings of those who sat for him, including his own daughters. So the visual and the audio, although remaining separate, interacted powerfully to heighten the impact of the paintings.

There is a comparable situation with still photography. A brilliant photographer can convey a great deal with a visual image alone: for instance, Sebastião Salgado’s photographs of gold-diggers hacking at a cliff in the Amazon jungle

like ants, or of a Lapp woman standing by her tent in blowing snow, seem to convey a whole culture at once. But this is of course rare. John Thomson, who, directly inspired by Henry Mayhew, published a series of photos of *The Street Life of London* (1877–78) along with interviews, often with snatches of Cockney city dialect, was an early exception. But with most early sets of photos of urban life, like Paul Martin's of Londoners or Jacob Riis' of New Yorkers, the impact is muffled: we long to hear their voices too.

Even Walker Evans' iconic photos from the depression years of three tenant families in the American South made their impact, not just from their haunting, wistful faces and the utter simplicity of their material homes, but also because of the compelling text by James Agee that accompanied them in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). This is all the more true of the huge number of studio and popular photographs of people and local scenes which have survived from the late nineteenth century onwards. 'A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading'. Discovering who the people are, where and when the photo was taken—and again, oral history may provide the answers—immediately gives a photo more meaning, and gives the image a chance of inclusion in one of the many, largely local, popular books of old photographs. These photographs can also provide important historical evidence. They trace the changing of urban townscapes and architecture, and for family historians, they show how family members chose to look and dress for the studio. Where family scrapbooks survive, they usually focus on the most positive times of family togetherness, such as holidays or weddings.<sup>2</sup> The interpretation of this family evidence becomes much more alive and interesting when it can be supported by memories through oral history—particularly since this is more likely to reveal the aspects of family history which were deliberately left out of the album.

The development of combined—rather than mutually supportive—visual and audio media came later, and took still longer to become a possible popular medium. In principle it makes possible a much richer record, for example of relationships and emotions between people at home, of work practices and relationships, of group ceremonies and leisure. Early film making was expensive, requiring specialised equipment and needing a whole team for acting, shooting, and producing. To raise revenue, films had to be shown to large audiences at chains of cinemas. Thus at this stage, there was no room for popular personal audio-visual activities. However, from the early 1920s onwards, some major documentary films were produced. The outstanding early director was Robert Flaherty, a Canadian who worked with the Inuit to film *Nanook of the North* (1922) and went on to make a much-admired film, conveying a romantic picture of life on an Irish island, *Man of Aran* (1934). Flaherty scripted both films and trained local people as actors, restaging events and sometimes filming archaic behaviour that had long ceased, such as hunting sharks with harpoons from small boats in the open ocean.

Surprisingly, anthropologists, who had long used still photography to document their fieldwork, and normally included a few photos in their publications, began using ethnographic film with sound only in the 1960s. This was a big step forward, because it enabled the ordinary experience of a culture to be portrayed through people talking about their own lives. An early classic was Robert Gardner's *Rivers of Sand* (1974), in which an Ethiopian woman tells her life story. Ethnographic filming—aimed at professional audiences, but with less exacting artistic standards than for the public circuits—then quickly became a common practice for anthropologists. Soon there were regular film reviews in journals such as the *American Anthropologist*, and from 1973 the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication published its own journal. But most social researchers continued to hesitate, not only because of the extra costs and fieldwork time involved, but also because the very richness of film evidence meant that it was harder to analyse. A film needs to be evaluated overall, just as a book does, and its message and oral and visual delivery tested in small narrative sequences, but neither way is easily reducible into the statistics which social researchers like to produce.

Since the 1970s, television oral history has developed into a very powerful new form, as in the work of Steve Humphries and Testimony Films. However they are presented, with or without a narrator, these programmes are professionally driven and shaped. But from much earlier, there was also a popular market for the new audio-visual media. Beginning with safety film in the 1920s, ordinary families started to record their domestic activities. But the advent of video in the 1970s made a much more explosive impact. Originally video was used only by professionals, but it evolved into an inexpensive home-based form of filming requiring only basic skills. It has been taken up in many contexts, but notably in group family therapy and in classrooms (for example, interactively, helping children to learn to present their ideas).

For oral historians, video means that extracts from their history interviews can be used in project DVDs. The largest oral history film and video archive is probably the Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive of testimonies of Holocaust survivors at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, where extracts are regularly played to visitors. There are, however, potential drawbacks in using video. Alessandro Portelli suggests from his experience that it makes the interview situation more formal and pushes the focus onto recording brief highlights, rather than giving the deep space needed for a reflective life story. He also observes that we lack an effective analytical procedure for video, which would need to include making it easier to pause to hold a scene or to replay a section.<sup>3</sup> In any case, lone researchers are likely to find that long sequences of talking heads or figures sitting in the same position can become distractingly boring. If the key point of a presentation is the audio, then an audio and photo show may be more effective. A successful video DVD needs much more than a single fixed camera: a second camera with a different angle, separate audio to get better

quality, and the use of still photos. All this implies the need for much more than basic skills, so that the best results still come from professionals.

Hence much more important has been video's encouragement of self-recording. It has become a standard element of key family occasions, such as weddings or major birthday celebrations. As a result, while earlier filming was led by men, video has brought a big increase in informal filming by women. It is incorporated into mobile phones, so that any interesting moment can be captured and then immediately transmitted around the circle of family and friends. It does not matter if it is a bit out of focus or the sound is blurred—indeed, that can add to the sense of authenticity. Michael Moore's first success, *Roger and Me* (1989), on the aftermath of the layoff of 35,000 workers by General Motors in Flint, Michigan, deliberately used home movie style, incorporating his own camera and using a hand-held camera. This new culture of mass self-recording has also been one crucial stimulus to 'memory studies'.

In this context a significant new form has arisen, encouraged by professionals. This is 'digital storytelling': the recording of short audio-video stories in the context of a workshop-based practice. Because it focuses on short stories and very short presentations, digital storytelling is a very different practice from oral history, where giving time and space is fundamental to recording. But it does present a model for democratic audio-visual recording, and it does produce interesting social history material. Digital storytelling was originated in the 1990s by Dana Atchley of the American Film Institute in California, who aimed to 'put the universal human delight in narrative and self-expression into the hands of everyone. It brings a timeless form into the digital age'. Participants at the workshops were taught how to interview, as well as digital skills in recording, archiving, and transmitting the results.

Encouraged by the success of the burgeoning new forms of personal internet transmission, digital storytelling has spread widely as a combination of media practice and group activism, with more than three hundred programmes worldwide. It is especially used educationally with children and young adults. A notable media example was the BBC's *Video Nation* series, broadcast from 1993 to 2000. For each programme 250 people in different parts of Britain were lent camcorders, trained to use them, and asked to record a story on a particular main theme. The most interesting were chosen for a two-minute broadcast, and were typically fascinating. Fortunately, more than seven thousand stories have been thematically archived at the British Film Institute and are available to the public on their own website.<sup>4</sup>

## Public history

Public history, by contrast, overlaps with oral history in a different way. It is not a new interdisciplinary form, but a development within history. The term goes back to the 1970s, when Robert Kelley and colleagues at the University of California at Santa Barbara sought, in a period of graduate unemployment,

to create a sphere of professional work outside academia. They launched their journal, the *Public Historian*, and set up links with other established institutions, including with military and banking centres. This provoked a debate with radical oral historians like Ron Grele, who wanted to get beyond the old, white, elite version of American history, symbolised by well-groomed former colonial villages like Williamsburg. There was also uncertainty about the scope of public history: does it include any form of non-academic history, from local clubs or commercial practitioners to museums and television? Probably yes. But despite such confusions, before long fifty American universities were running graduate programmes listed by the National Council on Public History. The core issues with which they deal are practice, the popular presentation of the past through museums, heritage sites, film, and fiction, and questions of identity and how we acquire our sense of the past—through buildings, through archives, or perhaps through memory. While oral history plays only a part in all this, public history certainly has helped to illuminate some spheres in which oral historians can work collaboratively with other professionals, and also to encourage thinking about the contexts in which memory develops and can be evoked.<sup>5</sup>

In Britain through the 1980s the parallel debate about the role and focus of heritage and memory was much less practical, led instead by books such as David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* and Patrick Wright's *On Living in an Old Country*, with Raphael Samuel putting a more radical populist spin on it in *Theatres of Memory*.<sup>6</sup> Although British oral historians have been heavily involved with the public presentation of history, whether in museums, or National Trust heritage sites, or on television, and despite the launching by *Oral History* in 1997 of a special public history section, and the establishment by Ruskin College of an MA in public history, the term has made less impact in Britain than in the United States.

Public history has flourished much more in Australia, stimulated initially by the generously funded national celebrations of the first arrival of Europeans in 1788, which led to questioning as to what such celebrating might mean to the indigenous Australians whose land the newly arrived Europeans seized. Appropriately, the best recent oral history book on public history is edited by an Australian and an American, Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, *Oral History and Public Memories*. Its case studies range from oral history in American museums, a project on the Cleveland homeless, and the Canadian National Parks, to Australian Aboriginal history, Japanese Americans, and Albanians in Kosovo.

### **Sociological trends**

In the relationship between oral history and sociological developments, the scene is much less clear today than it was in the 1980s. On the one hand, there have been significant developments in life story work in France and through the German narrative interview. Equally important has been the strong establishment of the American 'life course' school led by Glen Elder, based on

longitudinal studies that follow the same sample of people over long time periods and combine quantitative data with in-depth qualitative interviews—an approach which European researchers have unfortunately failed to follow. ‘Life course’ research evolved in the 1960s through a gradual fusion of sociological, psychological, and social historical approaches, based on the understanding that all social behaviour is socially embedded but that these contexts vary between cultures and over time. Ageing is seen as a lifelong process, but not one of fixed cross-cultural stages, as had been suggested by the psychological school of Erik Erikson.

This more historical perspective was particularly effectively developed in oral history by Tamara Hareven in her study of a New England textile mill, *Family Time and Industrial Time*. Life course work allows researchers to examine the overall pattern of a life, its turning points, how a life is shaped by its social context, but equally, why people make their own choices, and what are the sources of ambition and resilience. Methodologically, as Elder puts it, what is ‘absolutely essential is some type of longitudinal framework’, providing the evidence for a full individual life story and so making it possible to follow the long-term impact of earlier experiences and feelings.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Europe, the United States is rich in longitudinal life story surveys. They include the Terman studies of gifted children and the Gluck studies of delinquents and their families, both begun in the 1920s, and later surveys launched by the US Department of Labor. Typically they combined quantitative and qualitative information. This was especially true of the best-known longitudinal studies of all, the Berkeley and Oakland cohorts, also begun in the 1920s, which combined statistical physical health data, survey questions, and long interviews with psychologists. These provided the datasets that Glen Elder re-analysed for his evaluation of the lifelong impact of childhood deprivation in *Children of the Great Depression* (1974), the founding classic of the life course approach. It is also significant that the director in charge of these Californian cohorts from the 1960s to the 1990s was John Clausen, a Chicago graduate who had worked with Clifford Shaw on the life stories of delinquents, who added retrospective oral history interviews to the Berkeley data, publishing a set of sixty as *American Lives* (1993).

It is more of a puzzle to understand what has happened to the former cutting edges of ethnographic research in sociology—community studies and life stories. Community studies provided a form in which an in-depth local project could speak to much wider social issues. Regrettably, in the 1970s they were discredited as an academic research methodology as lacking a measurable focus, especially for sociologists, although some anthropologists and social geographers continue to use this approach, as have oral historians. Indeed Portelli’s *They Say In Harlan County* (2011), based on twenty years of interviewing and participant observation, is one of the most powerful and reflective of all community studies.<sup>8</sup> Earlier, there was also a long-standing and highly influential



tradition of life story publications in both sociology and anthropology, either as classic single stories or as groups of testimonies—as exemplified by the work of the Chicago school of sociology. In anthropology this approach continues strongly in many parts of the world, and it has been vigorously taken up by both historians and independent writers. In sociology, by contrast, it seems to be spluttering.

It looks as if there has been a failure of nerve in the twenty-first century. We can sense this if we try to follow the main line down from the Chicago life story school. Its ethnographic heyday was in the 1920s–1930s, with a second wave in the 1960s, as in the work of Howard Becker and Erving Goffman. In terms of theory, a key early figure was George Herbert Mead, with his idea of ‘the self’ shaped through social interaction but with its own sense of reality, independent of the perspectives of the researchers. During the second wave, Herbert Blumer provided a new and still important banner for the life story approach with his *Symbolic Interactionism* (1969). He argued that human action is based on the social meanings that people interpret from their social interactions. He advocated a range of fieldwork methods, including observation, life stories, diaries, letters, and group discussions. He wanted researchers to take a middle way between ‘mere descriptive accounts’ and social theory divorced from ordinary life in ‘a world of its own’. This second wave was also methodologically innovative, with Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss’s technique of ‘grounded theory’, which encouraged the development of key ideas and strategies in mutual interaction during fieldwork as well as before it, and Erving Goffman’s vision of social life as a form of theatre.<sup>9</sup> But what happened next?

On the British side, a good companion is Ken Plummer’s *Documents of Life* (1983). The first edition is a clarion call for fresh qualitative research. The second edition (2001) is given a cautious subtitle: *An Invitation to a Critical Humanism*. In his introduction Plummer notes that ‘the past twenty years has seen considerable development in life story work: biography, narrative, lives, oral histories, telling tales—all these have now developed into a wide network of research. . . . Yet despite its prominence with certain groups—like symbolic interactionists, oral historians and feminists—it still remains at the margins of academic research’. He gives as one reason the theoretical attacks on the assumptions of humanist sociology, which focused on real people in their social contexts and with their social issues. Now, ‘attacked by structuralists, poststructuralists, postmodernists, postcolonialists and multiculturalists alike, . . . theoretically, the language has turned to “discourses of the subject”, “decentred identities”, “polyvocal voices”, but rarely these days to the living and breathing, embodied and feeling *human being*: this is an idea which has had its day’. These theoretical ideas have been influential with oral historians, but not to such a destructive extent. Fortunately Plummer still hopes for change with sociologists: ‘A major theme haunts this book. It is a longing for social science to take more seriously its humanistic foundations and to foster styles of thinking that encourage the



creative, interpretive story telling of lives.' Yet the contributors to Liz Stanley's *Documents of Life Revisited* (2013) write as if Chicago ethnography had never existed. As Les Back has observed, listening is a 'fundamental medium for human connection', but 'the capacity to hear has been damaged and is in need of repair. This is what sociology is needed for'.<sup>10</sup>

In the United States the banner was taken up by Norman Denzin, who moved from ethnographic work on alcoholism to theorising methods. He began in a straightforward symbolic interactionist perspective with *The Research Act* (1977), providing more detailed discussion of methods, including a whole chapter on life histories. Here he notes the recent turning away of sociologists from the method, but maintains that the life history is 'a method par excellence ... because it rests on the assumption that records of man's subjective experiences form the core data of sociology'.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, however, this confidence seemed to fade. Denzin went on to produce a massive multi-edition *Handbook of Qualitative Research* and also a series of individual books—such as *Interpretive Biography* (1989) and *Interpretive Interactionism* (2001)—through which the twists and turns of methods can be traced. These successive 'turns' include the feminist challenge to the male idea of an objective interview; the 'interpretive' approach, which emphasises how meaning in the interview is co-constructed between the interviewee and the researcher; and the psychological perspective, which advocates less structured interviewing in order to give space for unconscious processes to emerge in the narrative. Denzin has continued to support flexible approaches and openness to multiple methods, as the life story method has evolved, first into symbolic interactionism, and more recently to be labeled as critical humanism.

Yet remarkably, Denzin rarely identifies outstanding new work, and instead keeps reverting to the earlier classics as exemplars, or to fiction. He is not alone in this. Indeed the only major new works cited by Denzin and others of this school are late works by old Chicago hands: Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street* (1999), about the struggle for decency in a poor Philadelphia street, and Eliot Liebow's *Tell Them Who I Am* (1993), about a shelter for the homeless. And Denzin, in his most recent turn, *Performance Ethnography* (2003), seeking to politicise research around the contradictions of racism and democracy in contemporary America, no longer offers much of a role at all for recent ethnographic sociology. Instead he looks for inspiration to Anna Deavere Smith's one-woman touring performances, exploring the differences between black and white ways of speaking. It seems, despite his long-standing commitment, through so many methodological publications, that Denzin has abandoned the promise of field-work-based life story sociology.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the optimistic assertions of many authors of manuals, American sociology remains primarily quantitative in its methodology. In Britain the scene is different: although the bulk of the funding goes to survey researchers, the majority of teaching sociologists choose to work qualitatively. And life

stories do continue to be seen as one mode of qualitative sociology. To take three British research manuals as examples, one gives a whole chapter to 'narratives and stories'; another favours the 'narrative method' and illustrates this with the life story of a burglar; and the third and most recent very clearly sets out the life story, oral history, life course, biographical and narrative interviews as valuable forms for the qualitative sociologist to follow. Nevertheless, again it is hard to name a recent life story classic authored by a sociologist. How has this happened?<sup>13</sup>

One factor is the changing market context for sociological books. The earlier classic life stories were published primarily as testimonies with quite brief introductions and comments. Similarly, best-selling urban ethnographies like Jackson and Marsden's *Education and the Working Class* (1962) made their impact through combining clear, straightforward argument with vivid descriptive detail and interview quotes. Today a respectable sociological monograph has to be justified and weighed down by a heavy apparatus of theory, literary review, and methodology, and a style of writing that is frequently off-putting and hard to grasp. Plummer castigates the current style of social research publications as littered with tables and pretentious language, 'illiterate, ugly and stark', 'unreadable'.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, while in the 1980s there was still plenty of room for paper-backed empirical sociology books selling three thousand or five thousand copies to a wider market, backed by the widely read weekly *New Society*, today the lay market has been lost and publishers are content to aim at under-five-hundred highly priced monographs for the library market. Historians, it should be noted, never so absorbed by theory, do still address a lay as well as a professional market. Hence in the big bookstores you are much more likely to find a history than a sociology best-seller. For sociologists, this means that a series of brief articles in the increasing number of available journals appears as a more efficient way of publicising new findings and ideas. Alternatively, they can try a textbook: for unlike detailed ethnography, a good methodological textbook continues to win reasonable sales. However, in the long run this looks to be a dangerous situation. Ethnography certainly needs good theory and methodology, but without exemplary practice as well, it will die. Qualitative sociology would have much more current impact if some of its theorists were out there in the field generating best-sellers.

### **Narrative studies**

Next we come to the strands of narrative research, again a diverse cluster, but overall presenting a more optimistic picture—to the point, indeed, where the claims of narrativists can seem exaggerated. Too often they present narrative and storytelling as the crucial essence of human life. Thus from anthropology Barthes wrote of narrative as the fundamental coinage of culture: 'The narratives of the world are numberless . . . Narrative is present in every age, in every place,

in every society . . . Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, trans-cultural'. The psychiatrist Oliver Sacks argued that storytelling was the keystone of personality: 'each of us constructs and lives a narrative', and 'this narrative *is* our identity. If we wish to know about a man, we ask "what is his story, his real inmost story?"—for each of us *is* a biography, a story. Each of us *is* a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously . . . To be ourselves we must have ourselves—possess, if need be re-possess, our life stories. We must "recollect" ourselves . . . A man needs such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative to maintain his identity'.<sup>15</sup>

Norman Denzin takes this still further, writing in 2000, 'We live in narrative's moment. The narrative turn in the social sciences has been taken . . . Everything we study is contained within a storied, or narrative, representation. Indeed, as scholars we are storytellers, telling stories about other people's stories'. He argues that there is no dualism between self and society. 'Self and society are storied productions . . . We live in stories, and do things because of the characters we become in our tales of self'. Jerome Bruner and Dan McAdams, both psychologists, had earlier taken similar views: 'We tell ourselves stories in order to live . . . As the story evolves and our identity takes form, we come to *live* the story as we *write* it . . . Thus in identity, life gives birth to art and then imitates it. We create stories, and we live according to narrative assumptions'.<sup>16</sup> So from this perspective, causation is circular: people make stories that make actions that make stories. There is no distinction between the lived life and the remembered life, and no room for interaction between the self and social and cultural factors, such as family, education, work, war, health, or culture. Fortunately few oral historians have used the narrative approach in this extreme form.

There are again numerous methodological texts—including a useful overview by Jane Elliott, who is an advocate of mixed methods, and an excellent practical manual by Catherine Riessman based on her own research experiences. She emphasises how narrative analysis belongs to 'a family of methods for interpreting texts', looking at both the language of the text and at its immediate context and its cultural and social background. In a different, more literary spirit is Charlotte Linde's work on the need to create 'coherence' in narrative—and lack of coherence can be equally revealing—while Vanessa May has analysed Finnish women's written stories by focusing on 'narrative structure', examining 'the pace and thickness of narrative, turning points and regressions and progressions in the narrative'.<sup>17</sup>

James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium—who came into gerontology from specialties in English and social deprivation, respectively—echo Denzin in their changes of tack: first advocating conversation analysis with a very helpful demonstration, then going for context, and finally for a multiplicity of approaches.<sup>18</sup> But while there is a confusing variety of narrative research approaches, there are also plenty of good exemplars of research, both old and new. Very broadly there are four strands to the narrative approach. The first is informal literary

analysis; the second, genre; the third, linguistic; and the fourth, psychological approaches, including illness narratives.

The use of informal literary analysis was not a new practice by narrative researchers, and indeed among oral historians it was first advocated by Ron Grele in the late 1970s, and has inspired much valuable work since. It means analysing texts with literary and historical sensitivity, rather than focusing on linguistic rules. Perhaps the best recent example is Daniel James' *Doña María's Story* (2000). This interweaves the testimony with its social and political context—in a meat-packing town in Peronist Argentina—and also with a series of reflections on differing levels of memory, the alternation of description with argument and exhortation, and the key themes which Doña María embodies in her life story. From sociology Daniel Bertaux's stories of Parisian bakeries and Ken Plummer's *Telling Sexual Stories* also use informal approaches. George Ewart Evans, a pioneer oral historian, emphasised the storytelling skills of the farm workers he recorded in East Anglia. Among folklorists, Henry Glassie has continued his lyrical descriptions of forms and styles of storytelling in rural Northern Ireland, his most recent book starting with a moving description of the death of Hugh Nolan, 'my star of the Irish twilight', 'my prime guide to the culture of Ballymenone', while Ray Cashman has backed this with a parallel account of wakes, ceili dances, and stories from another village close by.<sup>19</sup>

There has also been striking recent work on politics and narrative. This includes contemporary advocacy of human rights, and also historical work, such as Dalia Leinarte's interpretation of Lithuanian women's memories as denials of the influence of Soviet rule.<sup>20</sup> Particularly interesting is Molly Andrews' *Shaping History* (2007), which compares the stories of political activists in four different countries: with some, stories of failure, with others, of apparent success. She shows how these narratives are moulded both by earlier experiences and also by changing political and cultural contexts.

The second approach looks at narratives in terms of 'genre'. This is again a long-standing literary approach, which some sociological methodologists have found particularly attractive.<sup>21</sup> It was brought to the attention of oral historians by anthropologists, initially those who worked with oral tradition and wanted to understand its various forms, such as Jack Goody and Ruth Finnegan.<sup>22</sup> In the 1990s genre became a key concern through the influence of Elizabeth Tonkin's *Narrating Our Pasts*. She observed from her fieldwork in Liberia on the west coast of Africa that history was presented very differently depending on the social context—whether in an ordinary conversation, an individual life story recording, a praise poem or a myth, a court case or a communal ceremony. Hence she argued that oral historians should be looking for parallel 'genres' in European culture: jokes, ghost stories, confessions, pub stories, academic lectures, and so on. In response the Memory and Narrative series published its first volume on *Narrative and Genre* (1998), edited by Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, in which the contributors showed how oral history draws on a variety of oral

genre forms, including anecdotes, jokes, proverbs, men's war stories, stories of the little man standing up to the big boss, women's hospital and illness stories, and so on.

There could also be important varieties in contexts of recording, just as therapeutic sessions can vary between, on the one hand, psychoanalytic sessions in which the client lies down, staring into space in a mainly silent room, and on the other, family therapy, which engenders a great deal of shouting, with the team of therapists split between those in the consulting room and others watching from behind a one-way mirror, only to appear and intervene at crucial moments.

Nevertheless, the most powerful paper in *Narrative and Genre* is by Alessandro Portelli, who argues that while an oral history interview will draw on many other oral genres, it is a genre in itself. This is because, as Portelli puts it, 'What is spoken in a typical oral history interview has usually never been told *in that form* before. Most personal or family tales are told in pieces and episodes, when the occasion arises; we learn even the lives of our closest relatives by fragments, repetitions, hearsay . . . The whole story has hardly ever been told in sequence as a coherent and organised whole . . . The life story as a full, coherent narrative does not exist in nature; it is a synthetic product of social science—but no less precious for that.' Moreover, most often it is treated as a special occasion by the speaker, who is striving for 'the best possible diction'—and hence the propensity of many interviewees to want to revise or add to their testimonies.<sup>23</sup>

The linguistic approaches to narrative are by contrast the most formal. Somewhat confusingly, the terms for them, discourse analysis and conversation analysis, are used by some commentators as if there is no distinction between them, but this is misleading. Discourse analysis can be applied to any texts, including not only oral interviews but also written letters and memoirs. While theoretical concepts of discourse have been widely influential, perhaps most notably through Foucault's linking of discourse and power, formal discourse analysis has been much more specialised, and can be a quantitative form of analysis, for example counting the number of uses of a particular word or phrase. It has not had much influence on oral historians.

Conversation analysis, on the other hand, is much more relevant to oral history work, since it is a linguistic form of analysis specifically focusing on interactive oral exchanges, such as conversations or interviews. The key pioneer was Harvey Sacks, who was inspired by Harold Garfinkel, founder of 'ethnomethodology' with its stress on 'communicative action', and also by Erving Goffman, to deliver in 1964–67 a series of lectures which focus on the formal qualities of conversation. Sacks particularly emphasised the grammatical rules of sequence in conversation, of 'turn-taking' between participants, and how jokes are used to deflect the focus from undesirable issues.<sup>24</sup>

A second pioneer was William Labov, with his studies of black American city language. Out of this grew conversation analysis, in between sociology and

linguistics—for conceptually this is another form of social analysis. As Charles Tilly puts it: ‘Conversation in general shapes life by altering individual and collective understandings, by creating and transforming social ties, . . . and by establishing, obliterating, or shifting commitments on the part of participants . . . In both non-contentious and contentious conversation, these processes work through words and through a wide variety of nonverbal interchanges.’<sup>25</sup>

The basic approach can be applied either to conversations or to single life narratives. The most influential recent exponent has been Catherine Riessman, who has exemplified the approach in her own work, *Divorce Talk*, and has written two practical manuals on how to analyse a testimony, the briefer *Narrative Analysis* (1993) and the wider-ranging *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (2008). With any interview, turn-taking can change the whole balance of the story, while the sequence between description and expressions of feeling also remains crucial to interpretation. This kind of interpretation has become very specialised, bringing the danger that the focus becomes the formalities of the analysis rather than the wider meaning of the original text. Thus *Divorce Talk* tells a lot about how people involved in divorce express themselves, but it is not meant to offer a social or human account of the divorce process and its manifold impacts on people’s lives.

Narrative has also grown as a field for psychologists. Listening to the stories of patients had of course been a long-standing practice, and Freud made it famous as a research method. Paul Roazen in turn interviewed seventy people who had known Freud himself for his biographical study of the movement, *Freud and His Followers* (1975), and he notes interestingly from this experience how ‘Freud had an almost hypnotic effect on his patients and pupils; some of them, living apart, would discuss the same issue in exactly the same words, and one knew they were using Freud’s own phrases’. Freud was an important influence on many novelists, perhaps most notably James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, as well as later researchers. And in the 1940s Kinsey’s research team recorded twelve thousand sexual life stories for *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. But they kept the actual stories secret, hidden in ‘cryptic codes’, unpublished until much later.<sup>26</sup>

Hence a more crucial early influence in understanding the psychological dimension of remembering was Robert Butler’s paper on the significance of life review with older people. Robert White was another pioneer in the 1960s.<sup>27</sup> But the spread of professional interest in the 1990s was indicated by the launching of two new journals. One was the annual *Narrative Study of Lives* (1993–99), edited by Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich, American and Israeli psychologists. They worked with an interdisciplinary board to produce a series discussing broad humanist issues. Allyssa McCabe, also a psychologist, edited the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* (1991–99), with article topics ranging from psychological resilience to media studies, Holocaust studies, and oral history interviews.

Dan McAdams is another American psychologist who has aimed to blend psychology, sociology, and history, and who analyses the life story interviews he has recorded in terms of developmental psychology. As he points out himself, much of this new development has been tested by 'quantitative studies designed to test hypotheses', usually in non-natural contexts. Nevertheless, he writes with a striking confidence of the importance of narrative for psychology:

The study of stories people tell about their lives is no longer a promising new direction for the *future* of personality psychology. Instead, personal narratives and the life story *have arrived*. In the first decade of the 21st century, narrative approaches have moved to the center of the discipline . . . A new generation of personality psychologists have established psychological laboratories and research programs dedicated to the empirical study of personal narratives . . .

The formulation of an integrative narrative identity is an especially salient challenge for individuals living in modern societies, who seek personal integration within an ever-changing, contradictory, and multifaceted social world that offers no clear guidelines, no consensus on how to live and what life means . . . Narrative theories offer a strong alternative to the tired dogmas of psychoanalysis for the interpretation of case studies, biographies, and the intensive study of the single life over time and in society.<sup>28</sup>

Psychology also offers other clues to understanding narratives. Developmental research in Western societies has shown how there are typically early speech differences between boys and girls, and that their ability to frame a coherent narrative at all is shaped by their social experience with parents or other crucial adults early in life. In terms of stories, McAdams neatly summarises recent research. This suggests that children become storytellers by the age of two, encouraged by sharing stories with their parents, and by the age of five understand 'the canonical features of stories' as a genre—how they need to have definite beginnings and endings, and a place, a plot, and characters. But it is normally only in adolescence that stories and accounts of personal experiences get linked up into a connected biography of self. But from that point onwards, 'once narrative identity enters the developmental scene, it remains a project to be worked on for much of the rest of the life course'.<sup>29</sup> The latter stages of memory and storytelling through this life course have concerned psychologists somewhat less, but are of course of central concern to oral historians.

A final and very rewarding field focusing on narratives, which has produced notably rich examples within its methods books, is that of 'illness narratives'. It has involved both medical and social researchers. The first two leading figures were Elliot Mishler, originally a behavioural scientist, and Arthur Kleinman, a doctor specialising in chronic illness and pain. Kleinman worked in China as well as North America, and both he and Mishler later became eminent members



of the Harvard Department of Psychiatry. From the 1980s they took up analysing doctor-patient interviews with methods derived from conversation analysis. Both Mishler and Kleinman were eager to persuade doctors to listen more carefully, and to pick up the half-hidden meanings in many exchanges with patients. It was Kleinman, however, who saw the crucial importance of patients' stories in dealing with their illnesses. His classic book on *Illness Narratives* (1988) gives a new story in every chapter, partly from his own recordings, and includes a dramatic juxtaposition between the transcript of a doctor-patient interview and the brief purged record left in the medical notes, eliminating all but physical symptoms. Kleinman sees the ill not as victims, but as creative interpreters of their situations:

The chronically ill become interpreters of good and bad omens. They are archivists researching a disorganized file of past experiences. They are diarists recording the minute ingredients of current difficulties and triumphs. And they are critics of the artifacts of disease . . . There is in this persistent re-examination the opportunity for considerable self-knowledge. But—as with all of us—denial and illusion are ready at hand to assure that life events are not so threatening and supports seem more durable. Myth making, a universal human quality, reassures us that resources conform to our desires rather than to actual descriptions. In short, self-deception makes chronic illness tolerable. Who can say that illusion and myth are not useful to maintain optimism, which itself may improve physiological performance?

Kleinman is particularly sensitive to the need for older patients to review their whole lives. 'They frequently weave illness experience into the apparently seamless plot of their life stories . . . That gaze back over life's difficult treks is as fundamental to this ultimate stage of the life cycle as dream-making is in adolescence and young adulthood'. And he remarks how 'few of the tragedies at life's end are as rending to the clinician as that of the frail elderly patient who has no one to tell the life story to'. To doctors his key message is the need for 'empathetic witnessing. That is the existential commitment to be with the sick person and to facilitate his or her building of an illness narrative that will make sense of and give value to the experience'.<sup>30</sup>

Subsequently the most important contribution has been made by Arthur Frank, a Canadian symbolic interactionist who himself suffered from cancer. In *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995) he argues that 'the ill person who turns illness into a story transforms fate into experience'. Moreover, 'as wounded, people may be cared for, but as story-tellers, they care for others. The ill, and those who suffer, can also be healers'. Most importantly, he takes the analysis of the stories further, proposing that there are three types of illness narrative. These are, first, the 'restitution narrative', the story of those who recover their health, a triumph for medicine; second, the 'chaos narrative', for those who never recover, stories of loss of control, which are hard to hear but must be listened to; and third,

the 'quest narrative', which seeks a deeper meaning in the experience of illness, perhaps practical, perhaps spiritual.<sup>31</sup>

Since the mid-1990s there have been an increasing number of books on illness narratives, typically for medical audiences. British work includes Glenn Roberts and Jeremy Holmes' *Healing Stories*, and a collection by Trisha Greenhalgh and Brian Hurwitz from the *British Medical Journal*. There is an American manual by Rita Charon. Vieda Skultans has written as a medical anthropologist on the psychological impact of suffering and loss caused by the Soviet occupation of Latvia. There are separate books on many particular illnesses. David Karp, a Boston sociologist, has written a moving account, partly autobiographical, of depression, *Speaking of Sadness*, and Barbara Taylor, feminist social historian, of the suffering and treatment of acute mental illness in *The Last Asylum*. Yasmin Gunaratnam has written another unusual and haunting book, combining interviews, ethnography, photos, and poetry, on dying migrants.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps most notably, and a striking parallel with oral historians' innovation of reminiscence work with the elderly in the early 1980s, has been the development since 2001 of a new national resource in Britain. Here two doctors, Ann MacPherson and Andrew Herxheimer, who had themselves suffered seriously from illness and had longed to talk to others in similarly difficult situations, together launched a national website to provide this resource. It is now called Healthtalk. The website currently covers eighty-five subjects and is visited by more than two million people annually.

### Autobiography and life writing

Moving on from the diverse strands of narrative work, we come to another related group, autobiography and life writing. Autobiography has a long and well-studied tradition whose beginnings are usually taken back to the *Confessions* of St Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century. The rise of popular autobiography from the spiritual testimonies of the Reformation era onwards foreshadows the development of oral history, while the written autobiographical competitions which now flourish in Scandinavia are parallels. There has been fascinating work by Philippe Lejeune and others in identifying different genres within autobiography. Unlike oral history, autobiography is not interactive, and it relies on writing skills, which many people do not possess. On the other hand, it is often concerned with themes very similar to oral history, and many historians use the two sources interchangeably. Biographies are yet another flourishing form of life story, typically written about elite men and women by professional authors, using a range of historical sources, quite often including some interviews with the subject and those close to her or him. They may deal with similar themes, but in terms of method and genre are of less interest to oral historians.

Since the 1990s autobiography and life writing have become significant new spaces for researchers. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson identify sixty genres

of life narrative in their *Reading Autobiography*—and twenty-four strategies for analysing them. Much more helpful is Laura Marcus' thoughtful discussion of autobiography as a form that transcends boundaries. She observes its changing emphases from the Victorian concern with genius, and Dilthey's focus on autobiography as 'the primary cell of history', to the successive influences of psychoanalysis, genre, and feminism, all together highlighting the richness and diversity of the field. As Joanna Bornat writes:

What was an area of work scarcely acknowledged beyond groups of committed oral historians, occasional sociologists, autobiographers and ethnographers twenty years ago has become a vast and constantly changing and expanding ferment of creative work, drawing in new as well as career-old researchers. In critical pedagogy, cultural studies, critical race theory, gerontology, decolonising research, social policy, health studies, feminism, identity theory, studies of sexuality, employment, family and management theory, the range of areas in which biographical methods have been taken up is vast. All reach for meaning and accounts in individual biographies to both confirm and complicate understandings of the working and emergence of social processes and relationships in place and through time. And this is only within academe. Telling your story, the public confessional, the personal account has become a totally pervasive form, as any quick check through the media will show.<sup>33</sup>

She goes on to identify the methods used in this explosion: narrative, life history, oral history, autobiography, biographical interpretive methods, storytelling, ethnography, and reminiscence. It is striking that all but one turn out to be the same as those which we have already discussed.

The exception is life writing. Life writing has now become the most popular academic term in the autobiographical field. Life writing proclaims no particular models or methods. Its strength is in being inclusive. Margaretta Jolly describes in her *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (2001) that life writing is 'an ancient and ubiquitous practice', going back to the beginnings of recorded literature, and today is espoused by a wide range of disciplines.<sup>34</sup> It can encompass diaries, letters, autobiography, obituaries, travel writing, internet blogs, and also oral history. The shift of focus from autobiography to life writing was anticipated by the work of the British Sociological Association's Study Group on Auto/biography led by Liz Stanley, which had its own journal, meaningfully entitled *Auto/biography* (1992–2006), now succeeded by the *Auto/biography Yearbook*.

This broader focus was also encouraged by the arguments of critics who have documented the increasing blurring of genre boundaries between fiction and autobiography, most notably Max Saunders, who in *Self Impression* (2011) proposes a new mixed-genre term, 'autobiografiction'. One resulting danger is of losing insights into specific genres—but good work of this kind also continues.

Examples include Thomas Couser on the memoir, and work by Philippe Lejeune and Patrick Hayes on internet blogging.<sup>35</sup>

This has led to new academic activity: for example, in Oxford a Centre for Life-Writing has opened, and a multi-volume history of life writing is planned, heralded by Zachary Leader's edited collection *On Life-Writing* (2015). Elsewhere there are now two academic journals under this banner, *Life Writing*, launched from Australia in 2007, and the *European Journal of Life Writing*, launched in 2012, which also includes a 'creative section'. The latter is backed by the European Chapter of the International Auto/Biography Association, itself formed in 2009. Yet another journal, *a/b/Auto/Biographical Studies*, was launched in 2013. All these journals thrive on diversity, rather than pushing particular lines of work.

Also striking is the story of Mass Observation. Founded in 1936 with a large team of diarists observing popular behaviour, fading out in the 1950s, but reviving in 1981, with a new base at Sussex University, it was restarted as a twice-yearly collection of autobiographical observation on chosen themes from a team of around six hundred volunteers. Mass Observation today is one of the most-used archive sources for information on everyday life in Britain, past and present.

The spirit of these developments is well summed up through two books. It is no accident that both present feminist perspectives. Autobiography has proved a genre enduringly sympathetic to feminist views, and potentially a support for the argument that there is a fundamental difference in style between men's and women's autobiographies: that typically men focus on work and achievements, women on family and friends; men emphasise their public, and women their private, lives; men write as the leading subject, women observe the group from the margin. The first of the two books is *The Auto/biographical I* by Liz Stanley (1992), who has led the Auto/Biography Study Group. She is a rebel sociologist who leads through surprise. She needs the space offered by diversity because she rejects both the 'realist fallacy' held by most biographers, and 'the extraordinary elitism of scientific views of social science'. But she does not have much time for post-modernists either: 'post-modernity does not exist outside of its own invention by particular writers and their followers, then re-peddled second and third hand by others'. So instead she collects a pile of old photos of herself, and writes with fascination about the memories they arouse. The second book is a conference collection on *Feminism and Autobiography* (2000). This volume covers both written and oral forms, discusses various genres, and stretches from questions of composition, including the issue of 'composure', to the authenticity of the 'surreal' in Caribbean narratives.<sup>36</sup>

## Memory studies

This brings us to our final group: memory studies. This is a broad field, rather than a method or a genre or a focused theme. It is not in itself a new field. For oral historians, memory has always been a key concern; neuroscientists have

been trying to understand the memory processes of the mind for decades; and indeed memory has been an issue in Western culture since the Greek philosophers. Historians, however, have traditionally sought to use memory as evidence for what happened, while ignoring the shaping of memory as in itself evidence about history and culture. Hence memory has only very recently become an accepted academic field, marked by the launching of *Memory Studies* under the editorship of Andrew Hoskins in 2008. In his opening editorial, Hoskins expressed his hope to retain the interdisciplinarity of 'this nascent field' of memory studies, but also to 'move beyond them towards a systematic set of conceptual, theoretical and methodological tools for the investigation of social and individual memory'. Time will tell whether this hope can be realised, but in the meantime this is a lively international and interdisciplinary journal, welcoming contributions, for example, from sociology, psychology, literature, or cultural studies. It has been regularly publishing articles by oral historians—sometimes with unexpected perspectives, such as the 'dark humour' embedded in Bosnian memories, or the stories emanating from a house which stands still while the world revolves around it. Alongside the journal, various overviews of the whole field have appeared, spanning memory and culture from historic texts to digital media, and also—again cross-disciplinary—successive notable sets of articles edited by Susannah Radstone with Katherine Hodgkin and with Bill Schwarz.<sup>37</sup>

The field of memory studies has heightened attention to some crucial questions. To begin with, how is social memory produced, in the past and in the present, in different cultures? An inclusive approach to this issue, surveying the roles of the media, the monarchy, the military, museums, and much else, was called for in the 1980s, from their base in cultural studies at Birmingham, by the Popular Memory Group. Since then there has been James Fentress and Chris Wickham's useful overview, *Social Memory* (1992), and also historical studies of memory and culture in particular societies, including the United States, Chile, Australia, and Italy.<sup>38</sup>

One sustained focus has been the disjunction between public and private war memories: on the one hand, celebratory public commemorations and memorials; on the other, often painful stories of harsh experiences and loss. Stimulated by Alastair Thomson's Australian *Anzac Memories*, this theme is central both to the essays of *The Politics of War Memory* and to Graham Dawson's *Making Peace with the Past*, about the aftermath of civil war in Northern Ireland. Dawson explains how he became aware of the Troubles through his own mixed family background, his mother an Irish Catholic and his father a secular Englishman. His book is exceptionally strong and compelling, weaving together evidence from official sources, the media, and oral history interviews.

Some enthusiasts for studying memory see the present as a time of exceptional fascination with memory, witnessing a great upsurge, even a tidal wave, of memorial activities, a memory boom. Thus Paul Williams subtitles his interesting book *Memorial Museums* as *The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*.

On this issue David Gross' long historical perspective suggests the opposite view. In the distant past, memory was crucial for survival, both practical and ritual. For centuries, elites have left costly memorials to themselves, from hill-top tumuli to Westminster Abbey crowded with its monuments to royalty, politicians, and distinguished writers and artists, including many exquisite works of art, or the Victorian monuments that jostle the slopes of Glasgow's Necropolis. By contrast, Gross argues, today memory is no longer 'a reservoir of vital information for the living'. Politically, memory has been undermined by the deceptions of propaganda, culturally by modernism, practically by digital data-storing. You no longer need to know your way; you just set up your Sat Nav/GPS. And far from memory's being applauded, 'more common is the assumption that in the fast-paced world of the present much or even most of the data stored in one's memory is outmoded'. Thus for personal identity, memory is seen as deadening rather than enriching experience, leading to 'frozen modes of perception or habitual forms of behaviour. What is needed is a full and free personality . . . that can shuck off the past, improvise, and adapt to new situations'.<sup>39</sup>

Gross gives us a useful reminder that historical trends are complex, although he clearly oversimplifies in his view of the present. Memory has been projected through a whole range of different media over the past few centuries, some rising to prominence while others fade: as script, orally through direct voice or audio recordings, and through images and portraits, sculptural monuments, and music. Worcman and Garde-Hansen argue in *Social Memory Technology* that current digital developments have created a new type of memory, with 'familial, filial and friendship stories becoming networked and connected'—a shift from traditional collective memory to 'connective memory . . . What do these transpersonal memories across scales, once kept separated by blood, ethnicity, nation and territory offer for the future?'<sup>40</sup> But it is important to remember that collective memory is also complex, shifting, transmitted through networks of individuals. Also, there are always simultaneous contradictory trends. It is true that today much practical memory has become redundant. But at the same time, the spread of digital media has been a key force in the growth of new forms of popular remembering.

These new trends take many forms, from the mass offering of flowers after a celebrity death, and the creation of monuments and museums to wars, disasters, and atrocities, to the simple steady spread of auto/biographical activities. Public remembering often generates multiple symbols and activities and these may include elements of oral history. An example is the new Staircase to Heaven memorial outside Bethnal Green tube station in London. It commemorates a panic during an air raid on 3 March 1943 when a crowd of people rushed for shelter into the underground station and 173 were killed, the largest British civilian catastrophe in the Second World War. The monument is striking, like half a plane on edge. On it you usually find floral memorial wreaths, and built

into it are tiny metal plaques carrying quotations from testimonies of survivors. And all this is the outcome of a remarkable local popular movement for the memorial, raising awareness and funds through an annual memorial service and wreath laying, survivor talks and testimonies, a Christmas fair, comedy evenings, football tournaments involving twenty teams, and exhibitions of paintings and photos of the East End in the 1960s. Altogether it is striking how in the rapidly changing social world of East London this movement demonstrates not just how memory matters to older local people, but also how it can in itself become a focus for re-creating community for younger generations.

There are also a growing number of opportunities for individual commemoration through the digital media. Digital Beyond helps you find a variety of solutions, including tubes for scattering ashes. Over fifty online companies are listed on the internet that deal with dying and online memories. The companies include several which can organise a kind of life after death by sending posthumous messages, such as ToLovedOnes, Knotify.me, and Remembered Voices. Thus users of DeadSocial can upload photos, video, audio, and text messages and schedule them to be sent out posthumously on Facebook or Twitter. Caroline Twigg has written how this brought a new kind of death experience to herself as a widow:

These days, people die a digital death alongside their physical one, which creates a whole new world of admin that didn't pass the radar of grieving widows 50 years ago. Those 20th-century widows would have had a box of love letters and a few hard copy photos; I have Facebook messages, professional videos on YouTube, personal videos on my iPhone, email histories, recorded Skype chats, Whats-App conversations, text messages and digital photos—photos galore. And all this from a husband who never really liked spending time online.<sup>41</sup>

The rise of popular auto/biography can be traced back at least 150 years, but it was originally a preserve of the literate minority. Today in most Western countries there are professional life story agencies that can enable people to create their own books of memories. Even in reticent Japan, Legacy Memoirs offer to interview from one to five people, transcribe the resulting texts, and produce a video, or a book including photographs, for a substantial fee. Confessional autobiography, once mainly practised as a confidential form of psychotherapy, today is conveyed to mass television audiences, as warring and too often apparently weird family members battle in front of Jerry Springer or Jeremy Kyle. There has also been an expansion of free internet facilities for autobiography, such as the website archive set up by the Museu da Pessoa in Brazil. That project is international, but there are also many other community or thematic websites—one of the first, launched in 2000, 'Brainerd, Kansas', appealing for memories of a once prosperous but now tiny ex-railroad town of a mere fifty people. Such websites are collecting spontaneous memories, in no way helped by the skills of



a professional oral historian. Meanwhile, among professionals, anthropologists such as Judith Okely have been reflecting on how their own autobiographies relate to their research, while a group of memory studies researchers have advocated 'self-interviewing' as a new research method.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, the advent of the internet and digitisation has brought a fundamental change in the technical base for memory activities, with its development now led by the memory industry. Digital memories can include text messages, memos, photos, cartoons, condolence message boards, virtual cards, alumni websites, objects sold on eBay, broadcasts, films, blogs, and many other forms. Most previously existed in some form of hard copy or tape that could be permanently archived. The new media offer almost infinite space, and the attractive possibility of linking up different forms of information to build a personal autobiographical portfolio. New ways of relating to other people have also been developed, beginning with e-mails as an alternative to letters, and Skype as a private audio-visual conversation, and then MySpace, Facebook, Audioboo, and Twitter, which allow users to continually display and re-shape biographical information, combining text and photos, typically using short code-laden messages, and commenting on their own lives semi-publicly with others through these messaging services.

Many of these activities can also be linked to mobile phones, creating 'wearable memories'. Mobiles have therefore especially contributed to 'an upsurge in memory-making from below, revealing the current obsession with capturing and editing as much of our lives as possible'. Other life-logging devices now on the consumer market include 'Narrative', 'an automatic life-logging camera' which photographs wherever you go, and Gordon Bell's 'Total Memory', which according to the suppliers provides 'your life uploaded'.<sup>43</sup> These new memory devices are advertised primarily for young people. And without doubt these devices and media forms herald a profound switch of the social dynamics of memory from top-down media activity to bottom-up popular enthusiasm. All this offers an unparalleled richness of information for researchers. But they need to get to work quickly. The information is almost always unstable, open to revision and additions—which is one of its attractions, but for historians this means that it is hard to date. More seriously, unless steps are taken to preserve some of it, it will disappear or be lost and inaccessible as digital platforms change. So in the longer run the memory boom may lead to a memory collapse. In short, memory studies face a very important task, and they need to tackle it urgently.

To sum up, what can be the significance of these parallel strands for oral historians? First, because with each of them there are overlapping concerns and activities, they offer oral historians new spaces and opportunities for working and publishing. Secondly, in some cases they offer warnings of how long-term damage can be wrought: such as through claiming to have the primary clues to all human behaviour; or through pretentious jargon and other obscure forms

of self-presentation; or from focusing on methodologies to the exclusion of fieldwork-based exemplars—dangers which fortunately oral historians have so far avoided. But lastly, especially with visual methods, mixed methods, and memory studies, they open up new ways of working and new issues which have significant potential, well worth realising, for oral historians in the future.

# 5

## Transforming Oral History Through Theory

LYNN ABRAMS\*

Oral history is a practical method for obtaining information about the past by means of conducting an interview, but in the process of eliciting and analysing the material collected, researchers quickly understood that what was said was just one element in a complex communicative event. Paying attention to *how* and *why* something is said provides access to the meaning of the words expressed. And in order to understand and analyse the linguistic and communicative strategies adopted by a respondent in an interview, the researcher is required to think about theoretical frameworks that might help with this kind of analysis. Moreover, the very practice of doing oral history has resulted in the development and elaboration of a range of innovative theoretical models and applications which draw on the experience of conducting, analysing, and interpreting interviews. Oral history, then, has spawned its own theory so that we can now speak of 'oral history theory' as a distinct field.

Oral history theory, though, is indebted to a wide range of disciplines beyond those that have traditionally employed the oral history interview as a methodological tool. History was found wanting when researchers began to search for the theoretical tools to help them unpick the meaning from complex narratives. So they turned to psychology, language and literature studies, anthropology, and feminist studies, all underpinned by the post-structural turn in the academy whereby objective structures were exposed as subjective constructs, texts were opened up to multiple meanings, and the individual or self was revealed as a contingent identity, the outcome of a dialogic process in relation to others and to discourses circulating in society. One of the outcomes of this initially quite eclectic deployment of different theoretical models is the emergence of new

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frameworks of analysis: the burgeoning fields of memory studies and narrative studies are examples of theories which originated elsewhere—in cognitive psychology and psychoanalysis, and literature and linguistics, respectively—but which have become an intrinsic part of the oral historian's toolbox.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the understanding of memory as something mutable and reflexive—now part and parcel of memory studies—derived in part from oral history practice whereby the memory slips, the silences, and the selectivity observed by oral historians needed to be understood. The now commonplace acknowledgement of the significance of the intersubjective relations between the parties to an interview—the acceptance that there is no such thing as an unmediated narrative—came about as oral historians observed the impact of this social interaction on the ways in which respondents constructed a narrative. And the recognition that memory stories are informed by forms of discourse circulating in culture, both at the time of the event being recounted and subsequently when the interview is conducted, arose from observations of respondents striving to make sense of their lives within a cultural context that may have marginalised or discounted their experiences.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that before the theoretical turn of the 1970s oral historians were not aware of some of these considerations, but once the dam had broken and researchers had realised the transformative potential of employing theoretical frameworks, there was no turning back. Theory has transformed the ways we analyse and interpret oral history narratives, allowing us to move beyond content alone towards a better and deeper appreciation of the underlying significance of what is said.

Oral history theory allies the practical elements of doing oral history with the analytical approach to the text (not only the spoken word, but also the transcribed interview and the paralinguistic elements of the interview—that is, those aspects which communicate meaning, such as pitch, emphasis, and gesture). Oral historians have deployed, adapted, and then created their own analytical models as a means of situating the interview within a historical context. This context might include official and popular representations of the past, as well as understanding the interview itself as the product of a very precise historical moment and personal relationship between interviewer and interviewee. We now recognise that most of our respondents seek to produce a coherent or composed memory narrative, that the context within which that narrative is produced will influence both its content and its shape, and that our respondent's performance (the speaking practices as well as the non-verbal elements of the interview) may offer insights into the meaning they are striving to impart. So, the listening practices we employ when conducting oral history interviews and then the painstaking analysis of the resulting text have created the need for analytical frameworks which help us understand how and why people remember as they do, not just what they remember.

Historians have learned from the use of oral history in other disciplines how to mine more from the text by looking beyond or underneath what is said and

recorded. For instance, the anthropologist Julie Cruikshank's research amongst the peoples of the Yukon has been profoundly influential in directing our attention to the ways in which we should attend to stories and storytelling. Stories, she writes, 'are things to think with': as a means of communication, as systems of knowledge embedded within the social world and capable of sustaining an indigenous understanding of that world, and as shifting carriers of meaning depending upon the context in which they are told.<sup>3</sup> Cruikshank's research method, which involved close and extended collaborations with elders of this community, facilitated insights into the social significance of the stories told that went far beyond the words spoken. These insights have gone a long way to helping historians—who rarely have the luxury of such extended contact with their respondents—to situate memory stories within a context that allows us to understand why they were told.

My own close analysis of one woman's telling of a story in Shetland—incidentally a story that I accessed only via the transcribed text—drew heavily upon Cruikshank's approach, applying narrative analysis and models of performance and of female authority and autonomy, in order to demonstrate how what appeared to be a version of a traditional folk narrative was in fact a multi-layered and complex commentary upon social change and woman's agency in that change.<sup>4</sup> In a very different context, that of an Argentinian meat-packing community, Daniel James offers a sensitive, self-critical, and perceptive analysis that draws on theories of narrative, intersubjectivity, performance, and self in order, as James puts it, to make sense of a life story that presents itself as a set of stories about a life—of his protagonist Doña María.<sup>5</sup>

The empirical demands of the historian, what Alessandro Portelli describes as 'the impossible dream of "authenticity" and "lived experience"'—are subordinated to an approach that accepts the complexity of the text and that therefore requires a set of theoretical tools, drawn primarily from literary and linguistic analysis, that facilitate interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for example, James employs the literary mode of narrative structure, a repertoire of genres with which we are familiar from literary and popular culture—in this case the epic and the romance—which are deployed by individuals to allow them to create a coherence of the self within the social world.<sup>7</sup> So what might seem like a series of stories or memories which do not seem to cohere, which may not be told in chronological order and which might give the impression of the 'anarchy of unmediated experience', can be made 'interpretable' by accepting the 'essential artfulness' of oral narratives and then using appropriate interpretive models to make sense of the narrative.<sup>8</sup>

The idea that the oral history interview is a medium or an opportunity for the revelation of the self is often expressed as a key aim of oral history, in contrast with earlier practice, when the interviewer was more often interested in the information revealed by the respondent than the revelation of the self as an autonomous, self-reflexive individual. Oral history has traditionally focused

on the *life history* (a chronologically told narrative of the individual's past), but since the 1980s the privileging of the self as a site of resistance to dominating structures, summed up by the feminist slogan 'the personal is political', and the wider acceptance (at least in the West) of a confessional culture, incorporating everything from talking cures to the tell-it-all confessional autobiography or media interview, has made oral historians focus much more on the *life story*, which is a creative narrative device used by an individual to make sense of their past. The interview thus becomes one of the very means by which the self is constructed and reconstructed through the active process of telling memory stories. A life story is, in some ways, harder to interpret than a life history; it is easier to deal with dates and events and recognisable life stages than with what might seem to the listener to be disconnected memories and experiences, reflections and evaluations, an account that has no fixed points and might be continually revised depending on the way the narrator wishes to present herself *at that moment*. The self is a story that is constantly being re-written.

The recognition that perhaps the majority of oral history interviews need to be understood in this way prompted oral historians to search for useful theories to help them to interpret narratives that might tell them more about the narrator's meaning than could be implied from the content imparted. Until quite recently the analysis of the life story narrative has been heavily influenced by the post-structuralist position that maintains that self-narratives must be constructed with reference to existing and shared discourses and language. In other words, I can express myself as an individual only within the conventions and constructions available to me.<sup>9</sup> Narrators use commonly understood and recognised frameworks or scripts to give shape to their stories and to aid others' understanding but also to enable a narrator to construct a story with which he or she feels comfortable or composed. And a comfortable narrative is most often that which coheres with cultural understandings or dominant discourses.

This theory of composure, first used by Graham Dawson, is now widely used within oral history analysis, in large part because it places the individual story of the respondent within a larger cultural framework and enables the historian to make generalised arguments. As narrators do not draw on cultural constructs randomly but, it is argued, tend to choose those that cohere most closely with their own experience, individual testimony can be regarded as an entry point to dominant culture. For historians who are often uncomfortable dealing in personal or individual stories (because they may seem to be 'unrepresentative' or untypical) it offers a way of integrating the self into an overarching narrative of historical change.

Charlotte Linde's theory of the coherence system is also helpful here.<sup>10</sup> This concept refers to a narrative strategy used by respondents to frame a life story in order to achieve continuity and to make it understandable to the listener. For example, when I interviewed a cohort of British women born in the 1940s, a belief in the principle of gender equality quickly emerged as a commonly used

coherence system. Firstly, it helped to create a culture of shared understanding in the interview which exploited and sustained the intersubjective relationship between the interviewer (who self-identified as a feminist) and the respondent, who was keen to validate her version of her life story in the encounter. Secondly, it allowed the respondents to key their stories into an overarching framework that facilitated the narration of selves that had been ultimately shaped by the language and values of the feminist generation.<sup>11</sup>

The model employed to understand how personal accounts relate to public accounts is the cultural circuit (sometimes also called the feedback loop), Richard Johnson's term, which describes how local or individual stories draw on and then feed into public interpretations and accounts. Clearly the danger here is that a researcher will too easily read off general cultural trends from a single testimony—the fact there appears to be congruence between a personal account and dominant or official representations of an event is just as likely to imply the narrator is keen to establish composure by aligning his memories with a recognisable narrative. When this does not happen, discomposure may be the result, often recognised by an incoherent or disjointed account or by silence.

Alistair Thomson's analysis of the First World War Gallipoli veteran Fred Farrell is now a standard model of how to undertake this kind of analysis, demonstrating how one man's inability to align his memories with wider official and media presentations of the past resulted in difficulties in telling his story.<sup>12</sup> We may need to accept, however, that there are some contexts in which individuals' accounts are impossible to disentangle from collective accounts. Graham Dawson's analysis of Bloody Sunday in 1972 in Northern Ireland, the pivotal event of the 'Troubles', which has spawned divergent accounts on each side of the conflict, demonstrates how, within the Catholic community, individual memory was not distinguishable from the collective. In the more than forty years since, the events of that day have been repeatedly rehearsed across a variety of media and in a range of forums. Dawson writes, 'the possibility of any individual articulating his or her own account of this multifaceted, subjective relationship to the past depends on a relationship with others, who listen, bring to bear memories of their own, and interpret and re-interpret the meanings that are made: it is necessarily "a collective, intersubjective affair"'.<sup>13</sup> A similar observation has been made in respect of Palestinian accounts of the *Nakba*, their term for the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. Such was the all-encompassing power of that event that ever since it has assumed a pivotal place in accounts of Palestinian history and identity.<sup>14</sup>

And yet the passing of time can negate the power of official versions of events. In his analysis of a Nazi massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine in Rome in 1944, Portelli shows how the existence of a diversity of positions (as opposed to a unified partisan memory) in relation to the event and its meanings allowed for both individual and collective interpretations to co-exist. Despite the elevation of the Fosse Ardeatine to national monument status in Italy, it evoked



conflicting emotions and memories as opposed to fixing a particular version of the massacre.<sup>15</sup>

Not all oral historians have embraced composure theory. An alternative approach to understanding the construction of a version of the self in the life history interview is proffered by Michael Roper, who argues that attention needs to be paid to the psychic shaping of memory. Roper maintains that the role of the unconscious has been downplayed and urges that we see the telling of a life story narrative as a psychically oriented process which 'operates forward from the event, as well as backwards through the impact of public representations'.<sup>16</sup> In this model the self may be constructed differently according to the exigencies of the moment of the telling (thus, an experience may assume various meanings and significance at different stages of life). This is an important reminder to the oral historian that we are dealing not merely with determining structures and external injunctions to tell a story in a particular way, but with individuals with psychic needs.

Implicit within many oral history projects is a potential power imbalance: within the interview relationship and at the point of interpretation. Perhaps this is especially evident within academic oral history projects, in contrast with the early days of oral history practice, which was dominated by community historians located outside the academy. Strategies to counter the tendency of academic researchers to exploit their subjects include collaboration between the parties and 'sharing authority', the latter productively employed by Alistair Thomson in his collaboration with four women migrants to Australia. By engaging the interviewees in all processes of the project, Thomson arguably produced a richer and more nuanced book, which is testament to the trusting relationships developed over the ten-year lifespan of the project.<sup>17</sup>

But good intentions are not always enough. Daphne Patai's research in the slums of Brazil highlights the difficulties in employing strategies intended to overcome the power imbalance when faced with such vastly unequal power relations; as she ruefully admits, 'the world will not get better because we have sensitively apologised for privilege'.<sup>18</sup> From another perspective, though, oral history has been used as a strategy to empower the interviewees as opposed to the interviewers. Engaging with elders in the community can be a positive experience for disenfranchised individuals, as was the case in St. Petersburg, Florida, where a project engaged urban African American youth as interviewers of older people in a community heritage project.<sup>19</sup>

Community oral history and projects that work *with* disenfranchised groups are more likely to be able to use oral history methods as a means of enhancing group identity and allowing individuals and groups to ascribe their own meaning to experiences. This has been termed activist oral history, whereby the personal testimony is not merely a conduit to experience, but plays a role in the process of identity construction. So in the context of migrant groups, for instance, oral testimony in this context can be used both as a means of

strengthening the subject group and informing the policies and actions of the dominant society. It can bind a group together through celebration of its culture and sharing of its stories in an alien environment which sometimes denigrates or tries to assimilate it to dominant norms.

In contrast to community projects are the 'restorative justice' projects conducted in territories that have experienced immense trauma, such as civil war and genocide. In place of prosecutions in a formal legal context, memories are listened to in a formal setting as a means of bringing about accountability and restitution outside the legal system. In 2008 a Truth and Reconciliation hearing was held in St. Paul, Minnesota, to hear the testimonies of Liberians involved in the Liberian civil war and who had subsequently emigrated to the United States. Although the testimonies themselves might be regarded as oral histories, a subsequent project whereby the witnesses were interviewed about their experiences of testifying adds to our understanding of the impact of the process. In the words of one witness: 'Some people were sharing their own personal experiences—it was something I was looking forward to because we live and work with people within the community and we really didn't know what others had gone through . . . so it was like a learning process as well as an emotional one'.<sup>20</sup>

However, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in hearing the stories of victims *and* perpetrators, was accused of sacrificing justice for the victims on the altar of reconciliation at all costs. In this context, being given the opportunity to 'bear witness' did not always have the effect of empowering the speaker and in many instances it seems to have induced more trauma, as victims not only listened to the accounts of crimes committed by the perpetrators but struggled to speak their own experiences. One woman activist who recounted horrific experiences of arrest, imprisonment, and torture at the hands of the South African police admitted: 'While writing this speech I realised how unready I am to talk about my experience in South African jails and ANC camps abroad. Even now, despite the general terms in which I have chosen to speak, I feel exposed and distraught'.<sup>21</sup> Speaking, bearing witness, was often not an empowering experience for those who testified, and silence was still the preferred option for many who had not, until that moment, been able to talk about what had happened to them. In contrast, in the aftermath of the Rwandan civil war and genocide in 1990–94, it was agreed that restitution as well as truth and reconciliation had to be pursued, the former by means of local courts which tried perpetrators in the community and which promoted reconciliation by providing for victims to learn how their family members had died and perpetrators to confess and ask forgiveness. The latter is being tackled by means of a range of policies and measures designed to educate and promote peace.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Rwanda, then, the testimony of those on both sides has been contained within a legal process so that victims are provided with the support of the legal system.

Collaboration and advocacy have become the preferred approaches of oral historians who depend on a relationship developing between researcher and

respondents. Nigel Cross and Rhiannon Barker, writing about using oral history in a development context, speak of 'returning the compliment', that is, recognising and utilising the knowledge and skills of both parties in order to develop capacity and to harness storytelling and information sharing to an agreed strategy for change. This approach is not limited to developing countries but has been employed in a variety of contexts where people's needs are at risk of being ignored. However, what some have called a 'witnessing fever' can outlive the immediate aftermath of a catastrophic event. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, which caused devastation in New Orleans and the southern United States, oral histories are still being collected and archived under the auspices of the Great Deluge Oral History Project to provide a historical record of the disaster.<sup>23</sup>

The question of power within oral history has not gone away despite social changes that have normalised the idea of speaking about the self in public (the advent of the so-called confessional culture). In the United Kingdom, considerable emphasis is now placed, within publicly funded projects, on empowering communities via training local activists and volunteers to undertake oral history. The academic or professional exists to advise and guide rather than to lead. The UK Heritage Lottery Fund, in its guidance to those seeking funding for an oral history project, assumes the involvement of volunteers and emphasises the value of participating in such a project, not only for the respondents and the community but for the volunteers, too, who benefit from training and personal development.

Theory has become an aid to oral historians who wish to understand and interpret the meaning of what our respondents tell us. Oral history theory is not abstract but deeply embedded in our practice at all stages of the process. People's stories are not always—if ever—transparent. The telling is always purposeful, and the theoretical insights, drawn from a spectrum of disciplines and approaches, can help us interrogate what we have been told and why. As oral history becomes a global phenomenon, practitioners can learn cross-culturally, as insights from culturally different contexts are applied to bring about an understanding of what on the surface appear to be straightforward memory narratives. Theory makes for better oral historians because it offers us the tools to open the box and interpret the stories contained therein. Without these tools, the stories would not reveal their meaning.

# 6

## The Achievement of Oral History

How do we measure the achievement of oral history? Against a roll-call of its long past: Herodotus, Bede, Clarendon, Scott, Michelet, Mayhew . . . ? Or its present ambitions and diversity? It is not possible to mark any clear boundary around the work of a movement which brings together so many different kinds of specialists. The method of oral history is also used by many scholars, especially sociologists and anthropologists, who do not think of themselves as oral historians. The same is true of journalists. Yet all may be writing history, and they are certainly providing for it. And for different reasons professional historians are also unlikely to conceive of their work as 'oral history'. Quite properly, their focus is on a chosen historical problem rather than the methods used in solving it; they will normally choose to use oral evidence along with the other sources, rather than alone.

If the full potential of oral history is realised, it will result not so much in a specific list of titles in a section of historical or social research bibliographies, as in an underlying shift in the way in which history and social research are discussed and written about: in the questions and the judgements, and in the textures. What follows is a discussion of the impact of new oral evidence across a range of fields of study—but the examples cited are primarily focused on work from the 1970s onwards. We have chosen these not only from self-proclaimed oral historians, but also from others who use similar techniques.

It is also difficult to make any satisfactory balanced choice between, on the one hand, books that may bring together an author's reflections on years of fieldwork, and on the other, the many, often brief, articles, especially on research in progress, which are published in oral history journals, and also the typically short-lived websites of projects. Because books can provide more sustained interpretations, and also because they will remain accessible through libraries as well as the internet, we give them the most attention in this inevitably selective survey of oral history's achievement.

## Environments, economies, and science

We can start from the widest context of all: the past and future of the globe itself. Oral history clearly has an important future role in documenting the impact of climate change and human activity on the environment. Given the strong influence of environmental movements in North America and Europe in the last fifty years, the growth of oral history projects concerned with such issues has been perhaps surprisingly slow. One early exception is Kai Erikson's account of a mountain community's reaction to a food disaster caused by a burst dam. There is also now a growing number of studies of Western activists, ranging from Canadian Greens, Englishmen in the Amazon, and animal rights militants, to the loose anarchistic nomadic American group who celebrate provocatively in the forests, known as the Rainbow Family of Living Light. William Ellis has neatly brought human and natural history together in *The Kentucky River* (2000). To this we can add the collection *The Roots of Environmental Consciousness*, edited by Stephen Hussey and Paul Thompson, and Suroopa Mukherjee's shocking account of how it can all go wrong through disregarding environmental risk, *Surviving Bhopal* (2010).<sup>1</sup>

Equally horrific—from fire, heat, and death—but with a strange poetic tinge, too, are the accounts in *Voices of Chernobyl*, recorded by Svetlana Alexievich after the 1986 nuclear reactor explosion that destroyed more than six hundred villages and their people outright, and left two million living in acutely contaminated territory. Svetlana Alexievich is a Belarusian investigative journalist whose books have sold millions in Russian, but only two of them have been translated into English. In 2015 she was awarded a Nobel Prize for her 'polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time'.

### SURVIVOR OF THE 1986 CHERNOBYL EXPLOSION

*Oral historians have responded only slowly to climatic and environmental change. This gives a special importance to Svetlana Alexievich's project on the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Here one survivor, Nadezhda Petrovna Vygovskaya, recalls its immediate impact, on children as well as adults, in terms not only of horror but surprisingly also of beauty:*

It happened on a Friday night. On Saturday morning, no one suspected a thing. Knew nothing. I got my son off to school, and my husband went to the barber shop. I was making lunch. My husband very quickly came back with the words, 'There's a fire at the atomic station' . . .

I can still picture the bright raspberry glow, the reactor radiated light from within somehow. I had never seen anything like it . . .

When it got dark the whole town piled out on their balconies, and people who didn't have one went to friends and neighbours who did. We were on the ninth floor, with great visibility. People took their small children outside, lifted them up and said, 'Look, how beautiful! Don't forget this!' ... We stood in the horrible black dust—talking—breathing—admiring. We did not know that death could be so beautiful.

In the morning, at dawn, I looked around—and I'm not making this up now, I felt it then, not later—something was wrong, something had changed. Forever. At eight o'clock in the morning there were soldiers in gas masks in the streets. They kept announcing on the radio that we should prepare for evacuation ...

When we settled in Mogilev and our son started school, he came home crying the first day. He had been put next to a little girl who refused to sit with him because he was full of radiation and she could die ... Everyone was afraid of him and called him 'lightning bug' ...

But I never lost the strange sensation that it was all happening to someone else and I was just observing. As if it were all on stage: I was watching, I could hear the weeping and screaming, but it had nothing to do with me.

Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: Chronicle of the Future* (London: Aurum, 1999), 121–23.

Equally striking, however, has been the growth of environmental oral history work in the Global South. Sometimes this is linked to development and aid work, as in Nigel Cross and Rhiannon Barker's *At the Desert's Edge* (1991), a pioneering book which brings together local memory and traditional expertise of farming in the challenging semi-arid Sahel. Other instances may be linked to history or sometimes to ecological research. A particularly striking conclusion was reached by Melissa Leach and James Fairhead in their ecological work in Guinea, where, by combining participant observation with aerial photographic and oral history evidence, they were able to show that the colonisers had completely misinterpreted the jungle landscape. They had assumed that areas of partial forests were relics of full forest cover resulting from slash and burn agriculture, and with this conviction they set out to protect the local environment by taking control from the locals, whom they blamed for declining rainfall, and they even imposed the death penalty for bush fires. Yet as Leach and Fairhead convincingly demonstrate, the locals were far better environmentalists than the colonisers had imagined, for they had been settling outside the full forest rather than within it, and they had been extending rather than diminishing it by

planting trees round their settlements. The villagers saw their landscape 'as half-filled and filling with forest, not half-emptied and emptying of it'; in short, the colonisers, imposing their presumptions without listening, had been 'reading forest history backwards'.<sup>2</sup>

Let us turn next to an equally fundamental theme, economic history. Few will need to match the boldness—in more than one sense—of historians of pre-colonial central Africa who, like Robert Harms, exploring the tributaries of the inner Congo in his own canoe, pieced together the emerging patterns of production, trade, and markets in their regions principally from communal and family oral traditions.<sup>3</sup> The role of oral evidence in economic history has normally been relatively modest: first, as a corrective and supplement to existing sources, and secondly in opening up new problems for consideration.

We begin with the role of oral history in terms of evidence. For some aspects of economic history, such as government policy, foreign trade, or banking and insurance, the existing documentation is abundant even if sometimes narrow in focus. But some of the major aggregate historical statistical indices, for example of real wages, of hours, and of productivity, are compilations resting to a quite considerable extent on either inadequate documentation or absolute guesswork, despite the confidence with which they are normally presented. They are the basis, for example, of the great debates on the standard of living in industrial Britain: but Elizabeth Roberts has demonstrated from interviews with working-class families in two Lancashire towns how many factors have been misconceived or completely left out of calculations for statistical indices of the standard of living. And the sources prove equally defective for studying the history of many major industries.<sup>4</sup>

Take mining, for example: Christopher Storm-Clark has shown how existing documentary records are both insufficient and misleading. The mining industry before the late nineteenth century consisted chiefly of small, shallow, and often short-lived local pits; yet the evidence which survives is not merely scarce and fragmentary, but heavily biased towards the atypical large-scale capital-intensive pits and their associated settlements. The closure of pits and consequent destruction of their records from the interwar depression years onwards, the unwillingness of owners to allow their examination, and the subsequently similar fears of the National Coal Board, have improved neither their availability nor their informative content.

For his own research, Storm-Clark therefore used interviewing partly to collect basic information about the technology and work organisation of the type of pit whose records are missing. Interviews also supply much fuller evidence than any colliery records of the processes of recruitment into the pits and migration into mining districts. Perhaps most striking, however, has been their value in elucidating and correcting the very information which, at least for certain pits, Colliery Wage Books do supply on working hours and wages. Interviews indicate that for the individual miner, hours remained very flexible, while the system of piecework payments divided between workgroups of miners was so



complex and variable that the concept of a wage rate for the period before 1914 is 'almost entirely meaningless'.<sup>5</sup>

The same kinds of arguments for the value of oral evidence in relation to documents apply to other industries. Thus for our own *Living the Fishing* (1983)—on an industry dominated by small firms and seasonal labour—interviewing proved the quickest way of constructing an outline local economic history of each community and each family enterprise, and also helped us to see some of the errors in the abundant government documentation and statistics, which had reflected local pride, or evasion, or guesswork in supplying information for the official records. But still more importantly, it gave us the vital information on the contrasts in entrepreneurial culture between different fishing communities, which helped to explain why some had died while others continued to thrive.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, more generally, it is as important to understand, in contrast to the big success story, the small firm like a country town iron foundry which did not grow into a great company, and, a step further back, the rural craftsmen—wheelwrights, smiths, thatchers, and so on—for whom written documentation is still sparser, but for whom there now exists abundant literature drawing considerably on oral sources. Again, it is often only oral evidence which allows adequate study of a transient economic activity which may be a vital part of the wider picture. Thus there are virtually no written records of itinerant trades—hawking, credit-drapery, market-trading, and so on—and even for the highly organised brewing industry, there was only the barest documentation of the regular organised seasonal migration of farm labourers from East Anglia to Burton-on-Trent.<sup>7</sup>

The most sustained oral history work, of critical significance for economic history, has, however, concerned agriculture. Here again accounts, wage books, and diaries can normally only be found for the larger and more technologically advanced farms. The very existence of such records denotes an unusual degree of efficiency. Even where records exist, the information provided on, for example, wage rates or work techniques is normally inadequate, and frequently either incomprehensible or misleading. To secure any reliable indication of the normal labour patterns or the variations in technological level within a particular district, oral evidence is essential. The collecting of such source material has been most systematically carried out in Wales and Scotland, but as sociology, anthropology, or folklore rather than as economic history. The demonstration of the relevance of oral evidence to agricultural economic history was led by George Ewart Evans, in his studies of East Anglian agriculture, such as *The Farm and the Village*, and especially *Where Beards Wag All*. His investigations encompass farming methods, from the large steam-powered farm to the smallholding; contrasts between cattle and corn-based economies; and the differing roles of dealers, farmers, and farm labourers.

Oral history evidence also allows us to look more deeply at the actors in the economy, and how their work connects with their childhoods, family, leisure,

and so on. This is equally true of manual workers, administrators, and bosses. Let us take the last first. Although there is abundant autobiographical material on the upper- and middle-class intelligentsia, such information on the manufacturing and business classes has been sparse. Typically, oral historians have tended to shy away from recording industrial elites, mistakenly thinking of them as being already well enough documented. But in fact there are rich rewards from this kind of work. In the early years of the oral history revival it was most common with American oral historians. Thus Allan Nevins' massive social and industrial biography of Henry Ford, his company, and the automobile industry shows how oral evidence can bring out more clearly than documents the working methods of a great innovator.<sup>8</sup>

In a more modest way, this kind of work has continued in the United States, and it has also inspired work on elites and businessmen in Singapore and Thailand, and at the American University in Cairo. There has also been ambitious work in Brazil, both national and regional, led by the example of the national oil company Petrobras. Many of these Brazilian projects have been impressively successful in involving workers along with company leaders.<sup>9</sup> But in Britain especially there is a need for more oral history studies of entrepreneurs. Without such evidence, key questions such as the role of the family firm and the socialisation and attitudes of entrepreneurs in British economic decline cannot be answered. By contrast, sociological studies have brought important new findings: the lack of ambition of English small businessmen in contrast to large firm managers, for instance, and the absolutely crucial economic roles played by their wives. There have been more recent oral history studies by National Life Stories at the British Library of industrial managers, for example in the steel industry, the Post Office, the North Sea oil industry, and Tesco's supermarkets, and especially of London City financiers.<sup>10</sup>

David Kynaston has very effectively synthesised oral and contemporary sources in his books on the history of the City. Michael Roper's work on industry and the City Lives project both highlight the continuing importance of masculinity in business culture, of initial rituals, bonding, and schoolboyish games at work, and how such attitudes prolonged an unsystematic amateurishness at the top of the British economy. *City Lives* shows how the generation at the top of the London finance market in the 1990s had got there without training or knowledge of economics, typically initially appointed through interviews in which the discussion was more likely to centre on poetry or cricket than on business. Junko Sakai's *Japanese Bankers in the City of London* (2000) is particularly fascinating in exploring the difficulties of English and Japanese financiers in communicating with each other, so that the Japanese banks came to depend on Japanese women who had married Englishmen and could act as intermediaries. The Oral History Society's conference on 'Corporate Voices' in 2013 showed the strength of interest in this crucial economic and social field.<sup>11</sup>

## WOMEN AND MEN WORKING: THE LONDON STOCK EXCHANGE

*Changing attitudes to gender relations have been as important for the elite in the financial sector as for workers in industry. The London Stock Exchange was a club which tolerated schoolboyish pranks—until women were admitted. Here George Nissen nostalgically recalls past fun, while Jane Partington speaks of how hard it was for those first women.*

GEORGE NISSEN: [In the 1960s] there was no public gallery at the Stock Exchange so the place was extremely private, its own little world. There were all sorts of jokes and pranks. Occasionally there was a small amount of rough-housing, but not much. There was an enormous amount of flicking of paper darts, quite childish in a way . . . On Fridays, there was one old boy who used to come in after lunch and a great sort of shouting went up and everybody started singing this song. It was a lot of fun.

JANE PARTINGTON: I went on the floor of the Stock Exchange in 1975 and was about the third or fourth girl there . . . The girls all got given nicknames by the men—I was the Night Nurse, there was Sweaty Betty, Super Bum, the Grimsby Trawler, the Road Runner, Stop Me And Pick One. They were very cruel. Stop Me And Pick One was because she had acne. You had to have broad shoulders and a good sense of humour . . . If you were dressed in red from head to foot they'd call you Pillar-box all day and try to post letters. You'd think carefully about what you wore. They'd sit ripping up newspapers and sticking it all together and then creep up and clip it onto your skirt so you'd walk off and have a thirty-yard tail behind you.

George Nissen (1930), stock exchange member, 1956–92, senior partner, Pember & Boyle, and Jane Partington (b. 1956) research and marketing manager, Philips & Drew, in Cathy Courtney and Paul Thompson, *City Lives* (London: Methuen, 1996): 78–79, 175.

There is also a potential link between economic history and the history of technological and scientific discovery. There have been several collecting programmes in this area. By far the largest is the archive of more than a thousand interviews recorded since the 1960s for the American Institute of Physics. There is also a substantial recording programme at the Chemical Heritage Foundation. In Britain, before the launch of the National Life Stories audio and video project 'Voices of Science' in 2013, there were only small collections of interviews with biochemists, chemists, meteorologists, and Arctic researchers. There are

also archives of computer scientists in both countries, leading in Britain to Christopher Evans' *Pioneers of Computing* (1981), which included cassettes as part of its jacket.<sup>12</sup>

In interpreting scientists' memories the lead was taken early by David Edge, who provided in his *Astronomy Transformed: The Emergence of Radio Astronomy in Britain* (1977) a penetrating analysis of the post-war growth of the most spectacular, expensive, and perhaps least socially relevant 'big science', radio astronomy. Partly through his own previous experience in the same science, he understood that the paucity of records left by scientists was no accident; they did not regard their own earlier gropings and mistakes as relevant to the history of science, which they believed proceeded in a rational sequence of discoveries. Through interview evidence he has been able to show that the true picture is very different: a story of dead ends, of misunderstandings, and of discoveries by accident, within a social setting of acute rivalries, partly handled by group specialisation, but sometimes leading to the deliberate concealment of information. This constitutes therefore an important contribution to the historical study of scientific method, in which the scientist, from cool, brilliant, and rational superstar, becomes a more human and more political animal.

Surprisingly, however, since the 1970s, except for the well-funded history of medicine, there has been little recording and still less interpretation by British oral historians on the history of either technology or science. A rare exception is the account by Sally Smith Hughes of a pioneering genetic firm launched in the 1970s, *Genentech* (2011). This makes the ambitious current 'Oral History of British Science' project at the British Library, which combines audio with video, a major breakthrough.<sup>13</sup>

### Labour history and work

An area contingent on economic history, but of especially early significance for oral history, is that of labour history. The range of work here has been considerable, running from local booklets, and articles in journals such as the *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* or *Radical America*, to substantial books and archive collections. While labour history has been most strongly developed in Britain and North America, there is also notable work from other continents, such as Meena Menon and Neera Adarkar's history of the Girangaon textile mill in Bombay, or Peter Winn's of the Yarur cotton mill, seized by revolutionary workers in 1971 after Allende's election as Chile's socialist president.<sup>14</sup>

The contribution of oral evidence can be seen in several different forms. The simplest is biographical. Even labour leaders do not normally leave substantial private records, so that oral evidence has proved of regular value in

an undertaking such as John Saville and Joyce Bellamy's *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (1972–93),<sup>15</sup> as well as in individual studies. But oral evidence has also transformed the character of labour autobiography. Despite some exceptions, the typical labour autobiography was until quite recently written by a trade-union secretary or parliamentarian about their public life, at best prefaced by a few brief pages on their childhood and first job.

Through the combined influence of oral historians, especially in community history projects, and also of broadcasting, we now have life stories from a much wider range of authors: from local as well as national leaders, from the ordinary rank and file, and also from non-unionised workers; from women as well as from men; from labourers, domestic servants, sweated and casual workers, as well as from miners and labour aristocrats. Equally important, the content and language have shifted from the public life to the ordinary experience of work and family. A more intimate and anecdotal type of autobiography has emerged, leaving its mark on the published life story. Its influence can be clearly seen in the extracts from recent manuscript autobiographies included by John Burnett in his fine collection, *Useful Toil*. A very considerable number of similar oral autobiographies are now available in record offices and archives. A selection has been published, most often as small local booklets, but also as more ambitious collections, for example by Ian Macdougall in Scotland, John Bodnar on workers in Pennsylvania, and Alice and Staughton Lynd's two successive volumes of testimonies from the *Rank and File* in America (1973 and 2000). The Lynds see their books as specifically directed towards young activists, and their interviewees can indeed be caustic about some older-generation 'ineffectual, do-nothing' union organisers. Dana Cloud's account of the revived militancy of the Boeing workers and Miriam Louie's *Sweatshop Warriors* (2001) on the struggle of American immigrant women in sweated manufactures similarly give an optimistic activist's view of 'how working people can command their own futures'.<sup>16</sup>

There is also a growing number of remarkable printed autobiographies of the new kind, which started as oral recollections, like Margaret Powell's *Below Stairs* (1968), a domestic servant's life. Still more powerful is Angela Hewins' *The Dillen* (1981), an autobiographical masterpiece recorded directly from a man who could never have written it but had a rare gift for the spoken word. An orphan brought up in a Stratford-on-Avon common lodging-house among down-and-outs and prostitutes, he was apprenticed to a local builder through his great-aunt's determination, but fell for an early marriage and failed to serve his full time. His life became a relentless struggle as a casual labourer to feed his growing family, and turned to bitterness through his savage mutilation as a First World War soldier: an unknown life of labour, yet unforgettable, which could have come to us in no other way.

Some oral historians have focused on particular industries, as in Anna Green's work on the New Zealand waterfront, a theme on which Wendy Lowenstein

was the Australian pioneer, with *Under the Hook* (1982). In Britain recent work includes a collection on working on the ICI oil refinery at Billingham, and National Life Stories projects on the Post Office, the electricity industry, and North Sea oil. Other projects look at gender or race at work, as in Kenneth, Nicole, and Robert Wolensky's study of the women's garment industry, Jane Latour's on New York women activists in the 1970s, and Karen Olson's on the wives of Baltimore steelmakers. Timothy Minchin combines legal records and oral history interviews in his account of the slow racial integration of the southern textile industry.<sup>17</sup>

Oral evidence can also be used to amplify information on specific events in labour history, such as the evolution of an organisation, or the course of a strike. An exceptional example to which we shall return is Peter Friedlander's study of *The Emergence of a UAW Local 1936–1939: The Unionization of a Detroit Car Factory* (1975)—which he built up almost entirely from a very searching form of interview. More usually, the oral evidence has been combined with documentary sources, and the advantage gained by the historian has been both in the spread of informants and the broadening of information to cover more of ordinary experience. There are many instances of this type of work, such as the analysis of a series of strikes like the harvest strikes of Norfolk farmworkers; of the early unionisation of women in woollen mills; of how devices such as profit-sharing were used by employers to suppress militancy; or of a sustained campaign like the Welsh miners' response to the Spanish Civil War. The particular strength which oral evidence can bring to such themes is to get beyond the formalities and heroics of contending leaderships, as represented in newspapers and records, to the more humdrum, confused reality and different standpoints within the rank and file, including even that of the blacklegs.<sup>18</sup>

Another form of oral labour history, which runs in close parallel to sociological research, is the community study, focusing on towns largely dependent on a single industry. The impact of oral history here can be suggested by contrasting the earlier sociological classic, Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques, and Clifford Slaughter's *Coal Is Our Life* (1956), based on interviews, but largely dismissive of the historical material which they collected, with the later historical and sociological work of Robert Moore and Robert Waller, or of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's work on a North Carolina textile town, in which the retrospective reconstruction of class relationships and sense of community from oral evidence becomes a major concern. Mining and fishing communities are the classic subjects of this type of work, but the use of oral evidence has also allowed the extension of historical community study to much more sparsely documented occupations, such as the casual labourers, carters, quarrymen, and laundry-women of Raphael Samuel's 'Quarry Roughs'.<sup>19</sup>

Local communities are not the only appropriate focus for such oral history work. As Emma Robertson shows in *Chocolate, Women and Empire* (2009), it is possible to use oral evidence from more than one country to understand the

workings of a major transnational company. Robertson recorded not only the women workers in Rowntree's York chocolate factory, but also the much poorer women cocoa farmers in Nigeria who supplied them. She demonstrates how Rowntree's reputation for high-mindedness as employers was sustained by local missionaries and activities such as black minstrel shows, depicting black people as primitives who needed English help—through Christianity, Empire, and low-paid work.

Deindustrialisation since the 1970s has brought a sharply different phase of labour history, with weakened and less militant trade unions and few strikes to record, but on the contrary, many industrial communities left economically bereft through the closing of their mine or mill. Several recent studies, including Thomas Dublin's *When the Mines Closed* and Monica Perales's *Smeltertown* (2010), describe the struggles for survival which followed. The same issues inspire combinations of photography and interviewing by Michael Frisch and Milton Rogovin in *Portraits in Steel* (1993), which combines striking portraits with life stories of Buffalo steelworkers, and Steven High and David Lewis's *Corporate Wasteland* (2007), in which the bleak landscapes from Detroit and Ontario are juxtaposed to narratives of hardship, hurt, anger, and resistance.<sup>20</sup>

From earlier periods there are also national accounts of workers who were unemployed: both of their organisations, and of their experience of life out of work—the long, fruitless search for a job, the pinching of food, the humiliation of welfare—an experience depressingly similar whether in North America, Australia, or Britain. The widest collections of such evidence are in Studs Terkel's classic *Hard Times* (1970) and Barry Broadfoot's Canadian parallel, *Ten Lost Years*. Nevertheless, two contemporary sociological studies give a more reflective analysis, showing the use of the life story at its best. Dennis Marsden and Euan Duff's *Workless* (1973) combines photographs with testimonies; while Elliot Liebow worked as a volunteer in a night shelter for the homeless, recording the women's lives, their accounts of rejection by their families and husbands, their search for solace, and their talk about God, in *Tell Them Who I Am* (1993). Similarly Desiree Hellegers has recorded fifteen homeless women in Seattle, presenting the choices the women themselves see in their lives, and their struggles against violence, abuse, and alcoholism. As the activist Anitra Freeman puts it: 'Personal problems don't cause homelessness. Personal problems don't dig the hole in the sidewalk; they just influence who is going to fall into it'.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, oral evidence has a special value to the labour historian concerned with the work process itself—not merely its technology, which we have touched on earlier, but the experience of work, and the social relationships and culture which follow from it. The experience of work is the concern of Studs Terkel's masterpiece, *Working* (1974). As with all his books, the effect is made not by explicit argument, but from cumulative interview extracts. It is a thick book: six hundred pages in which 130 Americans pour out their work stories; old and



young; real-estate woman, priest, factory owner, industrial spy, airline stewardess, hair stylist, bar pianist, strip-miner, car-welder, truck-driver, policeman, garbage man, washroom attendant. No other book conveys so vividly the feeling of so many different kinds of job: the incessant, relentless tensions of the telephone receptionist; the loneliness of a top consultant struggling to survive in the jungle of management; the steel-millworker who would like the names of the workmen to be inscribed on what they make ('Somebody built the pyramids ... ') and short of this leaves here and there 'a little dent ... a mistake, mine ... my signature on 'em, too'. One constructs one's own interpretations, although Studs Terkel no doubt had a shrewd idea of how they are likely to shape.<sup>22</sup>

Much more clearly articulated studies of this type of history have now been published: on Fiat car workers and Terni steelworkers in Italy, on Carrara marble quarrymen, on London male craft coopers and female assembly workers, on Paris bakers, on white and black domestic servants, and much else. Tamara Hareven has given us important histories of the working and family lives of both factory workers in Manchester, once the textile capital of New England, and the highly skilled *Silk Weavers of Kyoto* in Japan. Pierre Bourdieu's *Weight of the World* is a survey of the whole range of work in France, comparable with Terkel's *Working*.<sup>23</sup>

In Italy the search to understand working-class consciousness through the direct feelings of workers themselves led, on the one hand, to outstandingly perceptive historical studies, such as Luisa Passerini's *Fascism in Popular Memory* and Portelli's work in Terni, and on the other hand, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, to the collection and publication of factory interviews, songs, and poetry by workers' groups, journals like *I Giorni cantati*, and archives such as the Istituto Ernesto di Martino in Milan.

In my own research among car workers in Turin and Coventry, I was especially struck by how the interviews revealed the importance of the culture of the workplace. It seemed that skilled men who now worked on assembly lines sustained their self-image not only by elaborate systems of work rotation and self-pacing, but equally by play at work, including socialising, cooking rabbits, studying, and constructing giant festival lights out of car parts.<sup>24</sup>

One of the best studies of the impact of working practises on social relationships concerns mining. George Ewart Evans sets out the system of the anthracite district of the South Wales coalfield, where the coal was near the surface, so that it was relatively easy for a small man to start his own drift mine, while its irregular geology gave special importance to the miner's skill. Owners and men lived and worked closely together. He then shows the impact of mechanisation on the whole local social system, not merely destroying the status of the craftsmen, but also the close bond—sometimes paternal, sometimes exploitative—with the boys who formerly worked with them in their stalls, but now became a separate group beyond the control of the older generation. We have here an excellent

example of how the exploration of a particular technical reorganisation can illuminate its connections with other major processes of social change.<sup>25</sup>

### Political history

We have already touched, in considering the basis of changing class relationships, upon a key aspect of political history, and the biography of labour leaders can be taken as another. Biography is one of the forms in which historians most often use interviews, whether explicitly or not, usually in an informal and exploratory manner to supplement written sources. Sometimes biographers may find the need to go further in the use of oral sources. Thus Bernard Donoughue and George Jones interviewed more than three hundred people for *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician*:

We were forced from the beginning to resort to interviews because of the lack of certain other documentary sources. Morrison himself left very few papers, having burned the majority of them when moving house late in his life. The official papers for the 1945–51 government, in which he played a dominant role, are also not available because of the thirty-year rule.

Turning to interviews ‘in some desperation ... we were rapidly converted to appreciating their enormous value. They proved to be not just a stop-gap substitute for better sources, but a quite distinctly valuable source in themselves’. In particular, it proved possible to build up a much fuller range ‘of perspectives and insights to the man ... his virtues and his vices, and the extent to which the one was so often the reverse side of the coin to the other’. An early political life, so often skipped over by a biographer, could be reconstructed in remarkable detail. And throughout his career, Morrison could be revealed at work, as a minister or in local government, through ‘the various groups of people on whom he made an impact: his political associates, his political opponents, the civil servants working with him, the people at the grassroots who were supporting him or on the receiving end of his policies’. The result, it can be added, is a biography which is not merely unusually rounded in itself, but has also created significant new historical source material for the future.<sup>26</sup>

There are also political biographies intentionally based from the start on interviews. Striking instances from the Americas include T. Harry Williams’s *Huey Long*, built from more than two hundred interviews.<sup>27</sup> More remarkable, however, are two other oral history autobiographies. Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans* (1991) charts political and social change through three Chinese generations, especially vividly conveying the agonies and humiliations suffered by her committed Communist parents during the Cultural Revolution. *I, Rigoberta Menchu* is the autobiography, recorded in Paris in 1982 by Elizabeth Burgos, of a radical young Guatemalan Indian peasant, probably incorporating as her own some

experiences of other Indians, but a genuine and notably powerful account of the persecution of her people. It was deliberately intended to raise support for their cause, and with its multiple translations has indeed succeeded in giving them worldwide publicity.

Oral sources have an equal potential for exploring the political attitudes and personal lives of the more typical unknown activists, and equally of the unorganised, quiescent majority of the population. Neglect of this has meant, for example, that we still have only a superficial understanding of working-class Conservatism in Britain, or of its party activists, despite its key role in political history. Oral evidence can provide much missing information on the activities and attitudes of the rank and file of the parties: their social backgrounds, their reading, and their occupations and relationships.

Kathleen Blee's account of *Women of the Klan* (1991), and the everyday normality and even pride with which they recall their active membership in an extremist organisation, is a notable instance of what a study of right-wing populism can reveal. Other historians have recorded life stories with radical activists, ranging from Molly Andrews' British socialists to revolutionary Communist women guerillas in the Philippines, threatened Guatemalan trade unionists, or Steven Feierman's *Peasant Intellectuals* in Tanzania.<sup>28</sup>

Another form is the political oral documentary, of which William Manchester's *The Death of a President* (1967), drawing on more than 250 interviews, was a classic American instance. Here the focus was on a single brief event. Subsequently there have been other notable oral histories on crucial events which have lasted months, rather than a day: for example, Portelli's typically thoughtful book on a Nazi massacre of the Jews in Rome, or Jeremy Deller's combination of a book and a filmed re-enactment of the 'Battle of Orgreave' in the 1984–85 British miners' strike. There is also Urvashi Bhatia's notable account, from a feminist perspective, of memories of the Partition of India in the Delhi region.<sup>29</sup>

A particularly dramatic new example of this kind of oral history is Xun Zhou's *Forgotten Voices of Mao's Great Famine* (2013), the catastrophe that was the main consequence of the chaotic failure of Mao's Great Leap Forward campaign of 1958. The famine lasted five years and was the worst in recorded world history, claiming between thirty thousand and fifty thousand lives. It was due to misdistribution rather than to absolute shortage of food. At the same time as pushing for industrial development everywhere, Mao hoped to release rural labour through irrigation schemes and collectivisation. But in their initial enthusiasm, local party cadres greatly exaggerated harvest results, thus having to over-pay state dues, and at the same time much of the crop went to exports. The result was mass starvation, made worse by local cadres responding to protest by beatings and killings. The whole episode—unlike the Cultural Revolution, which is much discussed—has been suppressed in official Chinese history, went unmentioned in textbooks, and until recently was hidden in closed archives. Zhou has used both archival and oral sources.

She was originally inspired by her own grandmother's stories of the famine, but she found that most of those she recorded, in many different parts of China, had never recounted their memories before, inhibited not only by the pain they had suffered, but also by a continuing fear of antagonising local party cadres.

Oral evidence can also be a very effective way of documenting a more sustained broad-based political campaign, driven by little-known popular activists. There is a long tradition of this kind of work in Latin America, both in the form of *testimonios* and in outstanding oral histories, such as Daniel James' *Doña María's Story*, or Susana Kaiser's *Postmemories of Terror* (2005), which explores how children of the Argentinian disappeared remember and cope with the traumatic experience of the abduction of their parents decades earlier. There are also studies of Mexico's long and confusing revolution, and of men and women in Spanish anarchism.<sup>30</sup>

Especially impressive, however, is the demonstration that reconstructions of political organisations at the grassroots level are possible, even where documentation is by definition largely non-existent, in William Hinton's *Shenfan* (1983). Hinton had returned to the same village which he had documented in the earliest years of the revolution in *Fanshen* (1966), and consequently, through the retrospective testimony of the villagers of Long Bow, he was able to unravel, uniquely illuminatingly, the complex feuds and devastating chaos of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. More recently, in *Salt of the Earth* (1997), based principally on oral history, Ralph Thaxton has carried out an impressive study of peasant resistance to state control in three salt-making villages in central China. In contrast to Chinese party historians, who tend to regard the peasantry as incompetent, dirty, and ridden with fairy tales, he argues that it was the villagers' resistance to the state from the 1920s onwards which led them to back the Communist takeover in the 1940s. But today villagers are hesitant to make such claims in public, and the best-informed local historian will not publish his notes for fear of offending the local Communist cadres.

Probably the most sustained attention by oral historians to a political movement has been focused on the long-standing campaigns for racial equality in the United States, which are inextricably intertwined with American black social history. There are two monumental volumes of testimonies, *Voices of Freedom* on the civil rights movement from the 1950s to the 1980s, and Michael Gillette's account of Johnson's War on Poverty campaign of the 1960s, drawn from a set of 1,700 interviews. Kentucky is unusual in supporting a state-backed Oral History Commission that has produced a history of the civil rights movement in the state. Other in-depth local studies include Kate Willink on the struggle for school integration in rural North Carolina, Timothy Minchin on the parallel fight for racial integration in the southern cotton mills, and a gripping two-volume set by Kim Lacy Rogers on the fight for civil rights in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>31</sup>

## DESEGREGATING AMERICAN SCHOOLS

*Oral history does not give us an outcome of the civil rights movement in the American South in terms of precisely which public schools became desegregated and when. But it can help us to understand how people felt about the crisis, their anger and their fears—and also the laconic exchanges between them which would never reach the official records but could be crucial on the day. Here a pupil remembers the Little Rock crisis and a lucky escape from death:*

The first day I was able to enter Central High School, what I felt inside was terrible, wrenching, awful fear. On the car radio I could hear that there was a mob. I knew what a mob meant and I knew that the sounds that came from the crowd were very angry. So we entered the side of the building, very, very fast. Even as we entered there were people running after us . . . We were met by school officials and very quickly dispersed our separate ways. There has never been in my life any stark terror or any fear akin to that.

I'd only been in the school a couple of hours and by then it was apparent that the mob was just overrunning the school. Policemen were throwing down their badges and the mob was getting past the wooden sawhorses because the police would no longer fight in order to protect us. So we were all called into the principal's office, and there was great fear that we would not get out of this building. We were trapped. And I thought, okay, I'm going to die here, in school . . . Even the adults, the school officials, were panicked, feeling like there was no protection. A couple of kids, the black kids, that were there with me were crying, and someone made a suggestion that if they allowed the mob to hang one kid, they could then get the rest out. And a gentleman, who I believed to be the police chief, said, 'Unh-uh, how are you going to choose? You're going to let them draw straws'? He said, 'I'll get them out'.

And we were taken to the basement of this place. We were put into two cars, grayish blue Fords. And the man instructed the drivers, he said, 'Once you start driving, do not stop'. And he told us to put our heads down. This guy revved up his engine and he came up out of the bowels of this building, and as he came up, I could just see hands reaching across this car, I could hear the yelling, I could see guns, and he was told not to stop. 'If you hit somebody, you just keep rolling, 'cause the kids are dead'. And he did just that . . . He dropped me off at home. And I remember saying, 'Thank you for the ride'. I should've said, 'Thank you for my life'.

But American black history goes beyond this. Firstly it gives us the voice of the great ghettos of urban America. Paul Bullock's *Watts, the Aftermath* (1969) is an account of a mass confrontation in Los Angeles; while Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* has few equals for conveying the bitter richness of city life or as a powerful portrait of an individual leader. Black history also delineates the bitterness of black-white relations in terms of individual lives, as in the vivid testimonies of Bob Blauner's *Black Lives, White Lives* on northern California.<sup>32</sup>

Studs Terkel's *Race* (1992) is Chicago-based but more diffuse. Terkel especially brings out the antagonism with which whites thought of blacks: 'I didn't like the black people. In fact I hated 'em. If they just shipped 'em all out, I don't think it woulda bother me'; 'negroes, they're animals'. Some of his black informants described prejudice more subtly: 'being Black in America is like being forced to wear ill-fitting shoes'.<sup>33</sup>

Nor did the illiterate rural black communities leave written records for future historians. William Montell's *The Saga of Coe Ridge* (1970) is the leading American example of a serious fully documented community study, by its subject largely dependent on oral evidence: an account of a black colony, settled on a remote hill spur after emancipation from slavery, surviving at first through subsistence farming and lumbering, but degenerating through lethal fights with neighbouring whites over women, and driven as natural resources became exhausted into moonshining and bootlegging, so that eventually it was broken up by the county sheriff's revenue men.

Secondly, where records do exist, oral evidence provides an essential corrective to them. This is especially true of the old rural South, where history matters, as nowhere else in the United States, because it is employed to justify or deny the claims of white supremacy. It was thus no mere accident that the rich interview material that had been collected in the 1920s and 1930s from former plantation slaves and their dependants remained unused by historians for more than three decades. This has now been remedied, not only by full publication of the slave narratives in eighteen volumes edited by George Rawick—thus constituting the most important collective autobiography yet published—but also by the admirable interpretative essay, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community and the American Slave* (1972), which constitutes an introductory volume.

And similarly, to narrow the focus to a single case study, Lawrence Goodwin was able to discover only through oral evidence the true local political story deliberately concealed by contemporary newspapers and records of how the white upper class used systematic violence to destroy the inter-racial populism of one Texas county in the 1890s. More recently there have been notable oral history studies by Lisa Krisssof Boehm and by Elizabeth Clark-Lewis—herself great-granddaughter of a slave—of the great interwar migration of black American women from the South to the cities of the North. In the South they had most commonly worked as maids. The class and race relationships between

maids and their white employers has also been vividly conveyed by Pierrette Honagneu-Sotleo, a Californian Latina activist who interviewed immigrant domestic workers in Los Angeles. She gives us chapters that explore the great range of relationships, between mutual confiding on the one hand to, at the other extreme, employers who do not recognise their maids as human persons—she calls this chapter ‘Go Away—But Stay Close Enough’—but also how destructive this can be, in ‘Blowups and Other Unhappy Endings’.<sup>34</sup>

### Colonisation and resistance

The harshness of American race relations is of course a legacy of slavery and the slave trade, the most ruthless aspect of European colonialism. By the early twentieth century Britain was an imperial power controlling a quarter of the world’s surface and a colonial population of some 400 million people. British oral historians and anthropologists have responded by investigating both the rulers and the ruled. One type of oral history work focused on the colonial administration or the white settler population. Thus the Cambridge South Asian Archive focused on imperial rule in India, the Oxford Colonial Records Project on Africa. The fascination of a broader type of colonial social history was strikingly shown through Michael Mason’s radio programmes on the British in India, and their printed sequel, Charles Allen’s *Plain Tales from the Raj* (1975). Through them, as in no other way, one may enter the strange, caste- and class-ridden world of the imperial white elite: the messes and homes of the officers and soldiers of the Indian army, the pilots of the Calcutta river, the ‘heaven born’ of the Indian Civil Service, their brothels, mistresses, and ‘Memsahib: the Wives and Daughters of the Raj’.<sup>35</sup>

At the other end of the social spectrum are those who have suffered colonisation. In the Americas there has been a long tradition of life story work with indigenous peoples by anthropologists, as well as more political oral autobiographical testimonies. There is continuing oral history work with American Indians and Canadian First Nations, and also with Australian Aborigines. Documentation through oral history has proved crucial in the struggle to re-assert lost land rights. Palestinian oral history similarly aims to provide a record of land rights and uses as well as village history before the Israeli occupations.

In Africa and Asia, by contrast, individual life stories from among the colonised have been much rarer, no doubt in part because the European anthropologists who followed the colonisers lacked the American interest in this approach. Thus early oral autobiographies such as Mary Smith’s *Baba of Karo* (1954), the personal story of a Muslim Hausa woman in purdah and her marriages, divorces, and co-wives, remained as unusual as they were outstanding. More recent work, such as Tim Keegan’s *Facing the Storm* (1988) on sharecropping families in the South African high veld, or Pat Caplan’s *African Voices* (1997) on a Tanzanian smallholder and Islam, are both innovative in giving full voice to their subjects.



In Africa especially, for both political and social history, oral sources play a crucial role. Documentation, although certainly present, is much less prolific than that of societies which became literate earlier, while oral source material is abundant. It has been systematically used by historians of Africa since the 1950s, with an increasingly sophisticated methodology, including the development of special techniques for the establishing of chronologies of oral traditions which quite often reach back to the sixteenth century, and in some cases still further. At first these traditions were understood essentially as orally transmitted documents, most valuable when they had survived intact from the remote past, so that the method was based on formal historical traditions and was more effectively used for the political history of relatively strongly organised African kingdoms, particularly in the period preceding their nineteenth-century colonisation.

Increasingly, however, interest has shifted to the process by which oral traditions are varied and reassembled over time, and therefore to more diffused local political systems, where the very contradictions in the oral traditions of different communities or families provide the clues from which past political struggles and migration movements can be worked out. David Cohen's *Womunafu's Bunafu* and John Lamphear's *The Traditional History of the Jie* are remarkable histories of small forest and hill peoples in Uganda reconstructed in this way, while Paul Irwin's *Liptako Speaks* equally deftly exploits the contradictions in what he learnt among a savannah people on the upper Niger. The symbolic and social interpretation of origin myths has brought new meanings from them, too, not only from an anthropologist like Steven Feierman in *The Shambaa Kingdom*, but also from historians like Roy Willis, who in *A State in the Making* pins the Fipa myth to the moment when these mountain Tanzanians shifted from slash and burn to compost agriculture.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps the sheer ingenuity required to establish the elementary patterns of settlement and political power in pre-colonial Africa from oral sources diverted energies from exploiting their equal potential for documenting the economic, social, and cultural processes of colonisation and developing a recent African social history. Fortunately the balance is now shifting. One important influence has been the work of Terence Ranger in his research on nationalism and social change in Zimbabwe.<sup>37</sup> Another important contribution is Richard Werbner's *Tears of the Dead* (1991). He studied a transgenerational rural family in Zimbabwe, then Southern Rhodesia, documenting how they were forced off their good land by new settlers who claimed to have bought it, next employed them, then treated them as 'squatters' on their own family land, and finally pushed them out onto very poor land. To their added annoyance, the Europeans also told them how to farm in new ways, with no respect for their local experience. At first they tried to negotiate, but eventually they were driven into guerilla war against the settlers.

## EUROPEAN COLONISATION IN AFRICA AND THE LAND STRUGGLE

*Oral history has played a crucial role in the assertion of indigenous land rights but has been less often used to document how land can be usurped by incomers. In *Tears of the Dead* (1991), Richard Werbner recorded the stories of how a transgenerational rural family in Zimbabwe, then Southern Rhodesia, were step by step forced off their own land. Tobela, who was born around 1900, recalled:*

When we were living there at the mountains, we saw a European coming one day to tell us, 'This is my farm. I have been told to look after the farm where you are settled'. We said, 'That is all right but where shall we settle'? He said, 'Just settle here. But what you'll have to do is give me money'. That was Kesbaum Teit. We paid tax to Teit, we really paid tax to him . . . That was our good European.

*After some years, the land was divided, and they found themselves under another owner:*

Then we found the farm had been cut and an Afrikaner had come in . . . He said, 'There have never been two chiefs. Get up and go. Your cattle are too many; your goats are too many; they are living in this country. This is my country. I have bought it. It is now mine'. It was then they chased us away. We removed, and came this side of Ndadza. While we were behind Ndadza, we lived there for a time before one named Kala came. 'Hau! This farm is now mine. Remove from here! I don't want you anymore'. Ah, we were tired of carrying burdens.

*So they were resettled yet again, on much worse land. Besides resenting being pushed around, at the same time they resisted the European's advocacy of fencing off the fields, to prevent letting in more settlers.*

Where is it that this has worked well? . . . We refuse and we do not want wires. We told you, but you had already put up the fence. You did it without consulting us. We don't want it. In talking to Europeans about fences we are wasting our time. We grew up having cattle and we know about them; we don't want any European cutting down the land or moving us about.

Tobela (b. c. 1900), in Richard Werbner, *Tears of the Dead* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 9, 32.

## War and deviance

Wars have engaged oral historians in different ways: wars of all kinds—including world wars, guerilla wars, independence wars, and civil wars. War memories are particularly interesting as forms of social memory that are often contentious and one-sided, and also deeply traumatic. They have also strikingly broadened the whole scope of war history. Indeed the chaos of war undermines conventional documentation, thus leaving not only crucial gaps, but whole stories untold—of which the Holocaust is the bitterest example.

There have been several large-scale American and British projects collecting oral evidence in the field of military history. They have been particularly important in illuminating ordinary experience, like life on the lower deck of the navy, in the barrack-room, the wives of prisoners of war who felt marginalised and lonely like unwed mothers, or the black soldier on the Second World War battlefields. Many historians of war put the actors in a heroic frame, without any critical assessment of the causes of the war itself, let alone concern for the experience of the 'enemy' side: for example Max Arthur's very popular collection on the Great War, or Charles Allen and Tony Parker's soldiers' stories. This is equally true of Karen Turner's interviews with Vietnamese women fighters. Richard Vinen's massive multi-sourced academic history of British post-war conscription, *National Service* (2014), also shows a striking evasiveness in dealing with accusations of savagery, including torture, by servicemen fighting colonial rebellions.<sup>38</sup>

Others, by contrast, provide much more critical evaluations of military activities. Thus Nadire Mater portrays the experience of Turkish soldiers in the war with Kurdish guerillas as thoroughly corrupting; while Judith Gardener and Judy El Bushra portray the Somalian civil war through the eyes of women as a collective tragedy. Danka Li is unusual in focusing on the quieter struggle for survival behind the battlefield in China's resistance to Japanese invasion. Through oral history we can also gather otherwise unobtainable information on anti-war activities by conscientious objectors, passive resistance, sabotage, or outright mutiny within the forces.<sup>39</sup>

For the Second World War period in Europe there have been notable local studies of the Partisans in north Italy and also of the punitive massacres carried out by the retreating German army. Alessandro Portelli draws attention to the wartime refugees behind the battlefronts, living off the little they could steal. He suggests that war especially highlights the essence of oral historical work, contrasting the public history of wars, of victorious nations, with private tragedies, above all in the deaths of husbands, wives, and children:

They are the price paid for this victory they do not share, and they are its meaning . . . [Recognizing] the indissoluble bond between 'history' and personal experience, between the private unique and solitary spores of sorrow in houses, kitchens, and anguished memories, and the historian's

perception and reconstruction of broad, public historical events ... the task and theme of oral history—an art dealing with the individual in social and historical context—is to explore this distance and this bond.<sup>40</sup>

Closely related to the German war story of Nazi conquest and racial extermination is the impressively extensive international research on the Holocaust. The story of the concentration camps, whether told by survivors, or collaborators, or the children of victims, still proves exceptionally harrowing, both for those who tell and for those who hear. Unfortunately Holocaust memories are not altogether unique. The German death machine also included camps for 13 million forced labourers in twenty-seven countries, and Alexander von Plato has led an international oral history study of this workforce—‘modern slavery’—and the fate of their families and communities. Sarah Helm has recorded survivors from inside Ravensbrück, which the Nazis used as a camp for deviant women—prostitutes, Communists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or legal or illegal abortionists.<sup>41</sup>

There are other parallels in the memories of survivors of the earlier Armenian genocide, and also of the Hiroshima atomic bombing, not to mention in the contemporary resurgence of genocide, for which Selma Leydesdorff’s *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide* (2011) is the outstanding witness. And only a little less painful is the history of Spain under Fascism, the fear which drove men to live the best part of their lives in hiding, and the manifold, confusing, ambivalent experience of civil war for ordinary townspeople and peasants, men and women, which has been so brilliantly conveyed through oral history—giving the voices of both sides in the war, winners and losers—in Ronald Fraser’s *Blood of Spain*.<sup>42</sup>

Equally outstanding is Catherine Merridale’s eloquent book on ordinary soldiers in the Russian army, *Ivan’s War* (2005). She describes how the Russian soldiers and widows she spoke to clung movingly to the heroic Stalinist perspective of the Great Patriotic War, which still gives meaning to their years of hardship, pain, and loss. She argues that so many of these ex-soldiers still hold to the epic war myth of the heroic Soviet soldier, omitting any mention of rape, looting, persecutions of Jews, or panics, because it still provides them with a shield, as it did then: ‘The path to survival lay in stoic acceptance, a focus on the job in hand’.<sup>43</sup>

There is also a small number of oral history studies that follow Portelli in reflecting on the social meanings of war memories. Thus, in *Anzac Memories* Alastair Thomson subtly shows the relationship between celebratory Australian public memories and the sometimes bitterly painful recollections of battle veterans. There are more recent collections, one by Paul Budra and Michael Zeitlin, on memories of the Vietnam war, including both soldiers and defectors, and a second by Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper on the politics of war commemoration internationally. Graham Dawson has also published a fine reflective book on memory and the peace in Northern Ireland.<sup>44</sup>

Portelli has a particular concern with wartime memories. In *The Battle of Valle Giulia* he includes an exploration of the 'divided memory' of Civitella, a hill village in Tuscany, where in June 1944 the retreating German army massacred all of its men in reprisal for three Germans shot by the Partisans. Yet in the midst of this pro-Partisan and Communist-voting countryside the surviving women and children of the village have always blamed the Partisans for their losses, rather than the German army. And over time they have added stories of their heroic (anti-Communist) priest offering his life for those of the village men, and, in clear contrast to the continuing public triumphalism of the ex-Partisans, of an anonymous former German soldier returning to express his repentance.

Because war is the most powerful form of collective disorganisation, so that much of its documentation is untrustworthy or non-existent, oral evidence has an especially significant role in understanding the experience of war. The same can be said for individual social deviance, which is again ill-documented.

Sociologists have long explored deviant subcultures through collecting life stories: the Chicago classics run from boy crime in *The Jack Roller* (1930) and drug addiction in *The Fantastic Lodge* to *The Professional Fence* (1974). It is no accident that probably the most revealing single life story we have of an American businessman is of an Italian-American fence dealing in stolen goods, recorded for a study of deviance. *Addicts Who Survived* is another striking oral history contribution on drug use from the 1920s to the 1960s.<sup>45</sup>

Recent collections of testimonies include *Inside This Place*, on the experiences of women prisoners. And in a welcome development, William Domnarski has been investigating the lives of the federal judges who evaluate deviants; while Lola Vollen and Dave Eggers have led a group of Californian students investigating fourteen men and women who were wrongfully convicted. Perhaps the bravest recent researcher in this field is Martha Huggins, an American who interviewed police who were torturers or executioners working for the Brazilian state between the 1950s and the 1980s. She seeks to understand why ordinary men torture and murder for the state.<sup>46</sup>

In Britain the most important contribution has been made by Tony Parker, who ranged similarly from the professional thief of *The Courage of His Convictions* (1962) to the incompetent institutionalised ex-soldier in *The Unknown Citizen* and the eight sex offenders of *The Twisting Lane* (1969). He has also talked to solitary lighthouse-keepers, soldiers, and Northern Irish terrorists. Others have investigated the changing experiences of the police. And the historical insights which can be won through this approach are vividly demonstrated through Raphael Samuel's extraordinary record of the slum childhood and violent criminal adulthood of Arthur Harding in *East End Underworld*.<sup>47</sup>

## Social history

Nevertheless, it is especially in social history that the relevance of oral evidence is most inescapable. My own *The Edwardians* (1975) was originally conceived

as an overall review of the social history of the period 1900–18, rather than a fieldwork venture. But I fairly soon discovered that although there was a wealth of printed publications from the early twentieth century, including numerous government papers, and some pioneering sociological studies, much of what I wished to know was either treated from a single, unsatisfactory perspective, or altogether ignored. Manuscript material could not fill these gaps because where normally accessible it simply enlarged on the bureaucratic perspectives already available in the printed sources. It was too recent a period for a satisfactory range of more personal documents to have reached the county record offices. I wanted to know what it was like to be a child or a parent at that time; how young people met and courted; how they lived together as husbands and wives; how they found jobs and moved between them; how they felt about work; how they saw their employers and fellow-workers; how they survived and felt when out of work; how class consciousness varied between city, country, and occupations.

None of these questions seemed answerable from conventional historical sources, but when Thea Vigne and I began to collect the evidence of, eventually, some 450 interviews, the richness of information available through this method was at once apparent. Indeed, much more was collected than could be exploited in a single book, so that in the end *The Edwardians* became as much a beginning as a conclusion. We set up the interviews collected for it as a storeroom archive and they quickly became a resource for many other historical studies. Nevertheless the book does indicate something of the overall scope of oral sources for social history. Interviews provided a pervasive background to the interpretations; they were cited in all but two of twenty-two chapters; and some sections, particularly on the family, rely heavily on direct quotation. Equally important, as an antidote to the simplifications of an overall outline of social structure, I was able to present fourteen accounts of real Edwardian families, drawn from a range of classes and places over Britain, but obstinately individual—‘the untidy reality upon which . . . both theoretical sociology and historical myth rest’.<sup>48</sup>

The fieldwork for *The Edwardians* was on an unusual scale, and in one respect for the moment unique: the choice of informants was guided by a ‘quota sample’, so that the men and women recorded broadly represent the regions, city and country, and occupational social classes of early twentieth-century Britain as a whole. Such a research plan is clearly not within the means of an individual scholar. The characteristic contribution of oral evidence has thus been not the generalised overview but rather the spotlight into various distinctive areas.

In rural social history, George Ewart Evans led the way. His books are in their special way unsurpassable: direct yet subtle intertwinings of agricultural and economic history with cultural and community studies, portraits of individuals, and stories. In one work he may explore the social structure of an ‘open’ Suffolk village like Blaxhall, in *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* (1956), or contrast it with the paternalistic Helmingham, in *Where Beards Wag All* (1970). In another,

with the eye of an anthropologist, he will suggest the significance of some superstition or tale concerning animals, or an odd dress custom like the 'breeching' of boys on leaving behind the long hair and petticoats of infancy. Perhaps best of all is his feeling for the life and the speech of the East Anglian farm labourer. Now and then he will point to the very particular quality of popular language: its syntax, its humour, its directness; and there is always the same care shown in his transcripts. In all these ways he set an exacting standard for what has become one of the best-known areas for oral history.

It is perhaps hardly surprising that when Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield* (1969) made an international literary success of Suffolk oral history, it was with less exacting scholarship. Despite its title, *Akenfield* consists of life stories from several villages rather than a portrait of a single community, while in detail not only the language of the transcript, but even its attachment to particular informants, cannot be trusted. But if as a model for sociology or history *Akenfield* cut too many corners, it proved indisputably successful in popularising a new form of rural literature, a cross between the interview documentary and the novel. Nor can there be any doubt that oral evidence constitutes its real strength. Thus, although the book opens with an idyll of cottages around the parish church, the hard reality of a village labourer's life at once breaks through with the first section of recollections by the older farm workers. It also becomes possible to see the community from conflicting standpoints, both of generation and of class, as one hears in turn farm labourer and farmer, vicar and gravedigger, Tory magistrate and Labour agent. Above all, it succeeds through the immediacy with which the spoken word confronts a reader with the presence of the people themselves.

*Akenfield* thus proved an immense stimulus to oral history for essentially the right reasons. Subsequently, through offering authentic voices from the Italian and the French peasantry, Nuto Revelli in *Il mondo dei vinti* (The World of the Defeated; 1977) and Pierre-Jakez Hélias in *Le cheval d'orgueil* (The Horse of Pride; 1975) likewise fired the imagination in their own countries. In Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, a parallel role has been played by *testimonios* and by life stories recorded by anthropologists, notably Oscar Lewis and Sidney Mintz, not to mention the long-standing oral traditions and life stories of colonised peoples in North America and Australasia, such as the intergenerational storytelling among the Canadian Yukon First Nations, traced by Julie Cruikshank in *The Social Life of Stories*.<sup>49</sup>

*Akenfield* was followed by other community studies, often pushing rural history well beyond the concerns which were possible when only documentary evidence was employed. Raphael Samuel's fine study of Headington Quarry concerns a squireless hamlet of migrant farm workers, diggers, builders, peddlers, poachers, and washerwomen which is largely undocumented just because it was so egalitarian and ill-controlled, but, he argues, an essential and far from uncommon element in the nineteenth-century rural social economy. A more



recent example is Elizabeth Dore's in-depth account of family and gender relationships and coffee-growing among Nicaraguan smallholding families.<sup>50</sup>

Oral evidence is particularly important in allowing a much fuller treatment of women in rural history. Thus there have been accounts of women in a Portuguese fishing village, of women in four Chinese villages near Xian, and of British Land Girls in the Second World War. But the outstanding example is still Mary Chamberlain's *Fenwomen* (1977), a village study, influenced by *Akenfield*, but drawn entirely from the evidence of women, and again revealing an often harsh reality in a community in which 'men were the masters': in family and school, courtship and childbirth, chapel and village society, in service, whether in the kitchens, or out weeding on the windswept black-earth fields.<sup>51</sup>

Nearly all these examples from Britain come from the southern and eastern countryside of England, the region of arable farming and hired labourers. In North America larger family farms were the predominant mode, and oral history work has tended to focus on their hard times rather than their successes. A notable instance is Kenneth Bindas' book on the Great Depression in the South, which draws on five hundred interviews collected by his students in the 1990s.<sup>52</sup>

The British family-farm regions of the north and west attracted scholars concerned for oral evidence much earlier: collectors of literature and folklore, especially in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, but also sociologists and anthropologists. The result was a series of outstanding community studies, from Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball's *Family and Community in Ireland* (1940) onwards, all based on oral fieldwork.<sup>53</sup> Two of the most stimulating are W. M. Williams's successive books, *The Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth* (1956) in Cumbria and *Ashworthy* (1963), about the Devon village. In the first, his emphasis is on the recent erosion of a traditional, stable social system, but in the second he argues that rural society was always in flux, readjusting from external pressures, economic, technological, or political, as well as from the rise and fall of individuals and their families. James Littlejohn's *Westrigg* is also particularly relevant, because it provides a successful model for a community oral history as an alternative to *Akenfield*: a very effective analysis of the changes in local class structure during the past sixty years, as farmers have bought their own holdings from the old landowning class, and the former dominance of the sheep-farming economy of the Scottish borders has given way before the advance of forestry.

Subsequently social historians of these regions took up oral sources too. Thus Ian Carter sought to explain why farm workers in north-east Scotland, in contrast to their English equivalents, were not deferential in their social attitudes—yet failed to unionise. In the Scottish Highlands, for a social history of the island of Tiree, Eric Cregeen used oral sources not only as his major evidence for understanding the conflicts between the landowner and his factor and the community of crofters, but more surprisingly to build up a picture of

personalities, family relationships, occupations, and migrations from the mid-nineteenth century, with the result that the bare listings of the 1851 census are taken back in time long beyond living memory.<sup>54</sup>

The potential impact of oral evidence is equally strong if we turn from rural to urban history. Here, however, at first it generally produced new source material, rather than new forms of analysis. An exception was Richard Hoggart's classic study of the impact of magazines, films, and the other mass media on the culture and moral relationships of the working-class city community. *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) draws heavily on Hoggart's own recollections over forty years of a childhood in northern England. It is more explicitly oral history—one chapter is headed 'An Oral Tradition: Resistance and Adaptation: A Formal Way of Life'—in its attempt to examine working-class speech conventions in relation to social change. Hoggart's influence here, however, through his emphasis on the limitations of working-class speech, proved as much a handicap as a help, and still has its ramifications in oral history. It provided an explanatory theme for Jeremy Seabrook's depressing studies of the prejudice and narrowness of the urban working classes, *The Unprivileged* (1967) and *City Close-Up* (1971). Both of these were partly historical, the first an autobiographical family view from Northampton, the second from the northern mill town of Blackburn; and if a useful counter to cosy romanticism, they seem too much shaped by bitter comment and tendentious interviewing by the author. Hoggart's negative interpretation of working-class speech was also taken up by educationists, such as Basil Bernstein. But, fortunately, more typical of urban oral history work has been the local community history, often combining photographs with testimonies, which have proved to be successful local publications in cities as diverse as Brighton and Manchester, Boston and Buenos Aires.

There have, however, been special difficulties in moving from 'voices from within' to a successful interpretation of urban oral history. This is partly because urban history has concentrated on the big cities, and here the community study makes least sense, because even when a neighbourhood can be identified with distinctive boundaries, its people will almost invariably look beyond it for work, services, and definitions of their place in the city's social structure. Richard Rodger and Joanna Herbert's collection, *Testimonies of the City*, takes an international perspective, with essays on Glasgow, Budapest, Bucharest, Paris, Vienna, and Los Angeles, but all on different themes, so that it offers no overview. By contrast Sean Field, Renate Mayer, and Felicity Swanson more convincingly focus on the diversity within a single city in their *Imagining the City*, portraying 'the creole reality of Cape Town'. Thus the image of the city is shaped by very different backgrounds. On the one hand, a refugee from the Congo complains of Cape Townees, 'all of them are against foreigners. They shout, they talk badly against us'. By contrast a lifelong resident, despite having been forcibly removed from District Six, sees Cape Town as 'a city of love, it's like a mother ... The mountain ennobles all people who live in Cape Town as a bit of sculpture, as a

presence, and also it is the one constant, no matter what happens in the city, no matter what happens in the world'.<sup>55</sup>

One solution, to take a single block or street and follow the movements of all its people inwards and outwards, has been followed by Jerry White with notable success in two books, *Rothschild Buildings* (1980) and *The Worst Street in North London* (1986), one on an East London Jewish tenement courtyard and the other on a street of casual labourers and petty thieves, deprived families, and common lodging-houses. White has a sense of physical and social space rare among historians, which provides a firm foundation for each book; and through the framework of local economy, policing, welfare, and culture, he deftly weaves the individual and family lives of each of these tiny corners of the great city. The result is a microcosm of the metropolis: a compelling new model for urban history.

An alternative, but more illustrative, approach is the portrait of a neighbourhood, of which the most convincing example is Studs Terkel's classic in the Chicago sociological tradition, *Division Street: America* (1966). This was conceived around his own boyhood in Chicago's Near North Side, where his mother ran a rooming house for single men. But he found that his search for 'a cross-section of urban thought' could no longer be confined to a single neighbourhood, and it grew into a hunt across the entire city: 'with the scattering of the species, it had to be in the nature of guerilla journalism'. His people talk about both their past and the present; family, ambitions, work, politics; and they are men and women of all ages: black and white homeowners and homemakers from the window-washer to the aristocrat; architects and ad-men, craftsmen, the hot-dog man, the men's mag girl; the Republican precinct captain cab-driver, bar landladies, and the police; and the migrants—Appalachians, the Puerto Rican nightwatchman, the Greek pastry-shop owner, Jesus Lopez the steelman. *Division Street*, vibrant with the class, racial, and cultural variety of that struggling city, is undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of oral history.<sup>56</sup>

The great cities have drawn the attention, if only because their social problems have been the most acute, but the majority of people continue to live in smaller towns. Although towns provide much more manageable subjects for community studies, sociologists and oral historians have so far taken little interest in them. The most brilliant insights have come as chance by-products: a factory portrait such as *Amoskeag* also gives us an American company town, a single life like *The Dillen*, the underworld of Stratford-on-Avon.<sup>57</sup>

More recently, in *Tales of the City* (1998), Ruth Finnegan focuses on different kinds of narratives about a New Town of the 1960s, contrasting the heroic stories of town planners and the media disaster tales of its artificiality and soullessness, with local residents' accounts of its humanity and ordinariness, while Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor look at different ideas of community in three Norwich housing estates. Shelley Trower explores the different perspectives of literature and oral history on particular places and landscapes, while Stephen Kotkin's

*Magnetic Mountain* is a massive multi-sourced account of a new industrial city in central Russia, which he sees as a window into the culture of Stalinism.<sup>58</sup>

However, the pioneering series of sociological studies from the 1920s by the Lynds of America's *Middletown* and Margaret Stacey's much later *Tradition and Change: A Study of Banbury* (1960) have had few followers; and while local small town histories exist drawing on interview evidence, there have been few of distinction. This alone made Melvyn Bragg's oral history of Wigton in Cumbria, *Speak for England* (1978), an important landmark. The social change in this part-agricultural and part-industrial town is set out through the voices of a cross-section of its people: miners and farmers, dog breeders and pigeon fanciers, councillors, schoolteachers, housewives, and shopkeepers. There are patchwork sections on particular periods: the Edwardian days dominated by the Big House on the hill with its peacocks; the young men who went to the First World War to fight under colonels who called them 'rubbish' and returned to the bewildered disillusionment and unemployment of the 1920s; the beginning of better times for many ordinary people at the end of the 1930s, and the subsequent post-Second World War move towards much greater comfort, security, and leisure.

Another section focuses on Wigton's chief factory, from its first keen pioneers to a present in which the labour organiser has become personnel manager, and a disillusioned shop-floor worker can harangue the rat-race of 'snakes', while a promoted apprentice finds his way round the problems of eating his first managerial lobster. There is also a set of eight much fuller individual lives. They include such characters as Dickie Lowther, semi-crippled ex-valet to the aristocracy, griffon-breeder, Scoutmaster, and ritualist. But in significant contrast to the city oral history, the tones of Wigton are generally less spectacular. The quiet push of working-class people towards improvement which Bragg documents is perhaps thus all the more significant for the urban historian.

## Family history

Turning now to family history, we find that among all aspects of social history it is perhaps here that the impact of oral evidence has been most critically important, enabling historians to consider key questions which were previously closed. It is no accident that very early there was a special Family History Issue of *Oral History*, which included articles on family limitation, child-rearing, courtship, and conflict between adults and adolescents. The potential for new approaches to the family was first demonstrated by anthropologists and sociologists. Many of the most notable community studies have been as much concerned with family, as titles such as *Family and Community in Ireland*, *Family and Kinship in East London*, or *The Family and Social Change* demonstrate; and these, like the family sociology of Lee Rainwater's accounts of American working-class marriage in *And the Poor Get Children*, also depend on rich life story evidence. From anthropology, too, there have been many outstanding accounts of family life. Some are based on single life stories, such as the Moroccan and Tanzanian

families of Henry Munson's *The House of Si Abd Allah* and Pat Caplan's *African Voices*, respectively.<sup>59</sup>

Less commonly, and most famously in Oscar Lewis's deeply moving portraits of Mexican families, such as *The Children of Sanchez* (1962), anthropologists worked with different generations in the same family. This has been a particularly rewarding approach in recent oral history work, ranging from our own studies of the transmission of intergenerational influences in families to Michael Gorkin's eloquent and sensitive work with generations of women in Palestine and El Salvador.<sup>60</sup>

One theme which became much easier to explore through oral history is the interaction between family and the economy. This was a central theme of my own *Living the Fishing*. Another striking instance, indeed a masterpiece of micro-history, is *The Seed Is Mine* (1997), Charles Van Onselen's painstaking reconstruction of the life of a South African sharecropper and his extended migrant family. Equally important has been the work of Tamara Hareven on the mill people of Manchester, New Hampshire. She was able to demolish another more widespread sociological assumption that the nuclear family corresponds to the needs of industrialised economies by showing the continuing effectiveness of the extended family, both as an instrument for migration and the supply of labour over long distances, and as a buffer in crisis. But she builds on other theories in *Family Time and Industrial Time* to draw out the complex way in which the family and economy interact and how the relationship among family structure, tensions between generations, and class consciousness is continually re-shaped by the moment in the cycle of economic boom and slump when each generation starts paid work. Her book has proved to be a conceptual landmark.

Another major aspect of family history is housing, which had been hitherto seen largely through the perspective of the landlords and builders who supplied it. But housing was also an important factor in family experience. Among the poor, crowding could shape family relationships, generating both togetherness and tensions. As Pat Flynn, a Scottish miner's daughter, remembered:

There wis ten in our family in the room and kitchen, includin' ma mother and father and ma Granny Loftus. We divided oorsels oot. It depended what age you were and what sex you were. They tried tae keep the boys away frae the girls obviously. Well, ah remember sleepin' wi' three brothers at one time in one bed ... And probably mum and dad wid sleep thegither, and there wis always somebody slept wi' the granny. As a lassie ah slept wi' ma granny often. All three brothers thegither, and two sisters and the granny maybe, and mother and father. They sort o' spread them oot wi' the double beds that ways as best they could ... W' the double beds there were plenty o' room for tae sleep a'heads up if we wanted. But occasionally ye used tae say, 'Oh, ah'll sleep at the bottom tonight'.<sup>61</sup>

Among the middle and upper classes, a house could become the symbol of a family's history, with a great deal of energy and money put into defending it. For the upper classes, this would typically be a large country house on a landed estate, but for the middle classes it was more often a holiday home.<sup>62</sup>

Childhood memories are one of the commonest forms of oral testimony. An attractive collection is Lynn Jamieson and Claire Toynbee's *Country Bairns* (1992), on childhoods in farmers' and farm servants' families from right across Scotland, while Angela Davis has traced changes and ambivalences in the experience of motherhood in middle England. Oral history has also opened hidden areas of upper-class family life. One early example was Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy's account of nannies as substitute parents in elite British families, a theme which Katherine Holden subtly re-explores in *Nanny Knows Best* (2013), tracing the dynamics of love and attachment while 'living inside the mother-nanny-child triangle'.<sup>63</sup>

It was the almost complete absence of direct witness of this kind from ordinary people which allowed leading family historians to propagate the very condescending notion that love between parents and children or between married couples was a novel, 'modern' development of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This view has collapsed with the more recent accumulation of evidence. One rare early glimpse of the intimacies of everyday family life in the Middle Ages was reconstructed by Le Roy Ladurie from the testimonies of shepherd families in the Pyrenean hamlet of Montaillou who were being investigated for heresy. Furthermore, Martine Segalen, drawing on the rich French archives of folk traditions, has powerfully argued against misreadings of proverbs and customs and re-asserted the crucial importance of love in French peasant family relationships.<sup>64</sup>

There have been similar re-interpretations of the falling birthrates from the mid-nineteenth century. The lack of direct evidence in Britain meant that in his influential attempt to disentangle the causes for the declining size of middle-class families in late nineteenth-century Britain, *Prosperity and Parenthood* (1954), J. A. Banks could only cite the opinions of medical specialists, novelists, and other writers, yet for all their evidence he was left with 'no idea' whether it could be taken as 'specifically representative of the actions and words' of wider social groups, or 'how most members of the middle classes ... had begun to think'. Historians nevertheless attributed the spread of family limitation to middle-class influence.<sup>65</sup>

Subsequently the oral history work of Diana Gittins on married life and birth control between the wars showed this assumption also to be socially condescending. She was able through interviewing to explore why women chose whether or not to have children, and how they learnt about the contraceptive means which they used. She demonstrated that working-class women got their knowledge from each other at work rather than through their middle-class contacts. Thus the diffusion theory, whereby family limitation was held to have

spread to the working classes through middle-class influence, was seriously misleading. Still more recent oral history work by Kate Fisher, interviewing both men and women, has shown how with many families, especially when the husband was the only earner, men could lead the couple's decision-making.<sup>66</sup>

There have also been new perspectives on youth, ranging from Errol Lincoln Uys' attractive combination of oral history with photos of American teenagers jumping on trains in their search for work in the Great Depression in *Riding the Rails* (2005) to Steve Humphries' provocative explanation of working-class delinquency as a form of family self-help, in *Hooligans or Rebels?* (1981). A striking new contribution, richly quoting and interpreting the experience of a hundred young British people growing up in different contexts over ten years, is Sheila Henderson, Janet Holland, and colleagues' *Inventing Adulthood* (2007): 'inventing', because the speed of change and contradictory pulls between independence and community makes it crucial for young people to think through a life plan for the future which can become the thread of their life story of the past.<sup>67</sup>

Beyond teenage, for most American or British young people up to the mid-twentieth century, came marriage. John Gillis has given us a notably rich account of courting and marriage ceremonies, *For Better, for Worse*, which makes much use of oral history in his later chapters. By contrast, Richard Werbner's *Tears of the Dead* gives telling details of relationships in a polygamous family in Zimbabwe. There are also accounts of marriage based on less consensual norms. Thus, Ji-Yeon Yuh describes how Korean women prostitutes could end up as American military brides, while Joanna Herbert gives moving testimonies of empty arranged marriages among Asian families in Leicester.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF ARRANGED MARRIAGE: ASIANS IN LEICESTER, ENGLAND

*BALBIR*: I felt that he was cold. I realised that when I'd seen his photograph, he had these *cold* kind of eyes and I said to my mother 'I don't like the look of that' and when I met him, when I'd seen him, he wasn't very sociable either because some people can break the ice and warm up to you. He was very quiet and the only time he spoke to me during sixteen years of marriage was when he wanted his dinner to be ready he'd be like 'dinner now'.

There wasn't any communication between us . . . I had *nobody*, I couldn't talk to my own mother because I wasn't on the same level as her.

*SUE*: I still never got to see the outside world, what it was like women going to work, bringing so much money, I never had enough money, I couldn't even buy, I couldn't even spend one pound. I didn't know how to cross the road, I didn't know from Belgrave area, how to get to Royal Infirmary when I was pregnant with my daughter. My husband was working shifts



in a factory . . . I didn't know how to cross the road, that you have to walk up to the crossing . . . I felt so helpless. I thought, 'Wait a minute . . . here I am, don't even *know* how to cross the road, heavily pregnant, how do I? If I get late my mother-in-law will get very cross' . . . I did feel really, really helpless, I don't know how I managed to get home.

Joanna Herbert, *Negotiating Boundaries in the City: Migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 94, 95. Copyright © Ashgate 2008. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Books UK.

More recently life story interviews have shown their subtlety and strength in exploring two other situations. One is adoption. Jean Lau Chin has recorded the stories of Chinese women who adopted children, while Ann Fessler recounts the experiences of American women who gave up their babies for adoption. Fessler is herself an adoptee, from a family of transgenerational adoptions, and her book opens dramatically with her own fourteen-year-long search for her birth mother. For many of these mothers, giving up their babies proved a lasting shadow across their lives. As Diane put it:

Your identity is formed in your teen years and if you take on this identity of a worthless, horrible, guilty person, then that's going to affect you your whole life. Guilt was always such a pervasive part of me. Not that I was sexual, or not that I was pregnant, but that I let somebody take my child. That's the guilt . . . It's in your cells, and in your guts, and in your consciousness, and in your heart.<sup>69</sup>

The consequences of marital break-up could also be very challenging for both children and parents, bringing losses and also new relationships. *Growing Up in Stepfamilies* (1997), a joint study by historians and therapists based on interviews with stepchildren now grown up, highlights not only the pain of loss and inadequate communication, but also the children's long-term resilience.<sup>70</sup>

Another equally fertile theme has been that of relationships between generations in relation to ageing. Here earlier British sociological research had highlighted the extent of isolation of the old, and this was interpreted as a consequence of the weakening of the extended family. But life history studies such as *I Don't Feel Old* and *Between Generations*, in which two or three generations in each family were interviewed, have re-emphasised the mutuality of social visiting, caring, and influence. Life history research on stepfamilies also shows the key role in caring and support provided by grandparents—indeed, despite the widespread myth of the decline of the extended family, because of longer life of the older generation combined with the rising instance of parental parting, the role of grandparents today is probably greater than at any time in the past.<sup>71</sup>

Equally crucially, through her long-sustained oral history research on three Lancashire towns, in which she has investigated the whole family cycle from childhood through marriage to old age, Elizabeth Roberts has decisively refuted earlier sociological suggestions that the exchange of help within families, including caring for the old, can be explained principally as a calculated response based on self-interest. She shows how help was frequently given where no return was possible, and how the carers, who were above all women, were much more influenced by social values about poverty and independence, and by their affection for those who turned to them in need, than by any rewards they might gain for themselves.<sup>72</sup>

### Women's history

Roberts' work is indeed primarily about women; and it leads us directly to another major field: women's history. Here again, the potential of oral evidence has been enormous. Women's history was ignored by most historians up to the 1970s, partly because women's lives have so often passed undocumented, tied to the home or to unorganised or temporary work, and so unrecognised by historians as having social or economic significance. This previous sheer neglect has given this whole field the excitement of a voyage of discovery. More recently there have been notable overviews, such as *Women's Oral History: The Frontiers Reader* (2002). There have also been some excellent accounts of the changing roles of women in particular societies, such as Jenny Beale on Ireland and Lynn Abrams on Shetland.<sup>73</sup>

From the start, one strong current has been the publication of collections of testimonies in order to bring out the hidden voices of women. Notable early instances include Sherna Berger Gluck's *From Parlor to Prison* (1976), on the lives of American suffragettes, and Mary Chamberlain's on women in a rural village, many of whom worked in the fields as well as at home: *Fenwomen* (1977). Many of the more recent collections have been from other cultures: Morocco, Egypt, and Latin America.<sup>74</sup>

Given the radical aims of these collections, it may seem paradoxical that one of the most popular of women's testimonies has in fact been the confessional tape-recorded life story of Princess Diana, published by Andrew Morton as *Her True Story—In Her Own Words*. But Diana was seen as breaking out of a royal palace silence. She could have fitted into some of these collections, which range from the very poor to wealthy women. And a continuing explicit aim of this kind of work has been to re-assert the 'dignity' of women in their varying cultures and contexts, and to 'break that ancestral silence', whether in the Middle East or the West.<sup>75</sup>

More interpretative women's oral history has focused especially on four overlapping themes: on work, on war, on feminism itself, and on sexuality. To this we should add a growing interest in the role of women in migration: in Europe, but also in Africa, as in Belinda Bozzoli's *Women of Phokeng*.<sup>76</sup>

On both sides of the Atlantic there have been a whole series of studies on women at work—in fields, in the fishing industry, in domestic service, in wartime, on the frontier, on assembly lines, between factory and welfare—on which we have already partly touched. But as essays like those in *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words* (1986) show, or Anna Bravo's writing on solidarity and loneliness among peasant women, this new history also challenges basic assumptions about social structure and inequality, gender roles, the 'nature' of men and women, the roots of power between them, and the moulding of consciousness through both home and work.<sup>77</sup>

War has interested women's historians especially as a time of change, when gender roles could be more flexible as women replaced men in the factories and fought with them in the resistance. In *Rosie the Riveter Revisited*, Sherna Berger Gluck showed how the influence of wartime experience depended crucially on the woman's age at the time. Several oral historians have documented the active role played by women in wartime struggles in Asia. Perhaps surprisingly, the more politicised women who joined the wartime resistance in Europe as freedom fighters usually found themselves in a context of continuing clear gender roles, even if, for those whose upbringing had been particularly restricted, 'the joy of a new literacy and freedom of movement' is especially strongly recalled. Penny Summerfield contrasts two types of women's war narratives: on the one hand, the 'heroic' narratives of those who welcomed the war effort, and strove to participate 'as close to the front line as a woman could get'; on the other, the 'stoic' narratives of women who saw war as something to be endured and 'just got on with it'. The stoics, unlike those with heroic memories, did not take up any new opportunities which the war offered, nor did they remember it as changing them personally.<sup>78</sup>

There is also an interesting cluster of work on the feminist movement itself, including a British and American collection on *Feminism and Autobiography* (2000), exploring the relationship in terms of both oral testimony and literature. Other books portray the unsuccessful movements in Civil War Spain and in the fight for Moroccan independence and yet others, the on continuing Latin American struggles. Sasha Rosencil's *Common Women, Uncommon Practices* (2000) offers a robust defence of what she calls 'the queer feminisms of Greenham', the publicity around the sustained women's anti-nuclear campaign outside the airbase. Perhaps most reflective is Luisa Passerini's *Autobiography of a Generation*, which subtly interweaves the testimony of other Italian 68ers with reflections on her own life, including terse comments from her psychoanalyst.<sup>79</sup>

While the political studies by oral historians focus mainly on left-wing movements, there is an equally important potential in understanding right-wing politics, particularly at the level of ordinary activists. Ronald Fraser's *Blood of Spain* (1979) gave a much more powerful account of the Spanish Civil War by showing the thinking and experiences on both sides. Another more recent example is

Kathleen Blee's remarkable account of American racist extremism in *Women of the Klan* (1991). Approaching the Ku Klux Klan as a women's historian brought her to a new perspective on political activism, leading her to contrast the highly publicised roles of men—including night riding, electoral corruption, and gang terrorism—with the quieter but perhaps more influential activities of women, such as consumer boycotts of shops or 'poison squads' spreading rumour and slander. She concluded that 'traditional (and male-centered) definitions of politics that focus on workplaces, electoral contests, courts, and organised voluntary associations ignore the political effects of actions and organizing in neighbourhoods or through kin and informal networks'.<sup>80</sup>

Sexuality has been a major theme for oral historians, and one for which spoken memory must be a special resource. It has been approached from a variety of angles, including for British women the liberating influences of war, and the position of the single unmarried woman within the family. There are also vivid oral history accounts of women's experiences in more complicated families in parts of Africa. Terri Barnes and Everjoyce Win describe how in Harare, by custom, both teenage marriage and multiple marriage were practised. Joanna Scott, the thirteenth wife of a court interpreter, explained how she felt about him: 'My husband was really old. A really old man. I used to refuse, saying I didn't love him'. Young Kenyan women who married in the expectation of having a child might rebel openly against their situation. But this was not a matter of sexual desire. Wangecit told Jean Davison:

Before I met my husband, I had an idea that I wanted a man who . . . knew how to take good care of a person. Knowing a man sexually was not in our thinking until the time when one was officially married.

But if he turned out to be sexually inactive at that time, we would not hide our displeasure—we would leave the man in broad daylight and return home. The reason is that as you are a woman, you do not want to stay married to one who is a woman like you. Sometimes, . . . the mother would tell her daughter to wait, and the second year, if there was still the trouble, the mother would advise the girl to come back to her own homestead. So she would go to her father's compound and take back all the goats and cows given for *ruracio*, returning them to the husband's father. The husband would be left holding his head in his hands, because he knew he could never marry again now that everybody knew his state.

The purpose of having sexual relations is to have a child. If the husband was inactive, it meant that you would not get a child. Any other time, sex was just like eating dirt.<sup>81</sup>

In Botswana cultures both men and women seemed content to make the adaptations needed for smoothing polygamy. Marjorie Shostak records in her

biography of Nisa very intimate details of such practices. On the one hand, older men sought to satisfy more than one wife:

My grandfather Tuka, my father's father, he married many women! . . . He would go to his first wife, then to his second wife, and then to his third. One slept alone, and the other two shared a hut together. He'd live with the two of them for a while, then stay with the other one, then go back to the two of them and live with them again.

Sometimes, when he was sleeping in the hut with his two wives, he'd get up very quietly to go to his third wife. His first wife, the oldest, would yell, 'Tuka, what are you looking for over there'? Because she was very jealous. So Tuka would leave his third wife and lie down with his first wife again. He'd lie there, waiting for her to go to sleep. When she started sleeping . . . he'd go over to his third wife and they'd stay together the rest of the night. When the rooster first crowed, he'd go back to the other hut. His first wife would ask, 'Where did you go'? And he'd say, 'Uhn. I just went to urinate'.

In a similar spirit the women could take lovers, but keep them secret:

[For a woman], the best insurance against complications arising from love affairs is not to be found out . . . It is also important to maintain some emotional restraint in relation to a lover . . . To succeed at and to benefit from extramarital affairs, one must accept that one's feelings for one's husband—'the important one', 'the one from inside the hut'—and for one's lover—'the little one', 'the one from the bush'—are necessarily different. One is rich, warm and secure. The other is passionate and exciting, although often fleeting and undependable . . . secret glances, stolen kisses.

But there are degrees of secrecy between couples. The most extreme cases come from Russia, where in the era of Stalin any personal secret could be dangerous if revealed, risking public denunciation. Here a married couple who had each been imprisoned in the gulag might never tell their partner. Even intimate conversation might be avoided: as one Russian entrepreneur told Tony Parker:

It is because of the great shortage of accommodation in Moscow and other such cities that there is a very restricted opportunity for men and women to speak to each other about intimate things without being overheard. So therefore all such conversations are conducted through the eyes only.<sup>82</sup>

Other African voices convey harsher aspects of sexuality. Jean Davison recorded rural Kenyan women describing their experience as teenagers of female circumcision, the blood and pain from the 'cutting' of their genitals by an older

woman of the family. But they also emphasise their pride in their admission to adulthood in the community. At the same time there were other bodily markings which most young women welcomed:

It was during this period of being young circumcised women that we began to make ourselves more beautiful. When we were younger, we had our two bottom teeth cut out with a knife and stick once the new ones grew in. Now we would file the upper ones, curving them to make them look better. We would also make these marks you see here [short, dark, vertical lines on the cheekbones—cicatures] with a razor and then put in soot from a cooking pot. Also we put marks on the breasts because we used to dance half-naked . . .

The marks on our breasts were made using the inside of the maize stalk . . . [One] side was lit with fire and when it healed it left a raised place. Yes, it was painful, but you did not feel it so much because you wanted it done to look beautiful.'

The circumcision ceremony itself began with washing in the river; then they put on special reed skirts and seed beads; and all day there was music, singing and dancing. There were no such cultural compensations with the assaults and rapes described by women from societies in turbulent conflict, such as Haiti, or war zones, as in the Zimbabwean guerilla war, when the freedom fighters expected villagers to serve them with both food and sex.<sup>83</sup> In Western Europe and North America, there were issues around the social control of sexuality of a different kind. Jenny Beale recorded touching experiences of sexuality in puritan Ireland, including the dilemmas of a nun who fell in love with a priest and discovered a form of celibate sexuality. Daniel Cline describes a local campaign in a Massachusetts community in the 1970s to help women find ways around the prohibition of abortion, supported not only by doctors but also by some clergy.<sup>84</sup>

There is particularly remarkable work on sexuality between British men and women by Kate Fisher, both solo and with Simon Szreter. Fisher's book focuses on the campaigns for birth control and marriage; their joint book deals with sexuality from the 1920s to the 1960s. This is a multi-sourced work with a very substantial oral history element, notable in drawing on the life stories and thus roles in contraceptive practice of both men and women. It is especially moving in telling how, despite the inhibitions and sexual ignorance of their era, and the taboo against discussing sex, men and women could find deep fulfillment in 'the giving of love'.<sup>85</sup>

There have also been a number of substantial oral history studies of lesbian and gay sexuality, as well as other sexual variations. Robert Bogdan's *Being Different* (1974) is the Chicago-inspired recorded life story of a transsexual, Jane Fry. Another outstanding instance is the account of working-class lesbians in

the bar culture of Buffalo, New York, from the 1930s to the 1960s, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993), for which the interviews ranged widely, both in terms of ethnicity and of orientation, 'butches' and 'fems', 'rough and tough' and upwardly mobile lesbians. The book maintains, contrary to the usual view that gay liberation originated entirely from middle-class homosexuals, that this working-class bar culture represented a pre-political phase of the liberation movement. There have also been collections of testimonies published from Scotland, California, and New York, including methodological reflections in *Bodies of Evidence* (2012), and most notably Carrie Hamilton's fine account of changing sexuality in Cuba.<sup>86</sup>

Equally striking is Luise White's history of prostitution in Nairobi since the 1920s. She has a broad canvas, relating prostitution to migration, urban housing, and family, but at the same time through her interviewing drawing a subtle view of prostitution from the inside, sharply contrasted with the typical outsider depiction of prostitution as degraded social pathology. She shows how, contrary to outsider views, the most prestigious prostitutes were the streetwalkers, *watembezi*, whom the women thought of as faster earners and safer, yet more adventurous, by contrast with *waziwazi* room-girls, or the *malaya*, who would give men a bath, tea, and food, and even an overnight stay: these were seen as too much like passive married women. This evaluation linked with their overall attitudes. There were no pimps in Nairobi, and prostitutes earned well. Many of them became house-owners in the city, or sent back valuable remittances to family farms in the countryside, so that indeed 'the work of prostitutes was family labour'. Thus in contrast to the typical outsider stereotype of prostitutes as social degenerates, helplessly exploited victims condemned to a despicable fate, she found the women proud to have led active and independent lives, and conveying their sense of self-respect and dignity. As Kayaya Thababu, a *malaya* woman from the 1920s, put it, 'At home, what could I do? Grow crops for my husband and father. In Nairobi I can earn my own money, for myself.'<sup>87</sup>

## Migration

Migrants, too, have to battle against stereotyping. Indeed, in this respect, the early Chicago studies, although an inspiring fieldwork model, originally set out to examine the problems of immigration as if they constituted a form of urban social pathology. Later both sociologists and historians using oral sources moved towards a more balanced approach, examining the ordinary experience of immigration, the process of finding work, the assistance of kin and neighbours, the building of minority community institutions, the continuance of previous cultural customs, and the creation of new mixed hybrid cultural forms and identities, including mixed marriages, as well as problems of racial tension and discrimination.



In particular, oral evidence can explore the images of another country, the local tips and stories, and the receiving network at the other end of the journey, which explain why people do not move randomly, but follow particular migratory paths: so that, for example, nine-tenths of those running Indian restaurants in Britain come from the single town of Sylhet in the Ganges delta. It can also suggest—particularly by setting the direct evidence of personal experience against the generalised message of the community's own oral tradition—how distorted are some of the commonly held explanations of immigrant social patterns in terms of racial or cultural inheritance rather than simple economics or class factors. It can show how importantly the migration experiences of men and women differ, and how this can be crucial in deciding whether or not to return home. And especially it can explore the role of the web of transnational family connections.<sup>88</sup>

Since the 1990s migration has remained a focus for oral history in different forms: ethnic community projects collecting testimonies, reminiscence drama with migrant children and elders, and researchers exploring both old and new issues.

One focus has been how the migration journey relates to the image of the new country before and afterwards. There are cultures, such as in the Caribbean, where migration is seen as a part of becoming fully adult, both seeing the wider world and finding well-paid work. Mary Chamberlain has traced the family connections through images transmitted between generations—'our family love to travel'—with the grandmothers caring for children left back home, and the suffering of the mother who encourages her children to leave, yet cries every day for the loss of them. By contrast, James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson wrote of 'Ten Pound Poms', who chose to migrate to Australia, did so as individuals, partly reassured by personal connections there and the image of Australia's 'British way of life'. They had a long sea voyage to ease their adjustment. This was very different from the experience of *The Ethiopian Jewish Exodus*, graphically recounted by Gadi BenEzer, a psychologist who has worked with Ethiopian Jews in Israel. The rural Ethiopian Jews had long dreamt of travelling to 'the Promised Land' and of returning to 'Yerusalem', but the journey was forced on them suddenly in the late 1970s. They had to travel illegally, walking through the mountains at night, harassed by bandits, and struck down by hunger and thirst: nearly a quarter of the twenty thousand migrants died on the journey. But when they finally reached Israel, they were dismayed to find that, because of their black skin, they were excluded from mainstream Israeli society, and the religious authorities even challenged the authenticity of their Jewishness: 'we suffered so much on our way here and *they* question our Jewish identity'.<sup>89</sup>

Other scholars have looked mainly at the experience of settlement. Keiko Itoh tells the story of the small but well-established Japanese community in London, which was badly hit by the Second World War; Joanna Herbert tells how Asian migrants to Leicester encountered racism, but also made friends;

and Carol McKibben portrays the Sicilian migrants to Monterey, California, and how they created a Santa Rosalia Festa to sustain their ethnic identity. Cecilia Menjivar gives a much more pessimistic picture of Salvadorian migrants to California, whom she sees as too poor to maintain effective kin networks.<sup>90</sup>

Migration oral history is not only transnational by theme, but often trans-disciplinary too. Thus Linda McDowell, a human geographer, uses oral history to trace the experiences of the Latvian women who fled by train and boat from the advancing Russian army and ended as 'volunteer' workers in Britain, while Catherine Delcroix, life story sociologist, has movingly portrayed the struggles of a whole Moroccan family in a southern French city.<sup>91</sup>

Gender is another focus. There is a cluster of studies of women and migration, including Alistair Thomson's 'intimate' history of four British women migrants to Australia, Tamar Wilson and Luz Gordillo on Mexican women in migrant families, and two edited international collections, one based on an elaborate comparative European project involving seven countries. Comparisons between men and women are less common. Mary Chamberlain argued, on the basis of her recordings in Barbados, that men spoke of themselves as autonomous promoters of migration, and women as not seeing themselves as active agents, while the Jamaican evidence—including our own—presents women in the leading role. It was seen as the woman's role to 'tink and plan' for the family. As one woman, now a Florida professional, put it, it was her mother who chose the path for her family: 'She's always the person with a very global vision.'<sup>92</sup>

Although age is as important an element in the migrant experience as gender, there is little oral history on this issue—which makes Katy Gardner's outstanding anthropological life story study of Bengali elders in Britain especially welcome. In this very different transnational culture she did find that adventurous 'migrant's tales' usually came from men, while women focused more on suffering and the pain of separation from family. And she very effectively presents the complicated identities that grow from transnationalism.<sup>93</sup>

Lastly, there is the evolution of new family forms through migration. Thus Mary Chamberlain in *Family Life in the Diaspora* imaginatively examines Caribbean speech and writing, finding transnational motifs, such as stories of family and community love, which she calls 'praise songs of the family'. In the past, migration meant separation and loss, usually for a lifetime, while today family members can chat any time over the phone or internet. Elaine Bauer sees contemporary change in London families as a form of creolisation, brought about especially through the growth of mixed black and white families. Some of the special features of Caribbean kinship, such as the emphasis on shared experience rather than blood, and the informal adoption of the children of other family members, have persisted in the migrant context. And in our own *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic*, we have found how members of the same family, scattered thousands of miles apart, continue to help each other, emotionally, financially, and in crisis. Thus when Louis May, Jamaican car worker in

Canada, heard that his grandmother had suffered a stroke, he had 'to grab everything' and the next night he was flying to Jamaica to support her. Once there, 'I had to lift her up like a baby . . . And what came back to me is what she used to do to me when I was a baby'.<sup>94</sup>

## Health and medicine

Stereotyping can also be an important issue, not just with migrants. Thus it has also been important in the history of medicine. The most striking recent example has been with the spread of the AIDS epidemic in America. First targets for the blame were gay men in California, but then AIDS began to spread into the heterosexual population, partly through bisexual patients who had come to New York from California. Ronald Beyer and Gerald Oppenheimer's powerful collection of memories, *AIDS Doctors*, conveys how doctors faced the disease with a mixture, on the one hand, of panic, of overwhelming fear, and on the other of professional opportunity, of being on the front line of the fight against a new disease.

### AIDS: DOCTORS REACT WITH FEAR AND EXCITEMENT

*Gerald Friedland (b. 1938), a young Harvard-trained infectious disease doctor, comes to work in the New York Bronx in summer 1981 and is shocked to soon discover female patients with AIDS:*

We had a few male patients who had female partners. The female partners were not drug users, so if they were at risk it was risk through sexual transmission . . . I had one of these sexual partners in clinic, and I'm about to examine her. I put my hands on her neck, and I feel these huge lymph nodes and [I'm thinking], 'Oh, shit, she's got it, it's the end of the world'. I mean, there are a limited number of gay men in the world, but many, many more heterosexuals . . . This was dread, the end of the world . . .

I used to have a dream . . . I was walking on Jerome Avenue, this train was going overhead, and the greengrocer stalls were all out, and there were lots of cars and trucks, but there were no people. They had all died of AIDS. I remember that dream.

*Donald Abrams (b. 1960), research doctor at San Francisco General Hospital:*

It was a tremendous situation to be faced with this mystery and to try to figure out how to get to the bottom of it. It was just a very challenging and exciting time . . . Every patient was offering something that was unique, and you really felt like you were on the frontier and

a pioneer. And I wondered, Could the practice of medicine be like this forever?

*Fred Siegal (b. 1939), a hermatologist at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital:*

Oh, it was tremendously exciting. Here we were riding the cusp of this fascinating wave of medicine and immunology. It was as if I had been created to be there for this.

*Gwendolyn Scott (b. 1938), a paediatrician at the University of Miami's School of Medicine:*

Because I like to solve mysteries, I found it very intellectually stimulating . . . It was very interesting and fascinating. But it was also very tragic. Absolutely.

Ronald Beyer and Gerald Oppenheimer, *AIDS Doctors: Voices from the Epidemic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 26–27, 34.

In the history of medicine there has been long-standing American activity, and more recently there have been many British projects in this field. They range from studies of scientific innovation and the development of new medical specialties to the role of women in medicine, the life stories of general practitioners, and histories of particular institutions—and hence also from intellectual to social history. In Britain this has been encouraged by the Wellcome Trust's support for training courses and also for the holding of 'witness seminars', group recordings of the memories of specialists on a variety of medical themes. The most common form is the recording of retired practitioners. This goes back to Saul Benison's recording of a virus researcher, *Tom Rivers* (1967). Since then there have been studies of cardiologists, anaestheticians, pathologists, geriatricians, general practitioners, hospital chemists, midwives, and critical care nurses, and a substantial project by Max Blythe for the Royal College of Physicians. Other projects, led by Gwendolen Safier's recordings of leading American nurses, focused on women's contributions to medicine, including Jacqueline Zalumas's work on critical care nurses, while a British project by Joanna Bornat, Leroi Henry, and Parvati Raghuram focused on how South Asians came to play a major role in the development of British geriatrics.<sup>95</sup>

Other approaches include histories of special forms of illness, such as Ronald Johnston and Arthur McIvor's study of asbestosis, *Lethal Work* (2000), or of particular institutions, such as Michelle Winslow and David Clark's attractive booklet on an East London hospice, *St Joseph's Hospice*, which combines quotations and striking photos with interesting discussion on issues such as pain. Among

those interviewed was Cecily Saunders, founder of the British hospice movement, and she describes touchingly how she developed a spiritual love relationship with a dying patient from Poland.

Alternatively, changing health practices can be viewed in the context of wider culture. An early instance of this was Virginia Berridge's research on the popular use of opium in the damp Cambridgeshire Fens.<sup>96</sup> With the spread of health services, of travel, of professionalised childbirth and dying, and also of alternative medicine and new health superstitions, medicine has infiltrated our daily lives, and there is room for much more historical work on this change. A pioneering instance of this approach, building on the work of Elizabeth Roberts in Lancashire, was Lucinda McRay Beier's *For Their Own Good* (2008), which traces English working-class health culture—such as practices for preventing infection, caring for children, media influences, and mutual aid—through ninety years of change.

Oral historians have also sought to give voice to those whose health issues are too often stigmatised or marginalised: HIV sufferers, or those with sight or mental health problems. Beth Omansky's *Borderlands of Blindness* (2011) is an interesting combination of autobiography and oral history. Revealing such memories may meet with strong resistance from those who fear their reputations may be tarnished. When Claudia Malacrida set about recording survivors of a former institution for 'mental defectives' in Alberta, Canada, the authorities blocked her use of their archives and tried to prevent her from contacting former residents. We are therefore particularly fortunate to have Diana Gittins' outstandingly full history of Severalls, a large mental hospital in Essex which was then closing. In *Madness in Its Place* (1997), she explores the hospital's working as a community, and how whole families became encapsulated in it as staff, but she also demonstrates the struggles over innovation, especially the pulling down of the walls between inmates and the outside world, and still more remarkably, how some of the hospital doctors continued to be so focused on research that for years they were willing to carry out operations on patients illegally.<sup>97</sup>

### **Religion, the arts, and popular culture**

We now turn to cultural history. Here there is clearly room for a stronger oral history contribution. Thus in the history of religion, oral sources can be used to distinguish the beliefs and practices of ordinary adherents from those of their leaders. It is possible also to examine the 'common religion', superstitions, and rituals at birth, marriage, or death of the nonreligious—by their nature, areas mostly out of the reach of recent institutional religious documentation. It is therefore surprising, as a recent cross-national study observes, that few oral history studies have made religion their 'central focus'. There have been studies, for example, on the conflicts between radical popular Christianity and traditional elite values in Botswana, and on how different generations of a Moroccan family use Islam in interpreting their experiences of change. And M. G. Smith has

given us a fine life story of a Caribbean preacher and diviner whose practices blended Christian Seventh Day Adventism with possession by the god Oshun and the African dance cult of Shang.<sup>98</sup>

Most other studies are from a Christian context in Britain and North America. Some have looked at particular roles, such as of folk preachers, nuns, or priests. Others take a broader sweep. Hugh McLeod has surveyed the practice of religion in late Victorian British working-class culture, and Mark Boyle the role of Irish Catholicism in Scotland. Alana Harris explores the changing relationship of English Catholicism to the family and the role of women.<sup>99</sup>

Some of the most striking insights come from minority religious cultures. Thus Janis Thiessen describes how Canadian Mennonite manufacturers used their religious principles to sustain their patriarchal labour practices. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis explores how religious practice changed for southern African Americans who migrated to the northern cities. Older migrants especially could recall fond and nostalgic memories of religion in their earlier lives. As Virginia Lacy put it:

Down home you got in the wagon early to go to church meeting. It started when someone sang a song. Everybody just sang, helped bring up the song and swayed with it. A lot of them they made it up as they'd go on. Feet tapping all the while. A prayer was said, and whoever could—would read from the Bible. You can be sure a saint'd make a song from out the prayer or what was read in the Bible. Long and deep down slow. After a time it would get so good—somebody'd shout. Then a shoutin' chorus came up—some shouting or clapping, and stamping or crying or groaning. Church went on and on like that in South Carolina. Them people had time!

And Portelli gives us beautiful examples in *They Say in Harlan County* of the Christianisation of ancient superstitions, such as serpent handling, or Pentecostal images of rebirth and ecstasy.<sup>100</sup>

In Britain the relationship between economic development and the religious ideologies of entrepreneurs and their workforces has long been a key subject of historical debate, and this provides a point where oral evidence can make a link with economic history. A re-evaluation of the arguments of Weber, Halévy, and E. P. Thompson on this issue is the focus of Robert Moore's *Pit-men, Preachers and Politics* (1974). This study of a Durham mining valley shows the role which Primitive Methodism, with its emphasis on individual self-improvement, backed by the paternalism of local pit-owners, played in inhibiting the growth of militant class consciousness among the miners, until its influence, along with the paternalism of the owners, collapsed in the face of the twentieth-century economic crisis of the industry. The account of religion, including the identification of those who were local adherents but not members of the chapels,

depends heavily on oral evidence, and the combination of a painstaking local reconstruction with a general theoretical argument makes this book a significant landmark.

A final perspective is to look at the decline of religion. In Soviet societies this was a deliberate aim of government. More recently there have been accounts both of surviving religious beliefs and practices, and of the impact of suppression, including a comparative study in Eastern Europe by Peter Coleman, Daniela Koleva, and Joanna Bornat. Orlando Figes, for example, cites a Russian woman's memory of her Jewish father's recantation of his faith in front of her brothers and herself, explaining 'that his way of life was not appropriate for modern times. He did not want us to repeat his mistakes, such as observing Jewish religious traditions'. In Britain, especially, religious practice and influence steadily waned without such direct pressures. Callum Brown's sensitive and reflective exploration of *The Death of Christian Britain* (2001) explores secularisation primarily as a cultural change, allowing people to cease attending church but still think along religious lines.<sup>101</sup>

In other aspects of cultural history, the contribution of oral history remains patchy despite its potential. There has been very little attention given to basic consumption and fashion, for example in dress or in food, an exception being a study of the rise of English supermarkets through 'shopper narratives', and also an oral history of the Tesco chain.<sup>102</sup>

In the history of education, the major contribution was made early by sociologists, such as Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden in their classic *Education and the Working Class* (1962), based on life story interviews from their own town of Huddersfield. Subsequently, few oral historians have focused on schooling, although it is often a theme in local studies. Very much on its own is Iona and Peter Opie's *The Lore and Language of School Children* (1959), which revealed an astonishing historical depth of oral tradition which then survived in the contemporary school playground.

Oral traditions and stories are a common element in dialect studies, which have gradually shifted from their earlier concentration on rural communities, most notably in the United States. Here there had been radical earlier folklorists in the southern states focusing on the legacy of slavery, such as Stetson Kennedy in Florida, and then, from the 1970s, a switch to a strong interest in urban language and oral modes.<sup>103</sup> As a result, studies of urban folktales and folklore and even folk preaching have been added to the already numerous publications concerning rural superstitions, storytelling, and crafts. Of these rural studies, two classics are Henry Glassie's *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* (1982) and the imaginative blend of social history, folklore, and anthropology offered by George Ewart Evans and George Thomson's *The Leaping Hare* (1972).

National Life Stories is now recording creative writers, and in terms of the visual arts, they have now interviewed more than three hundred artists, architects, and craftspeople. All these interviews are available at the British Library,



which has produced a series of CDs. Of these, *Artists' Lives* (1998) and *The Sculptor Speaks* (2010) give especially vivid insights. But there is surprisingly little overt use of oral evidence by biographers in this area. Among painters, exceptions include Lawrence Weschler's interviews with the conceptual artist Robert Irwin, and two biographies by Ian Collins on regional East Anglian painters, while there is also work on American Indian artists. John Peter has edited a collection of architects' testimonies, and there is an outstanding biography by Mark Girouard of James Stirling.<sup>104</sup>

There is by contrast a much more fully developed scholarship in the study of music and folksong. Here, thanks especially to the work of Edward Ives in New England, we now have not only studies of traditional song and its general historical context, but also social and musical biographies of individual singers. Recent examples include a collection by Joshua Jampol of leading figures in opera, and Brian Ward's book on American black music of the 1960s to 1980s, *Just My Soul Responding*. David Dunaway and Molly Beer have written on folk music revivals, and Loyal Jones has published an attractive biography of the Appalachian folk singer Bascom Lamar Lumsford.<sup>105</sup>

However, oral history has played a more influential role in shifting the focus from professional artists and musicians to amateur musicians and their audiences, in choral societies, or the northern industrial bands portrayed by Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden in *Working Class Community* (1972).

Since leisure activities of this kind rarely leave many records, they cannot be seriously examined without oral evidence. In terms of understanding popular audiences, a particularly interesting experiment was made at an exhibition at the National Gallery of an early version of Constable's 'Cornfield', organised by the Wimbledon School of Art. People from that area were encouraged to lend objects such as plates or embroideries that reproduced Constable's image, and these were shown alongside the painting. Visitors were then asked about their interpretation of the original painting, and how this related to their lives. The differences were remarkable. For example, in the picture there is a boy lying on the grass, and some people thought he was peacefully resting, while others believed he was dead, perhaps even murdered. And as for the landscape as a whole, one woman described it as quintessentially English, while for a Jamaican woman it recalled scenes in Jamaica—both from their childhoods. All this undermines any suggestion that paintings have a fixed meaning that art historians can proclaim.

Equally interesting is Ruth Finnegan's inspiring study of music in Milton Keynes, *The Hidden Musicians* (1989), which showed how a town of a hundred thousand, often seen as a cultural desert, has an astonishingly rich musical life, spanning all ages and classes, including over a hundred choirs, seven brass bands, twelve jazz bands, twelve folk groups, and dozens of youth and school orchestras—and what is still more striking, in all these genres new compositions were being created.

Finally, there is the broader study of leisure. This was imaginatively pioneered by Colin Ward, who also watched for signs of creativity in his studies of self-built housing, camping, and allotments. Other researchers have focused on Scottish popular variety theatre, early baseball, and racing—but there is opportunity for much more oral history work on such themes. Meanwhile, Andrew Davies has provided a notable overview of inner-city urban culture in his *Leisure, Gender and Poverty* (1992), in which he emphasises how much more restricted women's leisure was than men's. Women had less time and less money to spend, and their presence in the pubs was only ambivalently accepted. This was why the advent of the cinema as a new acceptable recreation for women with or without friends and family offered such a crucial new freedom.<sup>106</sup>

In conclusion, then, oral evidence can achieve something more pervasive, and more fundamental to history, than any single study. For while historians study the actors of history from a distance, their characterisations of their lives, views, and actions will always risk being misdescriptions, projections of the historian's own experience and imagination: a scholarly form of fiction. Oral evidence, by transforming the 'objects' of study into 'subjects', makes for a history which is not just richer, more vivid, and more heart-rending, but truer. People can—and do—write their own autobiographies as 'subjects' as well as being recorded. A comparison of two remarkable black American autobiographies is instructive. The first is *Dreams from My Father* by Barack Obama (2007): eloquent and thoughtful, and even including some of his African family's oral tradition.<sup>107</sup> The other is Theodore Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers: The Autobiography of Nate Shaw* (1974). Shaw was an illiterate Alabama sharecropper, born in the 1880s, and his story is based on 120 hours of recorded conversations: a story as moving as it is richly detailed. But these two life stories differ in one crucial sense. President Obama's life would have been fully documented, whether or not he wrote his autobiography. Nate Shaw would never have been known to American history, but for oral history. By such fruits, one would gladly see the method judged.

# 7

## Evidence

How reliable is the evidence of oral history? The question will be familiar to any practising oral historian or social researcher. Our first task here will be to take it at face value, and to see how oral evidence stands up when assessed and evaluated in exactly the same way that you evaluate any other kind of historical evidence. But the question poses a false choice. Oral sources can indeed convey reliable information, but to treat them as simply one more document is to ignore the special value that they have as subjective, spoken testimony and as communications between people.

### Historians and their evidence

We can begin by looking over the shoulder of 'The Historian at Work', as described by Arthur Marwick in his book *The Nature of History* (1970). First he lists the 'accepted hierarchy' of sources: contemporary letters, informers' reports, depositions; parliamentary and press reports; social inquiries; diaries and autobiography—the last usually 'to be treated with an even greater circumspection' than the others. In considering these sources, the historian must first ensure that the document is authentic: that it is what it purports to be, rather than a subsequent forgery. Next follows the crucial problem:

How did the document come into existence in the first place? Who exactly was the author, that is, apart from his name, what role in society did he play, what sort of person was he? What was his purpose in writing it? For example, an ambassador's report . . . may send home the kind of information he knows his home government wants to hear . . . Does a tax return give a fair account of real wealth, or will there not be a tendency on the side of the individual to conceal the extent of his possessions . . . ?

Or in using 'an exciting on-the-spot account' from an author or newspaper reporter, 'how can we be certain that in fact he ever left his hotel bedroom? These, and many others, are the sort of questions historians must ask all the time of their primary sources: they are part of his basic expertise'.<sup>1</sup> We may note that Marwick assumes that the authors of documents, like historians,

are male. More importantly, many of the questions which have to be asked of the documents—whether they might be forgeries, who was their author, and for what social purpose were they produced—can be much more confidently answered for oral evidence, especially when it comes from a historian's own fieldwork, than for documents. But little indication is given of how any of these questions, either of identification or of bias, can be answered. It is only in the case of medieval forgery that a specific expertise is mentioned. Otherwise the historian's resources are the general rules in examining evidence: to look for internal consistency, to seek confirmation in other sources, and to be aware of potential bias.

These rules are in practice less observed than they should be. The oral historian has a considerable advantage here, in being able to draw on the experience of another discipline. Social investigators have long used interviews, so that there is an abundance of sociological discussion on the interview method, the sources of bias in it, and how these may be estimated and minimised. Discussion of the bias similarly inherent in all written documentation is by comparison sparse. There are few guides to be found to the faults in any of the modern historian's favourite quarries.

Newspapers present a characteristic example. Few historians would deny the bias in contemporary reporting or accept what the press presents at face value, but in using newspapers to reconstruct the past much less caution is normally shown. This is because historians are rarely able to unravel the possible sources of distortion in old newspapers. We may know who the owner was, and perhaps identify his political or social bias, but whether the normally anonymous contributor of a particular piece shared that bias can scarcely ever be more than guessed. Thus the evidence that historians cite from newspapers suffers not only from the possibility of inaccuracy at its source, which is normally either an eyewitness account or an interview report by the journalist. It is also selected, shaped, and filtered through a particular, but to the historian uncertain, bias.

For example, Lawrence Goodwin has used newspapers and other written sources in combination with interviews in a political study of a county of East Texas, in which a whites-only Democratic party ousted the inter-racial Populists from power in the 1890s. It was impossible to tell from the local Democratic press either how this happened or indeed how the Populists had maintained support in the first place, and who most of their political leaders had been. Goodwin was able to discover three separate oral traditions from different political standpoints in the community which, when linked with press reports, showed that the Democratic counter-coup had been based on a systematic campaign of murder and intimidation. Not only had the newspaper deliberately omitted the political significance of what it did report, but some of the 'events' reported had not happened and were published as part of the intimidation. One politician who was reported dead, for example, in fact escaped his would-be murderers and lived another thirty years.<sup>2</sup> But Goodwin's refusal to rely on

newspaper evidence is rare among historians—and it has an interesting basis, as in an earlier career he was a journalist himself.

Most historians would feel themselves closer to the heart of things with correspondence. Certainly letters have the advantage of often being the original communication itself. But this does not free them from the problem of bias, or ensure that what letters say is true, or even that they convey the real feelings of the writer. They are in fact subject to the kinds of social influence that have been observed in interviews, but in an exaggerated form, because a letter is not often written to a recipient who is attempting to be neutral, as an interviewer would. Yet historians rarely stop to consider how far a particular letter has been shaped by the writer to meet the expectations of its envisaged recipient, whether a political enemy or a political friend, or a lover, or perhaps even the tax inspector. As Liz Stanley and her colleagues have observed from their work on the correspondence of Olive Schreiner, the South African author, suffragist, and political activist, surviving letters are just a fraction of those originally written. They are only a part of someone's wider letter-writing, and the letters that survive will usually be kept or archived by who received the letter rather than who wrote it, particularly if the receiver is viewed as historically famous. Hence we need to look not only at the text itself, but also at the context and the wider social process through which it was created, sent, and preserved.<sup>3</sup> And if this is true of letters, it is much more so of other primary sources, such as paid informers' reports or depositions—the statements of evidence made in anticipation of a possible court hearing. Each will have a context that needs to be understood.

Printed autobiographies are another very commonly cited source. Here the problems of reliability are more generally acknowledged. Some are shared with the life history oral interview. In A. J. P. Taylor's view, 'Written memoirs are a form of oral history set down to mislead historians' and are 'useless except for atmosphere'.<sup>4</sup> But they lack some of the advantages of the interview, for the author cannot be cross-questioned, or asked to expand on points of special interest. The printed autobiography is a one-way communication, its form usually following the conventions of a literary genre and its content selected with the taste of the reading public in mind. It cannot be confidential. If it is intimate, it is more in the self-conscious, controlled manner of an actor on the stage or in a film. As a public confession, it rarely includes anything which the author feels is really discreditable. In those cases when it is possible to compare a confidential interview with a life story written for publication, there seems a consistent tendency to omit some of the most intimate detail, to forget the trouble with unruly children further down the street, for example, which can be much more revealing than the rosy generalisation that 'Children had more respect for their elders then'. Nevertheless, just because it is printed rather than recorded on tape, many historians would feel happier citing a published autobiography than an interview.

Many of the classic sources for social historians, such as the census, registrations of birth, marriage, death, public inquiries such as Royal Commissions, and social surveys like those of Booth and Rowntree, are themselves based on contemporary interviews. The authoritative volumes of Royal Commissions rest on a method that was shaky even when a Francis Place or a Beatrice Webb was not at work manipulating witnesses behind the scenes. They used a peculiarly intimidating form of interview, in which the lone informant was confronted by the whole committee—just like a widow seeking out relief who faced the Board of Guardians.

Most basic social statistics are also derived from human exchanges and consequently rarely offer a simple record of mere facts. Emile Durkheim believed, when he wrote his classic study *Suicide*, that it was possible to treat ‘social facts as things’: as immutable, absolute truth. But it is now accepted that the suicide statistics that he used vary as much with the degree to which suicide was regarded as a social disgrace to be covered up, as with the actual rate at which people killed themselves.<sup>5</sup> Similarly we know—from other, retrospective interviews—that the marriage registers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century grossly underestimate the marriage rates of those younger age groups who should have obtained parental consent to marry. Those who thought their parents might object simply misstated their ages to the registrars. The later figures show that the younger true rates were double those recorded at the time. Very much in the same way, in the 1990s, when the National Child Development Study’s cohort, who had been followed from their birth in 1958, were re-interviewed at the age of thirty-three, the results showed up twice as many retrospectively remembered instances of parental separation or divorce in their childhood as could be traced from re-examining the earlier interviews: a clear reflection of the degree of shame which had been felt during their childhoods by their parents.<sup>6</sup>

Other statistics turn out, on closer investigation, to be equally influenced by social or political attitudes. For example, the statistic used to calculate ‘excess deaths’ at Mid Staffordshire Hospital Trust was a hypothesis based on national averages of mortality rates when individual hospitals were recording clinical data differently. It suggested that ‘400–1200’ people had died from avoidable causes between 2005 and 2009. But it could not demonstrate any real cases of particular people who should not have died. Nevertheless, it became central to a campaign led by grieving relatives and parts of the media so that the hypothetical statistic became part of a national debate stoked by those who sought radical change to the National Health Service, with the prime minister apologising to patients and relatives.<sup>7</sup>

Figures for the proportion of the workforce described as skilled show startling discrepancies that are explicable only as social points of view: thus the census statistics, based on self-report, have remained high and slightly rising, while those from employers’ returns have plummeted. Similar problems affect even the recording of physical facts such as housing. The census definition of

‘a room’, used for measuring overcrowding, was a social one, which determined the exclusion of sculleries, and how substantial a partition was required before one room was counted as two. But social historians, perhaps because they have come to statistics relatively recently, much too easily fall into Durkheim’s trap of treating them as ‘things’.

This is true even of historical demography. Here, surely, one might hope to find historians dealing with hard facts. But take the table of ‘Completed Family Size by Year of Marriage’ from 1860 to 1960 confidently printed by E. A. Wrigley in his *Population and History* (1969). The table is based on various sets of retrospective interviews with mothers, and assumes their accuracy in remembering the number of live births that they had. But no allowance is made for the numbers of those children born who died in infancy or early childhood, so that the table does not measure the average number of children actually reared—the ‘completed size’ of family as experienced by its members. Because of high child mortality, the average size of family before 1900 was much smaller than the table suggests, and never actually as high as the so-called mean completed family size of the tabulation. In other words, ‘completed family size’ is a demographer’s abstraction, not a social or historical fact. Statistically minded historians and sociologists have ignored this. They have displayed no awareness that while the trend in the table is beyond dispute, the actual figures—however critical for population studies—are not. They are estimates, which have been subject to significant revisions in recent years by the Registrar General, even for the years before 1914.

Social statistics, in short, no more represent absolute facts than newspaper reports, private letters, or published biographies. Indeed, in some contexts they can be shown to be much less reliable than retrospective memories. For example, as Xun Zhou has shown, during the 1958 Great Leap Forward in China, local Communist cadres were so keen to fulfill their targets (and so help their own careers) that they grossly over-recorded both industrial and agricultural production figures, and this false information made a major contribution to causing the disastrous famine years which followed.<sup>8</sup> So just like recorded interview material, all these sources represent, either from individual standpoints or aggregated, the social perception of facts, and are all in addition subject to social pressures from the context in which they are obtained. With these forms of evidence, what we receive is social meaning, and it is this which must be evaluated.

Exactly the same caution ought to be felt by the historian faced, in some archive, by an array of packaged documents: deeds, agreements, accounts, labour books, letters, and so on. These documents and records certainly do *not* come to be available to the historian by accident. There was a social purpose behind both their original creation and their subsequent preservation. Historians who treat such finds as innocent deposits, like matter thrown up on a beach, simply invite self-deception. It is again necessary to consider how a piece of evidence was put together in the first place. Thus, for example, official information from



School Board and County Council records does not suggest that women teachers were required to resign after marriage before the 1920s, when this became an official policy, but records indicate this was the consistent practice. Yet individual life stories document quite frequent requests to resign on marriage before 1914, as well as appointments of married women to posts during the operation of the bar. Similarly, but much more recently, Johnston and McIvor have shown how, despite the introduction of new laws to protect workers handling asbestos, actual workshop practice has been little affected, so that workers have remained seriously at risk of lethal disease.<sup>9</sup>

At another level, even such apparently accidental social documentaries as photographs and films are in fact quite carefully constructed. Indeed, the pioneering filmmaker John Grierson, who coined the term 'documentary', was especially known for his film *Drifters* about the North Sea herring fishermen, vividly conveying small boat fishing in the face of the elements, yet suggested that film was propaganda. His example was followed in Second World War Britain when almost all the sound background to film was faked in order to enhance the reality of what was shown. Similarly, visual images can be more fruitfully understood and interpreted when linked with literary and other sources. For example, with photographs, on rare occasions one can discover how for the 'casual' family snapshot, everybody in the picture was forced to change out of their normal clothing. As Audrey Linkman argues in her study of photography and death, photographs also play an important role in families during periods of mourning, providing a focus for telling the life story of a deceased person, determining how the person will be visualised and continue to be remembered, as well as being a focus for emotional expression.<sup>10</sup>

Equally important, social images of 'respectable' or 'happy families' determine what photographs are *taken*. They determine similar decisions about what is *kept* for the album. And the same kind of weeding shapes the public archive. The process of discarding, the systematic, if half-conscious, doctoring of the record sets, is the standard practice in Western countries. An extreme example relates to the deaths in custody of prisoners involved in the so-called Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya during the 1950s. Documents proving that eleven men had been beaten to death by prison guards and that there was systematic abuse at Hola prison camp were suppressed for decades, hidden in the UK National Archives. However, once those files were discovered, it also became clear that key incriminating documents had already been destroyed.<sup>11</sup> One can only refute, as thoroughly misleading, Royden Harrison's assertion that written archive sources, 'the type of evidence upon which historians set the highest store', possess a special superiority over oral material, because they constitute 'a kind of primary evidence which takes the form of pieces of paper which have been bequeathed to us unintentionally, unselfconsciously; secreted by institutions or by persons in the course of their practical activities'. Contrary to his assertion, this is 'a matter of some superstitious prejudice in favour of the written over the spoken word'.<sup>12</sup>

## Interviewing the past

The true distinctiveness of oral history evidence arises from quite different reasons. The first is that it presents itself in an oral form. It is important to remember that the conventional one-to-one interview is but one of a variety of possible oral forms. Indeed, this is a key part of the early history of oral history itself, which has been explored and debated by many notable anthropologists, including Jack Goody and Ruth Finnegan. Particularly significantly, drawing in *Narrating Our Pasts* on her own West African field experience, Elizabeth Tonkin has shown how the content and form of memory are strongly influenced by the social context in which it is produced, including particularly the type of performance or genre, and the expectations of the audience. Her call for us to look equally closely at the range of Western contexts of oral communication—from pub stories and funeral reminiscences to academic perorations—indicates a particularly promising new path for oral history work.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever its original context, an oral form of record brings both drawbacks and also advantages. It takes far longer to listen than to read, and if the recording is to be cited in a book or article, it will need to be transcribed first. On the other hand, the recording is a far more reliable and accurate account of an encounter than a purely written record. All the exact words used are there as they were spoken; and added to them are social clues, the nuances of uncertainty, humour, or pretence, as well as the texture of dialect. The recording conveys all the distinctive qualities of oral rather than written communication—its human empathy or combativeness, its essentially tentative, unfinished nature. Because it will remain exactly the same after being published, a printed text cannot be permanently refuted; that is why books are burnt. But a speaker can always be challenged immediately; and unlike writing, spoken testimony will never be repeated in exactly the same way. This very ambivalence brings it much closer to the human condition. Paradoxically, even through freezing speech in an audio recording—as well as more obviously through transcribing—some of this quality is lost.

Nevertheless, the oral interview provides a far better and fuller record than can ever be found in the scribbled notes or filled-up schedule of the most honest interviewer, or still less in the official minutes of a meeting. We have seen earlier how the ‘doctoring’ of official records has become so accepted that even the Cabinet Minutes document less what happened in the Cabinet, than ‘what the Civil Service wishes it to be believed happened’. This is equally true at the humblest level of the parish council. George Ewart Evans first became ‘sceptical of official records’ while he was himself a local councillor. ‘Not that there was any blatant inaccuracy . . . But since the time of the meeting so recorded, a selective intelligence had been at work, omitting almost everything that did not contribute to fortifying the main decisions reached’. The result was a set of minutes ‘streamlined to the point of appearing to be the record of a different meeting’.<sup>14</sup> In the same way, the notes of the interviewer seek to contribute to

the survey's hypothesis, to fill in the blanks in the schedule. Or the record of an 'exchange of views' between politicians is purged of its damaging passages and slips. The uniquely telling accuracy of the recorded interview, as evidence, needs less arguing since first Nixon tripped himself with it over Watergate, and then Princess Diana and Clinton were successively caught by taped phone calls. And in debates and criminal trials over phone hacking, it is once again clear that the pivotal evidence comes from the recorded spoken word.

Clearly, in these instances, since the original communication was oral, the oral recording provides the most accurate document. Conversely, when the original was itself a written communication, as in a letter, that written letter must remain the best record. However, the distinction is commonly less clear, because we communicate through both means. Sometimes a 'sacred' moment defines a particular form as authoritative: the judge pronounces a sentence, but a death warrant is signed; a priest says mass, but an international agreement is signed as a treaty. But what of a letter, originally dictated to a secretary, checked through reading back, discovered by a historian in the recipient's private papers, and quoted aloud to students attending a history lecture? Or the private recollections of a person, widely read in recent history, recorded at an interview, transcribed, and returned with written comments? Or the particularly puzzling practices of the UK law courts, where proof is argued out through oral testimony and debate, and written documents are read aloud; yet, quite inconsistently, their own proceedings are never recorded except in paraphrase by a clerk, and judges tend to take more account of written than oral evidence, as if the oral performance were a merely rhetorical drama justifying truths conveyed on paper? Certainly in each case there are both oral and written links in the chain of transmission, and either can modify or corrupt the original. And in none is it obvious which the original document is.

For some historical eras one can be more confident. Thus even after the Reformation in Europe, the principal means of communication was oral. People in general perceived the world as much through the sound of fellow human beings, or animals, and also through smell, as with their eyes. For this era, the document is normally a subsidiary record. With the spread of literacy, and the increasing use of the letter, the newspaper, and the book, the dominant means of communication became the written or printed word. The paper document could then be primary; word of mouth became a subsidiary form. Today the printed word has again been displaced by a more powerful means of audio-visual communication, in television and film. The visual-verbal form has thus in turn become subsidiary; and as the phone, now an audio-visual recording device itself, has generally replaced the letter, the original in most key exchanges between individuals—the internet playing a key role in this through sites such as YouTube and Vimeo—has become once more the oral communication. There are, of course, in each of these stages, differences between social classes, and between subjects of communication. But the main point is that the original of

evidence is sometimes oral, and sometimes not, and equally may or may not present itself, after transmutations, in the same form, and neither oral nor written evidence can be said to be generally superior—it depends on the context.

All this makes it sometimes difficult to distinguish between oral history and contemporary journalism. Mark Feldstein, who has conducted both types of interview, oral history and journalistic, talks about the relationship as that of “‘kissing cousins”, related but separate, whose very similarities showcase their differences’. He advocates each sharing from the other. In the 1980s he interviewed migrant sharecroppers whose life stories bore a chilling resemblance to firsthand experiences of US slavery collected for the 1936–38 Federal Writers’ Project. Though both types of interview seek accuracy, they experience different constraints. Oral historians depend on who has survived, while journalists are limited by publishing deadlines and the views of their publishers. Each conceives the interview differently. The oral historian typically seeks to be ‘gentle’ and sometimes ‘indirect’ in questioning, giving the interviewee an opportunity to perform. By contrast, the journalist, whether from print or television, may seek to share the stage, encouraging a dialogue that may sometimes develop along combative lines, or mutual appreciation, in various ways engaging the interest of a third party: the audience. Thus Alan Dein, a radio journalist, remarks, ‘I think the interviewee responds well to my performance’.<sup>15</sup>

The evidence of oral history is, however, normally distinctive in being typically retrospective over a longer time span. But the audio recorder makes it possible to take statements during or immediately after an event, so that the boundary between journalism and oral history has been tested in recent years following the aftermath of major events. The Columbia Center for Oral History, for example, began interviewing people affected in different ways by the destruction of the World Trade Center within days of the event on 11 September 2001. For its work, described as a ‘longitudinal project with the objective of gathering as many different perspectives . . . as possible’, the Center had interviewed 440 people within a year, and 220 more over the next two years. In all, the Columbia Center ran five projects on 9/11, with the aim of including ‘a broad spectrum of ethnic and professional categories, including those who were discriminated against in the aftermath and those who lost work or were unable to work’. Since then at least two anthologies of 9/11 oral history interviews have been published independently of Columbia.<sup>16</sup>

Rather different, and it seems more controversial, were the projects set up amongst refugees from the effects of Hurricane Katrina, which destroyed large parts of New Orleans, Louisiana, between 23 and 30 August, 2005. Again, almost immediately, oral historians had begun interviewing in Red Cross shelters and dispersal centres in nearby counties and states. Some interviewers claimed that they were working with ‘therapists’ and ‘counsellors’. Though some began with confidence, others were less sure. There was concern about the ethics of interviewing people dealing with relocation and the dispersal of family members

and there were calls to 'allow time for reflection', to allow people 'time to put their lives back together ... They are still "in the midst" of their story'.<sup>17</sup>

Two other projects with contrasting approaches set out to provide a record of protest in the days leading up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Ian Sinclair reveals through recordings made ten years later the dynamics and political infighting that accompanied the build-up and staging of the largest political protest in London's history. Neil Rafeek and colleagues interviewed participants in a large demonstration in Glasgow on the same day in February 2003. Each interview claims to be oral history. The Glasgow group argues the case for 'recording the present' because 'it will soon be history', a history that they say should foreground the experiences of participants. Even so, while still encapsulated within the event, the narrators are not yet able to relate what they record to differing perspectives. Nor can they draw on remembering and reflection, which at a later point, as Sinclair's book shows, can add both information and subtlety to the interpretation of the event.<sup>18</sup> It is certainly worthwhile for oral historians to use their skills to record contemporary events, including disasters, but this type of work becomes genuine oral history only if it incorporates a time dimension, both through recording people's lives before and up to the event, and by giving them time to reflect, whether soon afterwards or later on.

### Memory and remembering

Of course, most written sources—whether from newspapers, court hearings, Royal Commission interviews, or committee minutes—are also retrospective. Neither contemporary nor historical evidence is a direct reflection of physical facts or behaviour. Facts and events are reported in a way which gives them social meaning. The information provided by interview evidence of relatively recent events, or current situations, can be assumed to lie somewhere between the actual social behaviour and the social expectations or norms of the time. But with interviews which go back further, there is the added possibility of distortions influenced by subsequent changes in values and norms, which may perhaps quite unconsciously alter perceptions. With time we would expect this danger to grow.

In the same way, over time the reliance on memory apparently becomes more salient. To understand memory and to consider what oral historians need to know about its reliability and variability, we can fortunately turn to the literature of the psychology of memory, of neuroscience, and also of gerontology, for help. Neuroscientist Steven Rose points out that while our bodies change throughout our lives, '... every molecule ... is replaced many times over, cells die and are replaced ...' yet '... memories remain'. In recent years, brain researchers have made enormous progress in understanding how brains work, how they develop, where memory is located, and how it is affected when assaults occur, following accidents, or as illnesses develop. Psychologists have similarly brought about new understandings of memory, seeing it as core to

how we define the mind and thus ourselves, with studies both in laboratory and real life situations. In Rose's view, brain, body, mind, and social cultural context are inseparable, as each interacts with the other through physiological processes, the effects of emotional states, and our subjective understanding of the world around us, past, present, and future.<sup>19</sup>

Historically, memory has been valued as a source of information, aiding survival, providing the basis for moral judgement as much as practical guidance. The earliest surviving study of memory, by Aristotle, followed by other writers, saw memory as a resource of images to be called up and consulted. In the broader scheme of things, this idea of memory's connectedness to the past, and by implication to the future, is suggestive of a comforting sense of continuity and presence, even immortality, for the individual. Ideas of what memory is and how it works have changed considerably over the last hundred years and particularly in recent decades.<sup>20</sup> Late nineteenth-century researchers, psychologists such as Ebbinghaus and James, wanted to identify different kinds of memory, focusing on how long items might be remembered and what led to losses of memory. Their studies were always laboratory-based and were paralleled by medical scientists interested in illnesses that led to memory loss; Alzheimer's disease, for example, was identified and named at this time. However, it was not until the 1930s that neuroscientists began investigating electrical impulses in the brain, setting in train a whole field of interest in identifying what physical changes occur within the brain to support memory formation.

Twentieth-century psychologists, coming from a different direction but with a similar interest in finding out how and when memory develops, what part it plays in learning and in recognition, investigated the durability and persistence of remembered facts and images and became increasingly interested in how memories might be heightened, or distorted, under the pressure of war or exposure to unusual and cruel treatment. The focus on learning and development led to studies of childhood memory and its distinctive qualities and an increasing interest in explaining unusual cases. For example, the case of Shereskevskii—a patient of the Russian neuropsychologist Alexander Luria who was able to repeat mathematical formulae that made no sense when he was asked to recall them fifteen years later, after a brief reminder—came to have increasing fascination. The idea that memory might be shaped or trained goes back to the Greek and Roman philosophers, who divided memory into 'natural' and 'artificial'. Natural memory was something they saw as requiring no explanation, a straightforward characteristic of being human. Artificial memory, on the other hand, could be improved, developed, and summoned up through various techniques of recall.

In a search for classification and to understand what are now recognised to be many more types of memory, experimental psychologists and neuroscientists now divide memory up into the classification set out in the table on opposite.

| Memory types and definitions*  |  |   |   |
|--|--|---|---|
| Iconic or echoic memory  | Working memory   | Long-term memory divides into declarative and procedural memory   |   |
| Brief storage of visual information (iconic) or auditory sensory memory  | Memory of very small amounts of information for only a few seconds; helps to keep things going when carrying out complex tasks | Declarative   | Procedural  |
|  |  | Declarative or explicit memory is consciously recalled. Declarative memory divides into episodic and semantic memory and both contribute to autobiographical memory               |   |
|  |  | Episodic  | Semantic  |
|  |  | Recall of a specific episode or events experienced at a particular place or time  | Knowledge of the world and how it works. This could be an accumulation of remembered episodes or something like remembering the times table or the days of the week |
|  |  | Autobiographical  |   |
|  |  | Memory of episodes from across an individual's life span includes flashbulb type of autobiographical memory of a particular event felt to be important or personally significant. |   |
| * Adapted from Alan Baddeley, Michael Eysenck, and Michael Anderson, <i>Memory</i> (Hove: Psychology Press, 2009); Gillian Cohen and Martin Conway, eds., <i>Memory in the Real World</i> , 3rd ed. (Hove: Psychology Press, 2008). With thanks to Steven Rose for his help with this table. |  |   |   |



The different types of memory have been tested and observed in laboratory and real life situations, and although the broad classification is now accepted, there are continuing debates about how they are formed, how they are sustained, and how they relate to each other. For example, some psychologists suggest that episodic and semantic memory are not easily separated and that they are interdependent and interactive. A particular event, say a ninetieth birthday party, will be encoded as episodic memory. But our semantic memory, what we know about ninetieth birthday parties in general and the individual people who would have attended this event, our own age, the time of year and place, and the type of food, provides a context that informs our remembering of the particular event and helps to place it in time and space. Studies suggest that the way in which people remember events is by using indirect prompts, for example by recalling the weather or another event that they can fix on. This has led observers to conclude that episodic and semantic memories may be encoded in different parts of the brain, but as they are re-remembered and repeated, they become interdependent and connected so that all this information together becomes the memory of the event.<sup>21</sup> Researchers now also recognise the lability, or instability, of memory: each time a memory is recalled, it once again becomes open to change and reconstruction, so remembering the first day of school is actually remembering the last time it was remembered. Thus autobiographical memories themselves become transformed over time.

The classification of types of memory is interesting, but how useful is it to oral historians? We perhaps do not need to know about the detailed biochemistry of the human brain, which amino acids or proteins we should be identifying and following, nor do we necessarily need to know about the effectiveness of particular probes used by psychologists in assessing memory performance. Knowing that there are different types of memory is helpful and is a basis for recognising that, as Steven Rose argues, 'memory . . . has to be understood as a property of the entire brain, even the entire organism'.<sup>22</sup> However, that there might be differences in how people remember, and forget, over a lifetime or in response to sudden unexpected events and experiences, sounds more like the territory of oral history.

Memory researchers Martin Conway and Christopher Pleydell-Pearce see autobiographical memory as being of 'fundamental significance for the self, for emotions, and for the experience of personhood . . . enduring as an individual, in a culture, over time'.<sup>23</sup> Autobiographical memory has three possible functions: providing a guide to behaviour now and in the future; supporting social connections through sharing memories with others by informing and educating and encouraging closeness; and for personal significance as a means to defining the self as it 'is, has been, and can be in the future'. This last function may mean that for 'coherence with current and central aspects of the self, memories may be altered, distorted and fabricated'.<sup>24</sup> Time frames play an important role in autobiographical memory. They help to organise chronologies and position the

scripts and scenarios, which typically structure what we remember into themes such as work or relationships, and into time sequences of activities and key events over a lifetime.

Even allowing for the distorting effect of a search for coherence, which psychologists have identified, there are differences throughout life in how we remember and these may also affect the pattern and structuring of autobiographical memory. Thus the earliest childhood memories are rarely formed before the age of five, and are not linear but are snapshots of smells, sights, and other sensory inputs. Before the age of five, the limits of language and expression will restrict what a child can understand and what she or he may want to communicate. However, there are cultural differences, with children in the USA having earlier memories than those in China; the mother, who helps with joint reconstruction, plays an important role. Robyn Fivush argues that in this way autobiographical memory is both individual and social in its development and construction. Recording mothers and children, she identifies how children learn to remember and also what to remember, as in this example of a mother talking to her forty-month-old child:

*Mother:* And what else happened at the celebrations?

*Child:* I don't know.

*Mother:* We did something special with all the other children.

*Child:* What was it?

*Mother:* There was a whole lot of people over at the beach, and everyone was doing something in the sand.

*Child:* What was it?

*Mother:* Can't you remember what we did in the sand? We were looking for something.

*Child:* Umm, don't know.

*Mother:* We went digging in the sand.

*Child:* Umm, and that was when um the yellow spade broke.

*Mother:* Good girl, I'd forgotten about that. Yes, the yellow spade broke, and what happened?

*Child:* Um, we had to um dig with the other end of the yellow bit one.

*Mother:* That's right. We used the broken bit, didn't we?

*Child:* Yeah.<sup>25</sup>

Experiments and observations show that children have prodigiously strong abilities to remember but that, as this example shows, their memory is idiosyncratic. As children grow older, autobiographical memory begins to *solidify*. The intensity with which these memories are recorded between the ages of ten and thirty and their ease of availability for retrieval later in life is described as the 'reminiscence bump'. Various explanations for this have been advanced; for example, that these are memories of first-time experiences that are new and

unusual. But perhaps the most convincing is that the period of late adolescence and early adulthood is when the self is becoming consolidated around the idea of who we are, including our philosophies of life and beliefs.<sup>26</sup> Thus the Dutch historian of psychology Douwe Draaisma analyses the way time is remembered, suggesting that the detail of memory when we are young makes time feel as if it went much more slowly then, whereas after fifty it feels as if time speeds up, as there are fewer details of memory, and consequently there are fewer markers from which to work out how time has passed.<sup>27</sup>

Later in life, the ability to remember changes, perhaps because the brain is affected by the loss of cells that are not replaced. It seems that mild memory loss later in life is normal, and most people find ways to deal with lapses, such as losing keys or forgetting names or words. In the brain, too, where the frontal lobes are the most common site of change, neuroscience suggests that older adults compensate by using the frontal lobes differently. Older people perform less well in laboratory experiments that test working memory. However, in the real world these findings are not so easy to replicate and it seems that social factors, such as the ability of older adults to compensate and collaborate in the face of cognitive difficulties, can have a positive effect.<sup>28</sup> Memory and how it is used continue to change throughout life.

The final stage in the development of memory commonly follows retirement or other age-related changes, or in very late life. This is the phenomenon recognised by psychologists as 'life review'. Erik Erikson, with his theory of eight developmental stages, is perhaps the only classical psychologist to put forward the idea that people continue to learn and develop throughout their lives. His final life stage, to which he gave the title 'Integrity vs. Despair', presupposes that older people seek some kind of resolution which gives a coherent shape or 'integrity' to their whole life. Those who are not able to do this may feel that their life has been a failure: hence 'Despair'. Robert Butler, a psychogeriatrician, argued that life review should be encouraged, seeing it as a 'naturally occurring, universal mental process characterised by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly the resurgence of unresolved conflicts'. In his study of a group of older people, Peter Coleman found that life review was not inevitable and that almost as many people saw no point in reminiscing as those who valued memories of the past. Both those who valued their memories and those who did not showed high levels of morale.<sup>29</sup> All of which is perhaps a helpful reminder that how and why an older person looks back over their life may be a product of both present and past situations and may emerge from a mix of motivations.

The effects of normal ageing are well documented and should be distinguished from the destruction of memory through diseases such as Alzheimer's. Dementias are now openly discussed in ways which not so long ago would have been unthinkable, partly because of the social stigma that had been attached but also because of the hopelessness with which severe memory loss has been associated. Effective therapies or cures are yet to be identified and research continues

into causes, diagnosis, and treatments. Oral historians have become involved in working with people with dementia and their carers through reminiscence work. These projects have used the ability that some people with dementia have to retain memories of their childhood, while their working, procedural, and short-term memory can be severely impaired.

A particular type of autobiographical memory, 'flashbulb memory', is also of potential interest to oral historians. In the interviewing programmes activated immediately after sudden events, such as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, some of what was recorded might be described as resulting from 'flashbulb memory'. This term was first coined by two psychologists, Roger Brown and James Kulik, who asked people how and when they heard about the assassination of President Kennedy. They found that people talked vividly and in much detail and suggested that this meant that such memories were quite different from other kinds of memory, that 'extreme emotion led to an almost photographic representation of the event and its physical context'.<sup>30</sup>

More recently Dorthe Berntsen and Dorthe Thomsen gave an open-ended questionnaire to 145 Danish people old enough to have lived through the Nazi occupation of their country. They found that those who had been involved in resistance against Nazi occupation remembered with much greater accuracy and detail facts like the weather and day of the week when Denmark was invaded and liberated, whereas those who were not directly involved in the resistance movement provided less detail. From this Berntsen and Thomsen suggest that emotional involvement or investment at both a personal and a social level may increase the amount of detail recalled.<sup>31</sup> While the accuracy and special qualities of flashbulb memories have been questioned, the vivid nature of autobiographical memory of certain incidents is accepted, together with these memories' tendency to be valued for their importance and often for their connection with personal and social change. They are also likely to evoke strong emotions. The problem lies in how they are interpreted, since although they are distinctive to the individual, if they are memories of public events they will also have been talked about, and perhaps seen on television.

Though not necessarily embedded with the same level of emotionality, eyewitness testimony is another type of remembering that should interest oral historians. Alongside information about experiences of family life, education, work, and aspects of daily life, there are also events that are unique, such as the moment when a vote was taken, an accident happened, or a speech was made, which someone will remember as if they were still there. Research into eyewitness testimony has tended to be based in laboratory-type experiments that aim to shed light on the incidence of, for example, mistaken identity in court cases; indeed, some serious miscarriages of justice have been based in assumptions as to the reliability of eyewitnesses. The evidence available suggests that people often see what they expect to see and that eyewitnesses may respond to social pressures, unwittingly accepting misleading information.

Recent ways of explaining remembering have also resulted in a re-evaluation of forgetting. The fluidity of told memory matches up with what is known about what happens within the brain when memories are formed and recalled. It is now generally agreed that memories are not lodged somewhere in the brain to be retrieved as intact items. Remembering involves physical networking between various parts of the brain for memories which provide some kind of coherence for the self in terms of what was, what is, and what the future might be. Remembering inevitably involves reconstruction, with what Martin Conway calls the 'working self' collecting and managing knowledge, including memories, sometimes even relegating or distorting certain memories if they do not contribute to autobiographical coherence.<sup>32</sup>

Neuroscience has identified memory as being encoded within neural networks of the brain so that every time something is remembered, those same neural pathways are reactivated. If this happens several times to a certain memory, then it is more likely that it will become fixed and more easily retrieved. The brain potentially has unlimited ways to create these connections, which could mean that nothing might ever be forgotten. People who cannot forget, like AJ, a Californian who at forty-two could remember every day since she was a teenager, have an amazing ability, which she regarded as 'totally exhausting' and 'a burden'. Fortunately for almost everyone, the brain can and has to forget, by selecting what is relevant and current. In that way we function efficiently.<sup>33</sup> Thus forgetting comes to be seen as a normal brain activity, underpinning memory acquisition and retrieval.

How much is remembered varies greatly between individuals, which is why oral historians often chance upon a man or woman with a particularly full and vivid memory, whose recollections may play a key part in any study—or indeed the basis of a full life story. Memory is also crucially shaped by interest. For example, psychologists carried out an experiment to test, over a period of almost fifty years, the memories of 392 American high-school graduates for the names and faces of their contemporaries in classes of ninety or more students. They were first given eight minutes to list in unaided 'free recall' the names of all those who belonged to their class. They were then asked to pick, within eight seconds each time, first a series of names of their own classmates out of others; and then, similarly, pictures of their faces; and then, again with time limits, to match names to pictures and pictures to names. The findings are set out in the table opposite.

It is clear that on all counts the loss of memory during the first nine months is as great as that during the next thirty-four years. Only beyond this point do the tests suggest any sharp decline in average memory; and even this may be more due to declining speed in tests timed over seconds, and also to the effect on average performance of 'degenerative changes' among some of those in their seventies. But it is particularly striking that for those classmates who were considered friends, there is no decline in accuracy of recall, even over an interval of

### Classmates' names and faces recalled (%)

| Time since graduation | Free recall | Name recognition | Picture recognition | Name matching | Picture matching |
|-----------------------|-------------|------------------|---------------------|---------------|------------------|
| 3 months              | 52          | 91               | 90                  | 89            | 94               |
| 9 months              | 46          | 91               | 88                  | 93            | 88               |
| 14 years              | 28          | 87               | 91                  | 83            | 83               |
| 34 years              | 24          | 82               | 90                  | 83            | 79               |
| 47 years              | 21          | 69               | 71                  | 56            | 58               |

Source: H. P. Bahrick, P. O. Bahrick, and R. P. Wittlinger, 'Fifty Years of Memory for Names and Faces', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 104, no. 1 (Mar. 1975): 54–75.

more than fifty years. The more significant a name or face, the more likely it is to be remembered; it is the others whom a 'very slow forgetting process' gradually discards from the memory.

Thus the memory process depends not only upon individual comprehension, but also upon interest. This is the most likely explanation for the frequently observed tendency in Western societies for women to remember family events better than men do. Hence, too, the common vividness of earlier memories, of experiences that were new. And accurate memory is much more likely when it meets a social interest and need. Similarly it has been shown that illiterate Swazis, who might be thought to have particularly good memories because they can write nothing down, are no more capable of remembering messages for Europeans than Europeans are. But when they are asked about the exact descriptions and prices fetched by cattle sold a year previously, they can recite the information, whereas the European who bought the cattle and noted their prices in his accounts cannot. Or again, an eighty-year-old Welshman was asked in 1960 for the names of the occupiers in 1900 of 108 agricultural holdings in his parish, and when his answers were checked against the parish electoral list, 106 proved correct. Reliability depends partly on whether the question interests an informant. It is lack of any intrinsic interest which vitiates many of the early laboratory experiments with memory.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast with forgetting as an aspect of information management within the brain, recall can be actively prevented by unwillingness: either a conscious avoidance of distasteful facts or unconscious repression. It is of course a particular interest of psychology to revive these suppressed memories through the therapeutic interview. In recent years the reliability of suppressed memories, for example of sexual abuse within the family, has become an important legal controversy. Experiments have shown that it is relatively easy to generate false memories by feeding people with a mixture of genuine and misleading stimulants to memory, such as photographs. Suppressed memories rediscovered under these conditions can be extremely vivid, full of details, but their validity is often also

controversial. Perhaps the most famous instance is from Elizabeth Loftus and Jacqueline Pickrell, who introduced false memories of being lost in a shopping mall to participants in an experiment, which people then recalled with specific individual elaborations. It seems on balance highly unlikely that the memories recovered through therapy are either all true or all false.<sup>35</sup> But they must be seen as a relatively doubtful source of memory, and it is therefore perhaps fortunate that the potential influence of an oral history interviewer over an informant is so much more muted than that of a therapist or a barrister in a court of law.

Thus although earlier laboratory experiments succeeded in establishing some of the main elements of the memory process, many provide a poor guide to its reliability, because they take place in a social vacuum isolated from the needs and interests which normally stimulate remembering and recalling. One of Frederic Bartlett's classic experiments, for example, was to ask a group of ten Cambridge students to repeat to each other, in sequence, an American Indian tale, 'The War of the Ghosts'. The final version retained no more than a few scraps of the original. But these students had no intrinsic interest in a story from another culture; for them it was just an experiment, whose outcome proved more interesting, as it happened, because of their own lack of accuracy.<sup>36</sup>

More recent studies show much greater levels of sophistication. More important, it is not difficult to find striking counterexamples of the potential strength of long-term memory, given a supportive social context and interest. But there are epic tales told among the peoples of Africa that have been passed down orally for at least six hundred years, while Patrick Nunne and Margaret Sharp have shown that Australian Aboriginal stories of coastal inundation link back to flooding following glacial melting which took place between six thousand and seven thousand years ago.<sup>37</sup> These tales are subject to variation when the social needs of their tellers and audiences have changed, but can be consistent enough for the original elements to be identified by studying the structure of different versions. And nearer at hand, Iona and Peter Opie found very remarkable chains of transmission in their study of *The Lore and Language of School Children*.

Because of the very rapid turnover of children in school, the links in the chain of transmission are much shorter than with adult oral traditions, so that in 130 years a school jingle will have passed down twenty generations of children, perhaps three hundred tellers—equivalent to more than five hundred years among adults. It is extraordinary, in view of this, how much survives. For example, among the 'truce terms' used by children—whose accuracy is presumably especially important to them—are words like 'barley' and 'fains' that go back to the Middle Ages. They originated in adult vocabulary, but have been preserved only among children. 'Tiddly Winks the Barber' is a rhyme that children still repeat as it was originally composed in 1878. The Opies have many good examples of both survival and change.<sup>38</sup>

On rare occasions one can show in an ordinary life story how a telling phrase has been retained. One of Paul Thompson's first interviews—for *The*



*Edwardians*—was with Bob Jaggard, born in 1882, who started work in 1894 on an Essex farm, leading horses. Early on in the interview he said:

Men got 13 shillings a week and when I started work I went seven days a week for three shillings.

*Can you remember at that time whether you thought that was bad or good money?*

I knew it was bad money. Yes, they were put on.

*Did you feel there was anything you could do about this to get more money at that time?*

No, we didn't, that was just that. I can tell you right start, the old farmer what I worked for, he said a man carry a sack of wheat home every Saturday night was thirteen shillings.

Later on, reading Rider Haggard's *Rural England*, we discovered that Haggard had visited Bob Jaggard's village, Ardleigh, in 1901. A week's wages by this date had risen by eighteen pence. In Ardleigh, Haggard visited a Mr T. Smith, who farmed 240 acres and had been there for fifty-one years. 'How could farmers get on', Smith asked Haggard, 'when each man took the value of a sack of wheat; that is 14s. 6d. per week?'<sup>39</sup> Seventy years after Haggard's visit it was still possible to record the Ardleigh farmer's grumble, stuck in Bob Jaggard's mind.

### Memories in their social contexts

The transmission of memories is of course at the same time a social as well as an individual process. Another early but still crucial contribution to present understanding of memory was the work of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in arguing the extent to which individual recollections operate within the framework of a collective memory. In studying well-defined social groups, whether rural villages or urban neighbourhoods, or groups at work, or an extended family, this is a very fruitful perspective for exploring group consciousness, and where collective perceptions are the issue, the accuracy of memory is no longer the main focus. Indeed, as Pierre Nora's vast multi-volume *Realms of Memory* (1996–98) demonstrates, it is possible to reconceptualise a whole range of historical evidence, from buildings and street names to rites and traditions, so that they become considered primarily as expressions of collective identity. The social formation of memory was also an issue early identified by the Popular Memory Group in England at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University.

On the other hand, for our purposes here it seems important to warn against any suggestion that collective memory does not merely stimulate or influence individual memory, but determines it. Collective memory is not an independent essence and its meanings must always be transmitted by individuals; and in practice the boundaries of most groups, and therefore of their collectivity of memory, are uncertain. Anna Green sees the oral history interview as having an important role in revealing conflicts between individual and collective

accounts: 'While the oral history interviewer undoubtedly influences the narrative outcome . . . the interviewer does not usually share the same past, and . . . there may be less personal constraint on what may, or may not, be said'.<sup>40</sup>

The context of remembering is also crucial: in a group situation, such as a local celebration, or a memorial service, or in a pub, collective perspectives of memory are likely to exercise much more power than in more private reflections at home. Thus Alastair Thomson found that among Australian First World War veterans, who were lionised in public as the heroes who had first crystallised Australian identity, some accepted the legend of loyalty, courage, and self-sacrifice, while others felt uncomfortable and inadequate with such images, remembering how often they had been shocked or afraid. He draws on the notion of 'composure' to explain how people manage to accommodate the dissonance between their own individual memories and public accounts. He also points out that those public versions of the past may change. Discussing the Anzac 'legend', he argues that it continues to have a 'malleability' and a 'versatility' so that 'the possibilities for remembering, and for fashioning new identities also change'. Similarly, the essays in *The Myths We Live By* show not only how readily social groups create the myths that they need, but also how even the most powerful and universal myths, such as that of the wicked stepmother, can either be taken up as images to confirm experience, or be ignored in the telling of an alternative individual memory.<sup>41</sup>

In any context, recalling is always an active process. Bartlett wrote, perhaps with exaggeration: 'In a world of constantly changing environment, literal recall is extraordinarily unimportant. It is with remembering as it is with the stroke in a skilled game. Every time we make it, it has its own characteristics'.<sup>42</sup> He had in mind particularly how a story may be retold differently to various audiences in different situations, and how its recall can be stimulated by re-meeting an old acquaintance, or revisiting the scene of some past event. A willingness to remember is also essential: a feature of memory which is especially relevant to interviewing.

For oral history, interviewing older people raises no fundamental methodological issues that do not also apply to interviewing in general—and consequently to a whole range of familiar historical sources—as well as to those of the oral historian. Our concern here is with the degree of influence which the interview as a social relationship will inevitably have on the material that is collected through it.

The minimisation of variance in answers due to differences of style between individual interviewers has long been the aim of social method. In the sociological handbooks this concern is often taken to self-defeating extremes. Ken Plummer, after charting all the possible errors listed, concludes that 'to purge research of all these "sources of bias" is to purge research of human life'. The real aim of the life history sociologist or the oral historian should be to reveal sources of bias, rather than pretend they can be nullified, for instance, with

'a researcher without a face to give off feelings'.<sup>43</sup> But in precisely this sense, there is much we can learn from the experience of survey research. The key issue is how to introduce sufficient standardisation without breaking the interview relationship through inhibiting self-expression. One approach has been to begin with a freer form of interviewing in order to explore the variety of responses obtainable, and then to follow up with a standardised survey, in which the exact words of questions and their sequence is pre-determined. An alternative is to mix the two methods in each interview, encouraging the interviewee to free expression, but gradually introducing a standard set of questions in so far as these are not already covered. This protects the interview relationship, but makes the material less strictly comparable.

Since it is difficult to ensure that all interviewers carry out interviews in the same way, when analysing interviews recorded by others it is always helpful to know what an interviewer's perspective might be. The sociologist Martyn Hammersley refers to this as the researcher's 'cultural habitus'. By this he means the views and theories and perspectives that a researcher or interviewer brings to an encounter. A more reflective practice on the part of researchers has been taken up by some oral historians, typically amongst feminists. They follow the approach of anthropologists and ethnographers, tending to be open about their personal viewpoint, including their reflections in the fieldnotes which they record as part of their research.<sup>44</sup>

Since, in contrast to oral history, very little large-scale social survey interviewing is recorded and archived, it is difficult to know how exactly interviewers normally follow such survey instructions. The rare tests which have been reported suggest that a third of the questions may be regularly altered in unacceptable ways.<sup>45</sup>

It is certainly also clear that interviewers carry into the interview both their own expectations and a social manner that affect their findings. Recording can help to expose and assess this kind of social bias. But the interviewer has a social presence, even when not revealing any explicit opinions which could influence the informant. There is a widely held image of an interviewer as a middle-class woman; and most informants have some idea of what her views are likely to be. This has some advantage, because the consequent bias in response can be more easily allowed for, and it can also be to some extent countered, by showing respect for the informant's own views. But there are interesting consequences when the image is unequivocally altered. Thus American surveys have long recognised that black informants can give substantially different answers to some questions—for example, doubling the likelihood of expressions of social dissatisfaction or criticism—when they are asked by black rather than white interviewers.

In the same spirit, the feminist oral historian Daphne Patai began to wonder if Teresa, a black domestic worker, had accepted her invitation to be interviewed because it had given her a 'fleeting opportunity to escape her situation

by allying herself with a white foreigner'. A parallel caution between races has been noted in Central Africa, where, Jan Vansina tells us, the white missionaries are expected to be interested in traditions. But they must not be told traditions that go against their teaching, because then they will criticise them, which will undermine the prestige of the narrators, and will fight against them, which will harm the whole community.<sup>46</sup> In Europe an interviewer with a strong working-class regional accent can expect to vary the social effect in—one hopes—a less drastic, but comparable manner.

A more contentious issue is the role of gender in the interview relationship. As we saw earlier, there is a good deal of evidence that from childhood onwards, male and female memories tend to be somewhat different, with women having more detailed memories of personal experiences than men. But speech patterns are also gendered. A psychological and sociolinguistic study by Ely and McCabe suggested that these differences normally occurred very early, with girls using much more direct quotation, dialogue, and reported speech—all of which implied their careful listening—while boys preferred to summarise and simply convey the gist of a story. More predictably, several studies have argued that women talk in much greater detail about relationships and domestic issues than men.

Beyond that is the question of the impact of the gender of the interviewer. In an early but very influential article written at the height of the feminist revival, Ann Oakley argued that women interviewers, when interviewing women, should encourage a more confiding approach, towards the end of the interview talking mutually about each other, and where appropriate offering practical help. More recently she has repudiated this position, arguing that she no more favours a 'feminist' than a 'masculinist' approach to research.<sup>47</sup>

It should be emphasised that it is not necessarily true that an interviewer of the same sex, class, or race will obtain more accurate information. When Elaine Bauner and I were interviewing for *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic*, we expected to find important differences in the content of interviews recorded by her, black and Jamaican, and me, white and English. She did indeed find it much easier to persuade people to be interviewed—it took her a few minutes, while I was sometimes tested out for hours. But once into the interview, it seemed that the salience of the interviewer receded, and the narrative itself became the main focus. We were told equally about intimacies, whether to do with sexualities or illegalities, and most strikingly, people spoke as much to me as to her in patois.

Certainly personal knowledge may be a help in crossing traditional boundaries. Anna Bryson, who interviewed people from both Catholic and Protestant communities in the Northern Ireland town where she grew up, found that knowledge of her own Catholic religious background was no obstacle to finding people to interview, though she found that her Catholic interviewees were more open about discrimination while her Protestant interviewees were keen to emphasise their own tolerant upbringing. Her insider status gave her these

different responses and she was also, more than an outsider, aware of the delicate nuances of different attitudes within the two communities.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, if the social relationship in an interview becomes, or is from the start, a social bond, the danger towards social conformity in replies is increased. Nor does increased intimacy always bring less inhibition. It is remarkable, for instance, how many people, when stopped anonymously in the street by Mass Observation and asked questions about sex, were prepared to answer with a candour that is rare in the most intimate home interview.

The presence of others at an interview also has a marked effect. Boasting and exaggeration may be reduced, but the tendency to conform will be greatly increased. Howard Becker, when interviewing American medical students in groups, found that cynicism was the norm, but in private most students expressed idealistic feelings. Sometimes a group meeting may be helpful, for example in bringing out conflicts in tradition about particular figures in a community's past from informants with different standpoints. Graham Smith, analysing the memories of a group of older Scottish women, uses the term 'transactive memory' to show how they 'pooled' their knowledge of a familiar time and place and suggests that this can be a productive process. He argues that this is more than simply stimulating memories but a way of developing shared identity, emotions, and knowledge, through 'talking about lived experience', pointing out that reminiscing together is essentially a social behaviour.<sup>49</sup> In a more personal interview, a husband or wife sometimes stimulates the other's memory, or corrects a mistake, or offers a different interpretation. An account of the division of domestic responsibilities given in such a situation, however, would usually be much less critical of the other's part. It is also the case that, within a group, people will often emphasise a common view of the past, but if they are subsequently seen separately, much more individual pictures may emerge.

Even when others are not present at the interview itself, their unseen presence outside may count. This is a particularly important influence in any tight-knit community. The insider and outsider have different difficulties here. The insider knows the way round, can be less easily fooled, understands the nuances, and starts with far more useful contacts and, hopefully, as an established person of good faith. All this has to be learnt and constructed by the outsider, who, in the extreme case, may not originally know the language, ethnography, or geography of a community. But there can be good in this, too, because the outsider can ask for the obvious to be explained; while the insider, who may in fact be misinformed in assuming the answer, does not ask for fear of seeming foolish. The outsider also keeps an advantage in being outside the local social network, more easily maintaining a position of neutrality, and so may be spoken to in true confidentiality, with less subsequent anxiety.

The anthropologist Peter Loizos has reflected on his own experiences as both an outsider and an insider of the village community he studies. He started as a complete outsider, brought up in England with no awareness of having any

Greek identity and without contact with his Greek Cypriot father, but once he had met his father's relatives for the first time and then lived amongst them in their Cypriot village, he gradually moved to becoming an insider. While it took time to get to know their spoken Greek, he found that he was fully accepted, and he believes he was told much which would have been held back from an outsider. Often key confidential information was conveyed through jokes, cutting across the taboos about honour and sexuality that had preoccupied so many Mediterranean anthropologists. He recalled how once his cousin Tomas was waiting to fly. 'So he's getting ready to go to the airport, and he's standing around with his wife, and they're about to separate, and she makes a joke! Somebody says, "Maybe, who knows what foreign women he'll meet when he's abroad"; and she says, "If I had my way, I'd cut it off and keep it here!"' As Loizos reflects: 'There's an earthiness and a directness there, and probably, if I were an outsider anthropologist, they wouldn't have said it in front of me. So you do get privileged access'.<sup>50</sup>

Writing in the 1970s, Andrew Roberts emphasised the parallel handicaps of belonging for African students returning to record members of their communities in sub-Saharan Africa:

Relations with the local people may well be more difficult than those of a white student. In so far as African students have kept up links with the land of their fathers, they come back to it as a full social personality, far more subject than a mere foreigner to the moral constraints of the society. If they ignore local custom in the cause of research, they (or their relations) will have to answer for the consequences. Through the web of kinship, they may well be caught up in conflicts which cause people to withhold information they might readily impart to a transitory white visitor. Besides, since independence, African students are rather more likely than whites to be suspected of being agents of central government.<sup>51</sup>

This is the extreme case of the problem, closer to the fieldwork situation of the anthropologist. One suspects that here in the long term the disadvantages of the European outsider may prove decisive. The social codes and layers of expressive meaning have to be penetrated, as well as formal language itself. Even the very structure of conceptualisation may be fundamentally different, and Western notions of time and space misleading. 'The scholar struggling to understand a foreign culture', Elizabeth Tonkin suggests, 'may eventually realise that what appear to be answers to the question "where did we come from?" are actually explaining "why we are here"'.<sup>52</sup> The disadvantage of the insider in interpretation, on the other hand, is rather in the ease with which a community myth can be accepted at face value. Those others, often at the top and bottom end of the social scale, who carry a different viewpoint are not noticed. Nor can the social function of the myth be easily detected. For interpretation, as we shall

see, this may prove much more revealing than the explicit messages which it conveys.

The message may also differ, depending on just where it is heard. Thus an interview at home will increase the pressure of 'respectable' home-centred ideals; an interview in a pub is more likely to emphasise daredevilry and fun; and an interview in the workplace will introduce the influence of work conventions and attitudes. Linked with these changes in emphasis will be changes in language. A recording in a pub, for example, will often be festooned with swear-words; cross the home threshold, and the vocabulary will be transformed. Each might again vary if the interview was transformed from a confidential exchange to, at the other extreme, a television recording with technicians, glaring lamps, and a public audience beyond.

These then are some of the main influences on the interview situation. They are crucial: for they underlie the difficulties of any historian or sociologist in penetrating social reality, past or present. For the historian it is hardly possible to measure the extent of these difficulties, except when past errors come to light. But there are a number of sociological repeat surveys which suggest how far any historical or contemporary evidence derived from interviews needs to be treated with care.

### Surveys and sampling

With this in mind, let us look at some cases in which the accuracy of retrospective material collected in large-scale surveys can be assessed. One of the first is the sociological study by P. M. Blau and O. D. Duncan of *The American Occupational Structure*. The authors carried out a pre-test of 570 men in Chicago and tried to match their names against the census. They were able to match only 137, and in less than half of these did they find complete agreement of occupation and industry between the two sources. Tucking away as an appendix this rather damaging assessment of the foundations of their sophisticated statistical analysis, they argue that the discrepancies are partly due to high labour mobility in America (in 1945–46 this peaked at 12 per cent of all workers changing jobs), and partly—scarce comfort for historians—to the inaccuracies of a census at least as unreliable as their own survey. They cite a post-enumeration survey carried out by the Bureau of the Census to check its own results, which found that 17 per cent of the men were classified in a different major occupational group in the two surveys. This is a finding that might well be better known among statistically minded historians.

Blau and Duncan were also able to show that the differences between the census and their own survey were systematic. There was a tendency for labourers who appeared in the census to be described as craftsmen or technicians in their own questionnaire, but there was not a comparable error in the opposite direction. It was, on the other hand, reassuring to discover that the discrepancies, and so presumption of inaccuracy in retrospective interviewing, became less as the



time interval increased. Men were more likely to describe correctly their father's occupation fifty-five rather than twenty-five years ago.<sup>53</sup> The reason for this retrospective increase in reliability is that an older man has fewer social reasons for wishing to mis-describe his father's occupation than a younger man. On some subjects it is therefore possible for the historian to get more reliable information from interviews than the contemporary sociological investigator.

Since then there have been many reports of the accuracies and inaccuracies of recall of earlier events in survey research, with very varied results, some much more negative than others. These studies tend to be about relatively short-term recall, but they re-emphasise that the problem of memory is not peculiar to the oral historian, but basic to social research; and also that retrospective data does have a potential validity. And it is certainly possible to find strikingly encouraging instances of long-term recall. Thus another large-scale retrospective survey is provided by David Butler and Donald Stokes in *Political Change in Britain*. The historical information here is less closely analysed, but their tables of how each generation remembered their fathers' political views are clearly compatible with the broad picture which we have from other historical sources, of a Labour Party rising rapidly at the end of the nineteenth century to oust the Liberals as the main contenders for power with the Conservatives. So are other figures showing that the Conservatives relied chiefly on the middle classes and the Church of England for their supporters, while their opponents depended upon Nonconformity and the working classes. Charles More's detailed statistical comparisons between oral history interviews and contemporary reports and census figures on skill and apprenticeship at the turn of the century are equally reassuring. Such confirmations of established historical accounts clearly suggest that the retrospective survey can provide social information which in its broad divisions is reliable.<sup>54</sup>

Let us next consider the crucial and closely related issue of sampling. How do we overcome a rather different criticism—that our informants cannot be taken as typical or representative? Social surveys are normally based on carefully chosen samples, designed to secure as representative a group of informants as possible. They confront the oral historian with a dilemma. A survey whose informants are pre-determined, and interviewed according to an inflexible schedule, will collect material of intrinsically lower quality. Some of the best potential informants will be missed, and others often less willing chosen in their place, while the interview itself cannot be sufficiently flexible to draw the most from them. On the other hand, one of the great advantages of oral history is that it enables the historian to counteract the bias in normal historical sources; the tendency, for example, for printed autobiography to come from the articulate professional or upper classes, or from labour leaders rather than the rank and file. Because of this, it is important to consider how far the oral historian could make use of some of the techniques of representative sampling developed by the sociologists.

The historian starts with a difficulty not shared by the sociologist. If the old people alive today were themselves a balanced cross-section of their generation in the past, in principle we should only need to draw a random sample from a list of their names. There would remain the practical difficulty of obtaining a fully reliable list, which, unlike electoral registers, is rarely available. But we can be certain that such a 'random sample', even though providing the most certain form of present representativeness, would distort the past. It could take no account of migration, local or national, or of differential mortality. We know that people die much faster in some occupations than in others. Death rates can also be affected by personal losses, such as widowhood; by personal habits, such as smoking or drinking; perhaps by personality itself. Until a whole cohort of people has been studied from youth to age, we cannot be sure how far the cumulative effect of all these factors distorts the representativeness of the surviving group. But we do have measures of some of the most important differences between present and past, such as occupational and population distribution. This makes it possible for a large oral history project to rest on a frame that is, at least in some of its key dimensions, reliable.

### Occupational and sex sample

|                               | Men      |            | Women    |            |
|-------------------------------|----------|------------|----------|------------|
|                               | Occupied | Unoccupied | Occupied | Unoccupied |
| Professional (n=18)           | 4        | 3          | 4        | 7          |
| Employers and managers (n=54) | 16       | 10         | 4        | 24         |
| Clerks and foremen (n=28)     | 10       | 2          | 2        | 14         |
| Skilled manual (n=142)        | 48       | 24         | 14       | 56         |
| Semi-skilled manual (n=160)   | 48       | 25         | 30       | 57         |
| Unskilled manual (n=42)       | 16       | 8          | 4        | 14         |
| Total (n=444)                 | 142      | 72         | 58       | 172        |
|                               | 214      |            | 230      |            |

For our own research project for *The Edwardians*, we recorded some five hundred men and women, all born by 1906, and the oldest in 1872. Thea Vigne and I wanted to select a group representative as far as then possible of the Edwardian population as a whole, so that we designed a 'quota sample'—a list of categories of various proportions into which people had to fit in order to be counted. The sample was based on the 1911 census and it totaled 444 persons.

Geographical sample

| Rural 144 | Urban 200 | Conurbation 100 |                         |
|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------------|
|           |           |                 | London                  |
|           |           |                 | South East              |
|           |           |                 | East Anglia             |
|           |           |                 | West                    |
|           |           |                 | South West              |
|           |           |                 | South Wales             |
|           |           |                 | North Wales             |
|           |           |                 | Midlands                |
|           |           |                 | Lancashire              |
|           |           |                 | Yorkshire               |
|           |           |                 | North West & North East |
|           |           |                 | Lowland Scotland        |
|           |           |                 | Highland Scotland       |

The proportion of men and women was as in 1911; so were the proportions who had then been living in the countryside, the towns, and the conurbations; and so too the balance between the main regions of England, Wales, and Scotland. We tried to ensure a proper class distribution by dividing the sample into six major occupational groups, taken from the adjusted census categories of Guy Routh’s *Occupation and Pay, 1906–65*.<sup>55</sup> Those informants who were not working in 1911 went in as dependants of the chief breadwinner in the household, normally the father or husband. We had to carry out more interviews than the total 444 in order to fill the quotas, partly because some turned out to belong to a different classification than expected, and partly because not all were sufficiently complete.

Our aim was to present the people of Edwardian Britain who were alive in 1911, partly through those who survived, and partly through their children. And as a whole, the survey does succeed in this way, for the patterns which it produces by region and by class make sense. Some of the faults in the design of the quota itself could, on another occasion, be corrected. For example, we originally failed to take account of the fact that because Edwardian women normally

ceased working at marriage, the proportions of women working were far greater in some adult age groups than others.

It is all too possible to fill a category in the frame locally from a single social network which might, for example, exclude the less respectable. We therefore used a variety of means to find informants: personal contact, doctors' lists, welfare centres, visiting organisations, essay competitions, newspapers, and even chance encounter. We tried to notice the social bias which particular methods of contact could introduce, and counteract them. And there can be no doubt that the presence of the sample frame itself served to push the search for informants well beyond what would have otherwise seemed sufficient. In oral history work, as in any social research, it is too easy to miss the people at the margins: the very rich and the very poor, the disabled, the homeless, and so on. And we certainly found ourselves that the wholly unskilled, the 'rough' and 'unrespectable', for example, were again and again almost to the last moment socially invisible.

Some other more recent projects have similarly used a quota approach to ensure a broadly representative cross-section of their field. Thus Bornat and her colleagues wanted to record a sample of overseas-trained South Asian doctors who had come to Britain and found a career in the developing specialty of geriatric medicine in the National Health Service. They aimed to record sixty doctors, forty retired and twenty still serving. They recruited through a variety of medical and migrant doctor networks, choosing interviewees who fulfilled a variety of different criteria: where they qualified in the Indian sub-continent, when they migrated, and so on. The final sample matched fairly closely with the known population of South Asian geriatricians on grounds of gender, the geographical spread of their employment, and their career development. Most had been able to find employment only away from London, and all had had to give up ideas of working in medical specialties other than geriatrics because of prejudice against themselves and also the unwillingness of British-trained doctors to work with older patients.<sup>56</sup>

Some projects use an approach to sampling known as 'purposive' or 'theoretical'. Rather than aiming at a representative group, the sample over-represents key groups who may be particularly helpful in illuminating the themes on which the research focuses. Thus a study of a male-dominated industry might deliberately over-represent managers and women. Or a project on interfaith and interethnic families might focus especially on cultures that approved or strongly disapproved such mixing. 'Strategic' sampling adopts similar tactics, but with an acceptance that the original sample design can be open to revision as the work goes forward.<sup>57</sup>

Another recent approach to choosing informants is the matrix box. This is rather like the quota sample, but without pre-determined targets in numbers. The Barings Bank project aimed to record an oral history of one of London's oldest merchant banks, from the 1940s up to the bank's collapse in 1995, with thirty interviews. The project team devised a matrix with the aim of covering

interviewees at all levels, with memories from each decade, and a series of themes ranging from recruitment and office culture to business activities, clients, and the Baring family. The resulting grid of cells was then filled with the names of people who would be most appropriate to approach. This type of box is also very helpful later in the project, when interviewing is finishing and the spread of information needs to be assessed before deciding on the focus of the last few interviews.

The quota or purposive samples and the matrix box all carry one undeniable advantage over the random method. Since the choice of individual informants is not pre-determined, there is no longer any need to force an interview on a respondent who remains unwilling, even after the purpose of the research and potential value of their contribution has been explained. Everything is to be gained from avoiding an interview that is likely to generate false material. But while it is clearly desirable to record only willing informants, there is another possible danger of going too far in the opposite direction, and recording only the exceptionally confident and articulate. Even within a particular social group or occupation, these may be a distinct stratum of leaders with their own culture and intellectual attitudes. Such informants are not merely unrepresentative, but can often prove less reliable. The more people are accustomed to presenting a professional public image, the less likely their personal recollections are to be candid; politicians are therefore particularly difficult witnesses. So are those who, through reading, have fixed upon a view of the past which they propagate professionally—such as historians and teachers. They can be the most insightful, but equally the most misleading sources.

Indeed in African history Vansina originally suggested that the testimony of amateur collectors of oral tradition should always be avoided as 'quite worthless, because it is secondhand . . . "Listen to the words of the smith, do not listen to what the man who works the bellows has to say", as the Bushongo put it'. His ideal informant is a person still living the customary life, middle aged or older, 'who recites traditions without too much hesitation, who understands their content but is not too brilliant—for if he were, one would suspect him of introducing distortions'.<sup>58</sup> The point—if not the patronising tone, which he later very much modified—may be held relevant in Britain, too. If oral history is to be effectively representative, at all social levels, it is not just the unusually articulate and overtly reflective who must be recorded. Its essence is in conveying the words and feelings of ordinary people. The ideal choice is a broad one, but firmly grounded on the centre.

We may be certain in wishing to avoid interviews with unwilling informants. But what of those who are not so much unwilling as laconic, withdrawn? They will give the bones of a life story to a sympathetic interviewer, but never the most rewarding material. While they should clearly be included in any representative survey, what is lost if they are not deliberately sought out? This can be partly checked by observing whether their stories vary in any consistent direction from

those of ordinary informants. If we are seeking evidence from childhood, we can assume with some confidence that there is no kind of family life which produced exclusively a single, uninterviewable type of personality, and is therefore inaccessible to the oral historian.

To meet the various problems raised by retrospective representativeness, the oral historian needs to develop, rather than the standardised random battery sample, a method of strategic sampling: a more tactical approach, such as purposive sampling or the 'theoretical sampling' advocated by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Various approaches are worth considering. For many projects, as on an event, or about a small group of people, the issue is not representativeness, but who knows best: above all, participants and direct witnesses. As the sociologist Herbert Blumer puts it, the search ought to be for validity rather than for reliability: 'a half dozen individuals with such knowledge constitute a far better "representative sample" than a thousand individuals who may be involved in the action that is being formed but who are not knowledgeable about that formation'.<sup>59</sup>

One very fertile way of looking at long-term intergenerational change in work and family life, and also migration, which can be carried across periods of tumultuous political change, too, is to take a cross-class sample of families, and interview two or three generations in each family: this was the technique which Daniel Bertaux and I used in *Pathways to Social Class*. Elaine Bauer and I used a similar approach for *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic*, but in that case seeking not only different generations but also members of the same family in Britain, North America, and Jamaica.<sup>60</sup> The drawback is that there will always be a minority of families in which it is impossible to record more than one or two generations. The great advantage of a transgenerational sample is that it provides a much stronger account of social change than you can get for two sets of unrelated people who do not share their origins or social backgrounds.

Another possible approach is to take a sub-sample from a larger random or longitudinal survey. This is a recognised and fruitful American research practise but unfortunately difficult to achieve in Britain because of the hostilities between qualitative and quantitative researchers. We were able to use it not only for *Pathways to Social Class* but also for *Growing Up in Stepfamilies*, for which we took a sub-sample of a longitudinal cohort of British men and women all born in the same week in 1958, by this time in their thirties. While this kind of opportunity is unusual, any oral history can create a larger set of material and then sub-sample from this. Thus Reginald Byron, for *Irish America*, first carried out a survey of five hundred people from which he received 252 self-completed questionnaires, and of these chose eighty for in-depth interviews. Similarly Errol Uys, for *Riding the Rails*, a study of teenagers hunting for work who roamed America by railroad in the thirties, started with a call in a pensioner's magazine, in response to which he received three thousand letters—one sixty pages long. He sent follow-up questionnaires, and from these chose five hundred for phone

interviews, and then finally made twenty in-depth interviews for a television documentary.<sup>61</sup>

For other projects the whole objective might be to focus on a restricted group, for example interviewing several members of the same extended family group; or interviewing married couples and 'snowballing' by following up with their neighbours and friends. This would construct a picture of their social networks, attitudes, myths, and memories, for which the very circularity of the enclosed group would be a strength rather than a weakness, as for instance in Yves Lequin's study of the collective memory of the metalworkers of Givors on the Rhone.<sup>62</sup>

For a broader local study, the most appropriate method might be a 'community stratified sample', open to change as the work progresses, in which the aim is not to secure a mirror of its broad distributions, but to ensure the representation of all significant social layers within it. Both aims might be met by working with two separate samples, a cross-section devised on the 'quota sample' method which we used for our own national survey, and the second a 'strategic' response to fieldwork discovery.

No method of sampling can claim to be the best for all situations. For example, when our interview team first came to Buckie in north-east Scotland to record for *Living the Fishing*, we had looked at old census returns of occupations, and we were helped with names by the fisheries officer, clergy, and other local experts. It was soon obvious that they were recommending only men, so we quickly found a parallel group of fishermen's wives. After a while we noticed that all those suggested had been skippers. We were told that any man of intelligence could get his own boat—the ethos of the town—but eventually we managed to find a group of men who had only worked as deckhands. They proved very interesting, because they had a different ideology, with much more belief in luck and superstition and weather lore, and even different accents. Then, finally, after unraveling the complex system of financing the building of fishing boats, we realised that fish salesmen were pivotal figures in the whole system—and we sought and found them too.

Concern for representativeness is essential if oral history is to realise its potential. The worst kind of oral history is that which begins and ends with the first voluble contact. But it is equally important not to become obsessed with this issue and to lose sight of the substantive issues while developing methodology—and also of when they are best just forgotten. One of the deepest lessons of oral history is the uniqueness, as well as representativeness, of every life story. There are some so rare and vivid that they demand recording, whatever the plan. In a flash, we may be in another world, normally beyond even the most painstaking researcher: as in the experiences of a Glasgow girl, daughter of a proud artisan, a boilermaker who would sketch designs on the linoleum floor, but forced her and her brother—aged barely four and seven—out to sleep on the street to please their stepmother:



She just told us to get off, that's all. Yes, yes, shut the door on us. Gave us nothing . . . (for food), we used to steal the workmen's pieces to begin with. And then at other times, when we got too well known . . . we used to gather scrap and go to the rag store, get coppers and then go to these eating houses and get, maybe a bowl of soup . . . and then other times, Tommy and I used to go to a grocer's shop or a dairy, and I would ask the time while he was pinching scones off his table. That's how you lived. Between that and begging from door to door . . . (for clothes and shoes), we stole them in the cloakroom of the school . . .

I've slept under bridges. I've slept in people's doorways, with their carpets and cats on the landing, and I've slept in watchmen's huts. I've slept in school shelters . . . In the dockyards, I've slept in the sheds, with the rats running round . . . I was nearly down the hold of a boat. In a truck of coal . . . I put the tarpaulin over me, you see . . . They were just going to tip it into the hold of a boat—when the crane man saw me . . .

And then this old auntie . . . she used to chase my stepmother, because of what she was doing to me . . . She'd get a hold of us and take us away and wash our faces and soaped us all and do what she could for us. But she had to work. And always when she come back at night she couldna find us you know . . .

And this particular night, I'm asleep on her doorstep . . . But along came a lady, and I was sound asleep on this doorstep. She wakened me up, and asked a lot of questions . . . took me to her house, she carried me up, and she washed, cleaned me and put me in her own bed . . . She put me out the next morning, she had fed me, put all nice clothes on me . . . And she give me I think it was a penny . . . My father was in a close, in an entry, right facing . . . He whistled, and I looked . . . I thought that was great. And I goes to my daddy. You wouldna guess what happened. He struck me of everything I had . . . He went to the first pawn shop, pawned them. Pawned them. There I was left in the street again . . . I went back up to the woman. And I telled her my daddy had taken all off me . . . Next thing I knew I was in court . . .

In the end—although not until the age of eight—she was taken into a church home, and her brother sent to a training ship.<sup>63</sup>

### **When to work with other sources of evidence**

In weighing up the reliability of a particular example of remembered evidence, just as in the selection of informants to record, it is important for oral historians to accept that there are no absolute rules, but rather a number of factors to be taken into account. Ultimately there are only useful guidelines to indicate when oral sources can be most reliably used, and to give us a reasonable strategy for when to doubt most, just as there are for other historical sources.

The basic tests of reliability—searching for internal consistency, cross-checking details from other sources, weighing evidence against a wider context—are just the same as for other sources. All are fallible and subject to bias, and each has varying strengths in different situations. In some contexts, oral evidence is the best; in others it is supplementary, or complementary, to that of other sources.

Recent analyses of retrospective survey interviews are interesting in this respect, for they indicate that information can be collected ‘with a reasonable degree of accuracy’ about employment histories, health and education, marital and fertility histories, and family characteristics.<sup>64</sup> This fits in well with the strengths that have been found in oral history evidence where they can be tested against other sources. But they can be of still greater value especially for fields for which little other evidence exists.

In the field of family history, for example, internal patterns of behaviour and relationships are generally inaccessible without oral evidence. The same is often true, in studying a strike, of the details of informal local organisation, or of deviant behaviour, such as blacklegging, or the normal devices like stealing fuel which helped families to survive with no income. The extreme case is the history of underground movements, such as the secret Jewish organisations in Nazi territory at the time of the Second World War. Yad Vashem, the great archive of the Holocaust in Jerusalem, has collected, besides some thirty million written documents relating to the persecution and extermination of Jewish communities in the Fascist period, more than twenty-five thousand oral testimonies. Collection was begun as early as 1944, and, immediately after the end of the war, offices were set up in many parts of Germany and elsewhere for collecting evidence. They have collected a wide range of material on social and cultural life, partly in order to preserve some record of communities whose history would otherwise have died with them.

Much more remarkable has been the ability to reconstruct, step by step, with the exactness and the patience which is needed for evidence which may need to be proved in court—and has regularly been tested in this way—accounts of both the persecution and resistance to it. When a large part of the Nuremberg trial evidence was subsequently lost by the Russians, Yad Vashem was able to reconstruct three-quarters of the missing documents. As one of the archive’s pioneers, Ball-Kaduri, knew from firsthand experience in Berlin, official documentation could not possibly provide an adequate record of the activity of Jewish leaders and their sympathisers, who, in order to evade detection by the Gestapo, were forced always to meet in private, and to use spoken communication only. Yad Vashem has indeed succeeded in preserving a history which, as Ball-Kaduri argued, written documents could never represent: ‘Was nicht in die Archiven steht’ (‘What is not in the archives’).

More often, the role of oral evidence is less dramatic, complementary or supplementary, re-interpreting and filling in gaps and weaknesses in the documents. The census of occupations, for example, is a very unsatisfactory record

of secondary and part-time occupations. Through interviews it is possible to discover how a tradesman combined his craft with running a public house, or a casual worker took a series of occupations in a seasonal cycle, or many women described as housewives took in work at home or went out to part-time jobs. The labourer, 'that catch-all title favoured by the Census enumerators, turns out in many cases not to have been a labourer at all, but a man with a definite calling—a holder-up in the shipyards, a winch man at the docks, a well-digger or drainer in the countryside, a carrier or a freelance navy'. Such complexities could not be caught by the single entry of the census record, even if the enumerator was sensitive to them. And since for more recent periods the individual entries are anyway not available, in the meantime it may also be more accurate in a quantitative as well as a qualitative sense to use oral evidence:

Of what value would be the knowledge that 30 per cent of the workers in a particular plant were Polish, if we knew from previous investigations that this geographical unit was far too large to be meaningful? On the other hand, the response of an informant that a single department, say metal-finishing, possessed a work force that was 90 per cent Polish might be off by a few points, or even by as much as to 10 or 15 percent, but it would be far closer to the truth than the census estimate, which would be unable to go any further than specifying that 30 per cent of the workers in the plant were Polish.<sup>65</sup>

Donald Ritchie, former oral historian at the US Senate, points out how interviews help to flesh out the interactions often deliberately hidden in institutional record keeping: 'I use oral histories to explain what the meetings were actually about: the legislative ploys and the back-room deals that are not recorded in the memos and minutes'. He goes on to describe a meeting where Lyndon Johnson was trying to induce the long-serving chair of the Foreign Relations Committee to resign and almost persuaded him, but overdid his eulogy—with the result that he began to reconsider. The minutes do not record the machinations which then took place, but interviews with two committee officers fill out the account and were proved accurate when a transcript of the meeting turned up much later.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, while court records and newspapers might provide the best evidence for a dispute over common rights, or the numbers of poachers convicted month by month, oral sources could be essential to discover how the commons were normally used, or how the poaching system—with its receivers, regulars, and casuals—was actually organised. In his study of Headington Quarry, Raphael Samuel found oral history most useful in explaining the social structure and pattern of everyday life, but least helpful in understanding a crisis, such as a political riot or a prolonged dispute over school discipline, for which the contemporary documentation was richer.

Interviews nevertheless probably do offer the best method for assessing the normal means used by teachers across the country for maintaining discipline in class. One critic of *The Edwardians*, contending that ‘interesting reminiscences ought not to be offered as a substitute for a clear understanding’, asserted that it is quite misleading to say that Edwardian teachers resorted en masse to corporal punishment. The debate over corporal punishment in state schools had begun in the 1890s, if not before, and many school boards had begun to restrict its use even if the NUT protested at its complete abolition. A knowledge of the NUT’s journal, *The Schoolmaster*, would have indicated this. This journal does indeed show that there was debate. And one could also learn from the *School Board Chronicle* that teachers were demanding the right to use the cane. But it is certainly not possible to gain from these documents any kind of evidence of the extent to which corporal punishment was normally tolerated anywhere, as it is from the witness of the children themselves.<sup>67</sup>

As every experienced oral historian knows, however, the simple assertion and counter-assertion that oral history sources are reliable or not, true or false for this or that purpose, obtained from this or that person, obscures the really interesting questions. The nature of memory brings many traps for the unwary, which often explains the cynicism of those less well informed about oral sources. Yet they also bring unexpected rewards to a historian who is prepared to appreciate the complexity with which reality and myth, ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’, are inextricably mixed in all human perception of the world, both individual and collective.

Remembering in an interview is a mutual process, which requires understanding on both sides. The historian always needs to sense how a question is being answered from another person’s perspective. For example, general questioning on the good—or bad—old days will encourage subjective and collective myths and impressions; while detailed questions can draw out the particular facts and accounts of everyday life which the social historian may be seeking. But this does not mean that the generalisations lack any validity. The misunderstanding comes partly just because the historian is attempting to see change from another time angle: the experience of one generation following another, rather than that of a single life cycle. When older people say that they enjoyed themselves more as children, or that neighbours were more friendly then, they may be perfectly properly evaluating their own changing experiences at different ages, whether or not their successor generations as children find neighbours just as friendly today. Similarly historians too easily forget that most people do not arrange their memories with calendar dates as markers, but more often in terms of key phases in their own lives.

In general, one of the keys lies in mutual interest. Thus a man might be fascinated by the technological evolution of the motor engine through his years as a garage mechanic, but considerably less well informed about the upbringing of his children. But it is also true that over-interest can also present problems.

An excessive concern with justifying the part they themselves played, as well as too much secondhand knowledge, is, no doubt, one reason why politicians are apt, especially when not cross-questioned, to give somewhat casual accounts of major incidents. 'My experience is that memories are very fallible as a rule on specific events', comments R. R. James, 'very illuminating on character and on atmosphere, matters on which documents are inadequate'. But if personal pride and political interest make caution necessary in evaluating the recollections of politicians, with ordinary people sheer lack of interest is likely to affect their memories of national events. Melvyn Bragg, for example, discovered that it was pointless trying to collect information on important but historic events like Acts of Parliament or international incidents which to Wigton people were remote:

A man will talk of the Second World War, not in terms of Rommel or Montgomery or Eisenhower, but in a way in which everyone who served under those generals would understand. And poverty in the Thirties to a woman with six children would not be in terms of coalition governments and social legislation and trade union demands, but soup-kitchens, shoes for the family, the memory of a day's outing to the seaside—the common body of daily life.<sup>68</sup>

It is partly due to greater interest, and to the interaction and interdependence of episodic and semantic memory which encode repeated events together with what we know about the world, that one can observe a general tendency for recurrent processes to be better remembered than single incidents. Thus a farm worker, in recalling an angry exchange with a farmer, may find the incident hard to place in time, and perhaps confuse the details with those of another similar occasion. But ask him about precisely how he handled his horses while ploughing, and it will be very, very rare for him to be wrong. A child's memories of a Coronation Day are more likely to be about how the day differed from other days, and to have much less detail than memories of the games they usually played, or of their best friends. In many events people do not know from direct observation at the time what is happening, so that their retrospective accounts will be as much based on what they learnt from the news or from others as from their own participation. Indeed, just because such secondhand impressions may be more powerful than their own experience of the original fleeting incident, especially if they become a well-established part of community memory, some people come to believe that they actually saw an incident, such as an air raid, which they in fact experienced at secondhand, through the newspapers or local talk.

It is certainly possible to reconstruct an event with oral evidence. But it is likely to prove a more difficult task, and unless this general tendency is understood, it may lead to serious misunderstandings. In his study of Henry Ford's

development of the popular, mass-produced motor car, Allan Nevins was able to make rich use of oral evidence in giving body to the story which he found in the company's documents. Nevins comments, as a veteran oral historian, that 'any man's recollection of past events is untrustworthy'. But he knew how to use evidence effectively. For example, he could use it to establish Ford's own personal methods of working in the factory, like his avoidance of office work and letter-answering, and to separate the various roles in the teamwork which went into the crucial Model T design. But in dating the introduction of the moving assembly line, he found that some Ford workers confused the first 'genuine attempt' of 1912 with an 'episodic . . . rope-hauling experiment' of four years earlier. Others correctly confirmed that there had not been a regular moving assembly line before the later date.<sup>69</sup>

### When stories are confusing

This telescoping of two separate events into one in the memory is a very common phenomenon. For some purposes, the historian's task will be to try to separate them, delicately probing deeper; but for others, this very reorganisation of the memory will be a precious indication of how a people's consciousness is constructed. Thus when Sandro Portelli interviewed Dante Bartolini, a veteran militant of the industrial town of Terni, north of Rome, he told him how in 1943 the workers broke down the munition factory gates, seized all the weapons, and escaped to the mountains to join the Partisans. Many of the workers had indeed joined the Partisans, where they established their own liberated zone, but they did not sack the factory in 1943, although Bartolini himself was one of those who seized arms in the factory after the arrest of the Italian Communist leader Togliatti in 1949. For Bartolini the resistance and the post-war industrial struggle are all part of a single history, eloquently conveyed in his symbolic story.

In a similar spirit, almost half the steelworkers whom Portelli interviewed placed the story of the post-war strikes with the killing of a worker by the police in 1953 rather than in 1949, and they shifted its context from a peace demonstration to the three days of barricades and street fighting which followed the firing of 2,700 men from the steelworks. In fact nobody was killed in those three days in 1953. But as Portelli argues, the facts are not the interesting point about the episode: 'The death of Luigi Trastulli would not mean so much to the historian if it were remembered "right". After all, the death of a worker at the hands of the police in post-war Italy is not such an uncommon event . . . What makes it meaningful is the way it operates in people's memories'. Thirty, forty years on, in the '*longue durée*' of memory, Trastulli's death still echoed in popular imagination. 'The facts that people remember (and forget) are themselves the stuff of which history is made'. The very subjectivity which some see as a weakness of oral sources can also make them uniquely valuable. For 'subjectivity is as much

the business of history as the more visible “facts”. What the informant believes is indeed a fact (that is, the fact that he or she believes it) just as much as what “really” happened.<sup>70</sup>

We may illustrate this with a memory from British labour history which is again ‘false’, but nevertheless significant. Lindsay Morrison and Roy Hay were investigating a strike which took place in 1911 at the Singer factory in Glasgow. With the help of the only surviving worker from the workforce of the time (aged over 100) and his son,

we did piece together a story about how the Singer Company tried to break the strike. According to their version, which we subsequently heard from other independent sources, the company paid the Post Office to make a special delivery of postcards to all those on strike. The delivery was carried out on the Sunday evening and the postcards announced that all those who failed to report for work at starting time on the Monday morning would be considered to have left the employ of the company . . .

Now, we checked this story as far as we could from written sources, newspapers, a manuscript history of the company, and contemporary accounts. We found that there was a delivery of postcards but that they were made in the normal way and that the message they contained was somewhat different. The company said that when 60 percent of the postcards they sent out had been returned, signifying the willingness of the workers to return on the previous terms, then the factory would be reopened. Obviously the pressure is here too and the firm was making a clear attempt to bypass the union. But perhaps in a less underhand way. Nevertheless, and this is the point I want to stress, subsequent labour relations in Singer’s seem to have been conditioned more by the first version, which seems to have circulated widely and been believed, than by the second. For some purposes, the fiction captured in oral evidence may be more important than ‘the truth’.<sup>71</sup>

Rumours do not survive unless they make sense to people. Seen in such a light, as Portelli puts it:

There are no ‘false’ oral sources . . . Once we have checked their factual credibility with all the established criteria of philological criticism that apply to every document, the diversity of oral history lies in the fact that ‘untrue’ statements are still psychologically ‘true’ and that these previous errors sometimes reveal more than factually accurate accounts . . . The credibility of oral sources is a *different* credibility. The importance of oral testimony may often lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in.<sup>72</sup>



As a further instance, Portelli recounts the story of Alfredo Filipponi, a former factory worker and tram driver, who had been secretary of the Communist underground in Terni under Fascism and a military commander of a Partisan brigade in 1943–44. As an older man, Filipponi had been bitterly disappointed by the failure to achieve a socialist society in Italy, and he believed that the crucial mistake had been the decision of the Communist leader Togliatti to participate in a democratic post-war Italy, rather than to continue an armed struggle for revolution. 'At that time, with the partisan struggle, we should almost have made it'. In support of this view, he gave Portelli a graphic account of a meeting of Partisan commanders in Terni which Togliatti addressed, and Filipponi challenged him: 'I disagree because, as Lenin said, when the thrush flies by, then it's the time to shoot. If you don't shoot when it flies by, you may never get another chance. Today the thrush is flying by: all the Fascist chiefs are in hiding and running away . . . This is the time: we strike, and make socialism'. Now this confrontation, and the meeting itself, too, were purely imaginary. Nor did Lenin ever use the metaphor of shooting the thrush: the image comes from a popular local hunting proverb. But the value of the story for Filipponi is in allowing him to conclude triumphantly, 'They got the warning; they had to admit that I was right later'. And for us, it gives an invaluable insight into the way of thinking of a militant Communist of his generation; not only about political tactics, but also in subsuming local popular culture and imagery through relabelling it as Marxist.<sup>73</sup>

Portelli uses the term 'uchronia', the idea of an alternative world of historical events, in writing about such 'imaginary tales'. He argues that they reveal 'inner, personal' conflicts between what someone might have desired and what actually happened. Hence they tell us how a narrator felt about past events which may have disappointed them or be a reminder of how distant a rank and file member felt from their leadership.<sup>74</sup> Molly Andrews similarly values insights from imagination. She answers the question, 'How should we approach critical moments in our interviews when a leap of faith is required?' by agreeing with Portelli, that 'personal narratives represent a personal truth, or truths, even if that truth does not coincide with reality'.<sup>75</sup>

History, in short, is not just about events, or structures, or patterns of behaviour, but also about how they are experienced and remembered in the imagination. And one part of history, what people imagined happened, and also what they believe might have happened—their imagination of an alternative past, and so an alternative present—may be as crucial as what did happen. This is the focus of the essays collected in *The Myths We Live By* (1990). The essays show how a variety of myths and images can shape experience in many different contexts. Thus the male descendants of Admiral Byng, who was shot for alleged cowardice in 1754, two centuries later still seem driven to reckless displays of bravery; immigrant Puerto Rican women in New York find models of the strength they need in idealised images of their mothers and grandmothers; or—within hours of the dispute beginning—small children who participate in an Italian school

strike create stories of heroic boys leaping from the upper floors and a villainous headmaster monopolising all the heaters.<sup>76</sup> And on a grander scale, it is clear that the building of collective memory can result in a historical force of immense power in its own right; as the epic struggles of the miners, or the repeated persecution of the Jews, or the obstinacy of the Boers, or the three centuries of religious battle in Northern Ireland, so eloquently and tragically testify.

The constructing and telling of both collective and individual memory of the past is an active social process, which demands both skill and art, learning from others, and imaginative power. In it stories are used above all to characterise communities and individuals, and to convey their attitudes. An old Ulsterman, Hugh Nolan, put it nicely: 'Well, do you see, the way it is, all good stories and good novels, they're all fiction . . . But even they're fiction, there bes a warning. And there bes information in them too'. As John Berger has remarked, the function of the stories of past and present which are told in a small community, 'this gossip which in fact is close, oral, daily history', is to define itself and its members. 'Every village's portrait of itself is constructed . . . out of words, spoken and remembered: out of opinions, stories, eyewitness reports, legends, comments and hearsay. And it is a continuous portrait; work on it never stops.'<sup>77</sup> Individual autobiography is less rich in resources. It draws, in a finite span, on what one person has experienced and learnt; and the core of it must be direct experience.

But stories are also commonly used in the telling of individual lives, in order to convey values; and it is the symbolic truth they convey, and not the facts of the incident described, which matters most. The encapsulation of earlier attitudes in a story is a protection, which makes them less likely to represent a recent reformulation, and therefore especially good evidence of past values. And this remains so when—as quite commonly in collective oral tradition, and also sometimes in individual life stories—the narrative draws not only on the reconstruction of direct experience, but on older legends and stories. One of my own first interviews was with a Shetlander, born in 1886, Willie Robertson. I asked how much contact the people had with the lairds (the landowners), a question bearing on their degree of class consciousness. He told me, as a true story, naming a particular laird, a burial folktale which is quite widespread in Scotland:

That was Gifford of Busta. He was one of the county property owners—the laird. And before he died, he'd left instructions that there were to be nobody to attend his funeral except his own kind, the lairds. Well all these people had to come a long distance to funerals and there was no conveyance except they came on horseback. And I have been at a funeral in my time where they give you refreshments: gave you whisky, a glass of whisky, or you could take a glass of wine. Now these lairds that came to Gifford's funeral got refreshments: liquid refreshments; maybe some other. Then they had to carry the remains, the funeral, four or five miles to the cemetery. Well they were always stopping and having more refreshments. And

one dropped out; two dropped out; till latterly there were only two; and they lay alongside the coffin. So they were out for the count. And an old crofter come by, and he saw Mr Gifford's remains in the coffin lying there, and these two men. He went across to his house and got a big rope; he took the coffin up on end and put the rope round him; and he took him to the grave and buried him himself. And his kind weren't to be allowed at the funeral. And he buried the laird.<sup>78</sup>

Willie Robertson may have been mistaken in believing his story to be literally true, but this cannot diminish its symbolic force as an answer. Funerals in the island communities of small farmers (crofters) and fishermen were normally occasions for the demonstration of the fundamental equality of all before God, and in the long walk to the cemetery every man would take his turn in bearing the coffin. In some it was even the convention for the better off to be deliberately paired with the poorest. But as he tells the story he draws not only on a folk tradition, but on his own political and religious ideas. Willie Robertson was an Elder of the Kirk, with a strong belief in temperance. He was also a shoemaker Socialist: a member of the SDF converted by outdoor speakers who came up north with the East Anglian herring boats. So his story is also a parable of the Good Samaritan, infused with a flavour of Marxist class consciousness.

### Forms and processes shaping stories

Although such a complex instance is relatively unusual in an ordinary life story, it does suggest the need for understanding the different forms and conventions which shape not only how we tell our stories when *narrating our pasts*,<sup>79</sup> but also enable *any* communications between people. Just as in a book, the needs of argument, of shape and length, press for the inclusion of some details and the omission of others, so in the telling of an ordinary story: the symbolic meaning and factual details must hang upon a form. 'No utterance whatsoever falls outside a *literary genre*', Vansina urges: study 'form and structure first, because they influence the expression of the content'. Such forms in oral sources have been principally analysed by anthropologists, and by folklorists interested in oral literature, rather than historians. In oral 'literature' distinctions are made between characteristic major genres, such as the group *legend*, the individual *anecdote*, the family *saga*, and the *folktale*.

Thus there is an international type-list of several hundred folktales, which enables archivists all over the world to recognise a tale, and to see how the version they have collected varies from the basic type, and what influences have contributed to these changes. Vansina can not only sift out the familiar stereotypes, 'fillers' and 'formulas', from the parts of a narrative which convey significant messages, but also confidently assert, for instance, from the systematic analysis of narratives from a whole region, that 'all migrations in the upper

Nile are caused by a quarrel between brothers over an item of little value'. Most European oral historians must work without such an accumulation of experience to help them. The individual anecdote and the family history can be subjected to the same formal analysis, as indeed is shown in the edited collection *Narrative and Genre* (1998), but much more such work is needed.<sup>80</sup>

The way in which the story is learnt also needs to be more closely studied. In France, for example, village children are taken by their parents or grandparents to the cemetery to teach them the history of the family. A wedding photograph hung on the wall and a reunion of war veterans or workmates are all mechanisms for the reconstruction of memory. But these mechanisms vary significantly between different social groups and localities. Among the French Protestant minority in the Alpine foothills of Drome, memory of the past is not of a timeless rhythm of life and work, as for their Catholic neighbours, but of a long, tragic history, a history of struggle and persecution, clandestinity, exodus, and resistance. Here children were shown the secret assembly places in the woods, the beams from which martyrs were hanged. 'A Protestant had no right to be born, or to marry, or even to die'. And so deep was the mark of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century persecution that the more recent past came to be remembered in just the same mould: the 1851 insurrection not for its marches and clashes but in its repression and, similarly, the Second World War.<sup>81</sup>

The study of the differing processes of transmission has been carried furthest among the anthropologists and historians of Africa, due to their special dependence on oral sources. A clear distinction must be made between personal oral histories—eyewitness accounts—which are relatively easy to evaluate, and oral traditions, which are handed down by word of mouth to later generations. This latter process can be quite different in two adjacent societies. In northern Ghana Jack Goody found a sharp contrast between one centralised tribal society, in which a relatively fixed, brief myth is handed down by official utterers, and another society, decentralised, in which performance of the collective myth (the Bagre) is *intended* to be local and creative, so that it continually changes, and different versions from different groups have astonishingly little in common.<sup>82</sup>

Other Africanists have tried to disentangle the process by which immediate memory is transformed into formal tradition. This can sometimes be quite rapid: the lives of African prophets, for example, can be transformed into myths within a space of two or three years. With war memories the key change seems to come after there are no longer any direct witnesses. Even so, feelings and emotions about land and lifestyles from which communities have been displaced live on in some societies through song and music, as Angela Impey discovered. She talked to older Maputo women in South Africa about the instruments they played, jews' harps and mouthbows. Talking and playing evoked memories of places and landscapes: 'It reminds me of my sisters who would walk with me across the flood plains at Banzi Pan to visit our relatives in Mozambique or to

the store in Swaziland to buy sugar'. Ruth Finnegan points out that memories are embedded in social traditions and how performance, 'creating and re-enacting . . . [are] forms of verbal art and oral tradition'.<sup>83</sup>

However, once none of an audience can remember details of an event, or have their own perceptions and opinions about it, what is needed is a simplified, stylised account which concentrates on the meaning of the story. The time limit thus marks a great sorting-out process, in which some stories are discarded, and others are synthesised, restructured, and stereotyped.

It is hardly surprising, since dates are rarely a strong point even of immediate memory, to find that 'weakness in chronology is one of the greatest limitations of all oral traditions'. All is not always lost: Paul Irwin has been able to show, for instance, that the sub-Saharan Liptako in Upper Volta correctly remember their emirs and also the wars of succession between them, at least back to the 1820s. Both here, and in other comparisons from the Pacific between written records and oral tradition, the inaccuracies are far from one-sided. But equally interesting are the distortions: the incorporation of European motifs into traditional history, like the 'wild blackfellow image' of a free past which is now recounted by the North Australian Ngalakan Aborigines, the upholding of false claims to distinctiveness in customs from neighbouring people, the dropping of undesirable rulers from king lists, and the manipulation of genealogies in order to claim land or property, which is 'a very common use of genealogies all over the world'.<sup>84</sup>

Above all, consciously and unconsciously, memories which are discreditable, or positively dangerous, are most likely to be quietly buried. 'Forget that story; if we tell it our lineage will be destroyed', exclaimed a Tanzanian in the Nango royal capital at Vugha: his family had a history of conflict with the rulers. Few Germans wish to explore their own family's contribution to the liquidation of the Jews. Even the survivors of such massacres often want to forget, to put the memory behind them, as much as to tell what they had suffered; as Quinto Osano, Fiat metalworker, survivor of the Mauthausen concentration camp, put it, 'Yes, we always want it to be told, but inside us we are trying to forget; right inside, right in the deepest parts of the mind, of the heart. It's instinctive: to try to forget, even when we are getting others to recall it. It's a contradiction, but that's how it is'. Perhaps this is why the oral traditions of the Australian Ngalaka omit all mention of their decimation by European massacres.<sup>85</sup>

Similarly, in Turin, stronghold of the Italian working-class movement, the humiliating phase of Fascist domination is typically skipped in factory workers' spontaneous life stories: a self-censoring silence which Luisa Passerini sees as a deep 'scar, a violent annihilation of many years in human lives which bears witness to a profound wound in daily experience'. Later she would elaborate on her thinking about silence and forgetting, pointing to the 'defiance' of the Roma forgetting as a response to the lack of international recognition of their treatment compare to that of European Jews in the Holocaust. She points to the

role of 'imposed oblivion', a 'democratic dialectic' in the case of Spain when, for two or three years after the dictator Franco's death in 1975, it seemed necessary to exercise an amnesty of memories in order to be able to recover some kind of political democracy. For her, silences are to be understood only within their cultural contexts and it is the job of the historian to identify which silence is more significant, why and how it exists, and when and how it may or may not be exposed.<sup>86</sup>

The extreme instance of forced forgetting was Soviet Russia, which became a society pervasively wrapped in silence for seventy years, so that families would teach their children not to speak of their ancestry—especially if some were bigger peasants or Jews—and a couple might marry without ever revealing that each were ex-prisoners from the gulag. Even photographs were regarded as dangerous memories, so that family albums might have group photographs with one member cut out from the print, or ex-soldiers who had been on the wrong side would have their medals cut out. But even there, as Orlando Figes notes, there were the 'whisperers'. He points out that Russian has two words for a 'whisperer': the whisperers who colluded with the authorities, and those who were unintentionally overheard. In the essays collected in *Trauma and Life Stories*, the ambivalence in memories which bring acute pain, and yet need to be heard, is explored in other contexts, from the experiences of Argentinian veterans of the Malvinas war whom everyone wanted to forget, or black Jews who fled from Ethiopia to a Promised Land which did not want them, to the Guatemalan Indian widows forbidden to mourn their men by the army which had massacred them.<sup>87</sup>

Family traditions are also well known for their silences and secrets. As Annette Kuhn remarks, 'A family without secrets is rare indeed. People who live in families make every effort to keep certain things concealed from the rest of the world, and at times from each other as well. Things which are lied about, or simply never mentioned . . . Secrets haunt our memory-stories, giving them pattern and shape. Family secrets are the other side of a family's face, of the stories families tell themselves, and the world, about themselves'. Thus Carolyn Steedman never learnt that her parents were unmarried and she was illegitimate, until after her father had died. Jan Vansina, who came from a Belgian village rich in oral tradition, and was first struck by its value when he found the villagers rejected the official version of history taught at school, later found out, after sixteen years of consistent checking, that his own family history was only half reliable. The basic economic story of how his grandfather, in a situation of developing industrialisation, went in for growing cauliflowers, is quite correct. But there are more peripheral parts which have either been forgotten as less creditable, or, like the family's distant origins in Milan, created from mis-memories of a visit to north Italy: 'Half these stories are not true. They are an image setting. They are necessary for the pride of someone'.<sup>88</sup>

The discovery of distortion or suppression in a life story is not, it must again be emphasised, purely negative. Even a lie is a form of communication which

can provide clues, as the anthropologist Frank Salamone suggests. Interviewing in Nigeria, he was aware that a young man was lying to him about his sexual activity and that they both knew this. He describes this as 'cultural lying', since it was not possible in Hausa society for a younger man to talk to an older man, especially a European, about such matters. But in order to read these clues, we must develop a sensitivity to the social pressures which bear on them and also a recognition that family dynamics rather than culture may explain what is revealed and to whom. Urvasi Butalia has interviewed women in India who were raped or abducted during Partition. She describes a reluctance to tell stories which may never have been told because 'what they had seen was indescribable' and because they may have told their stories to some family members and not to others. A typical autobiography written for public consumption may be quite open about family tensions in childhood, but will very rarely reveal difficulties in the writer's own marriage; and less sharply, the same contrast is found when interviewing. Sexual experience is particularly likely to be censored or not told at all.<sup>89</sup>

On the other hand, people may be much more willing to talk intimately in a sympathetic interview situation. Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher carried out oral history interviews with eighty-nine men and women from middle- and working-class backgrounds whose sexual lives began in the period between the two world wars. They were mainly aged between mid-seventies and mid-nineties at the time of the interviews, between 1998 and 2001. In contrast to the advice in methods literature on interviewing about intimate relationships, Szreter and Fisher found little difficulty when asking people to talk. However, their approach was carefully worked out, from an initial point of contact through local authority day centres and social groups, where they made a short presentation about the project, to the interview situation itself where questions were asked in an unstructured way, at someone's home, with interviews which were often long and repeated. Szreter and Fisher point out how 'many interviewees welcomed the chance to reminisce about their lives for as long as they wished ... The use of unstructured interviews ... allowed them to direct the conversation to a considerable extent'. June, born in 1914, was not untypical:

You are crafty, aren't you, asking all these questions? ... When she [a friend] mentioned it on Monday ... I said ... 'Well. I've enjoyed it'. I says, 'It's been nice talking about'. I just put it like that; it's been nice going back and thinking about the old times. I said, 'You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to answer' (laughs) ... I said, 'Anything personal if you don't want to discuss', I said, 'you don't discuss'. I thought I'd better put her mind at rest ... So I just sort of said, 'Well I'm comfortable [with what] I said and I've enjoyed it'. I said, 'I've enjoyed her company and I've enjoyed going back in time', you see, which is nice.<sup>90</sup>



With an opportunity to interview more than once, it may become easier to get beyond what is presented as a public story, if an interviewee feels confident about confiding. One study of deprived families, for example, found that it took several interviews for their informants to move from presenting the answer they thought was socially desirable to one which represented their own views. 'When Elsie Barker was asked how many brothers and sisters she had, her answer in the second interview was that she was the third child out of six. It was only much later that she explained that the three younger children were in fact the daughters of an elder sister, Brenda, who had committed suicide. Because they were brought up with her, she had always thought of them and continued to think of them as sisters rather than nieces. Elsie had at first omitted all mention of Brenda'. The full story was not merely too complicated for a simple answer, but introduced a painful, shameful family memory. Yet it was hidden, rather than irrecoverable. The combination of facts given at different times, through this process of recovery, gives us much more significant information than the bare facts themselves.<sup>91</sup>

The possibility of recovery, of gradually unpeeling the layers of memory and consciousness, is a crucial distinction between direct personal memory and an oral tradition several generations old. In recent years oral traditions have become accepted as a legal form of evidence in relation to indigenous people's land claims in the courts of Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. However, earlier a good many anthropologists have argued that oral traditions are so malleable under social pressures, so continually shaped and re-shaped by changing social structures and consciousness, that their value is not only purely symbolic, but that they are valid only for the present. Vansina vigorously rebuts such extreme functionalism: while it is true that 'all messages have some intent which has to do with the present, otherwise they would not be told in the present and the tradition would die out', the notion that traditions retain no messages at all from the past is an absurd exaggeration. Social changes lead as often to additions, leaving older variations and archaisms intact, as to suppression, and suppressed items usually leave traces. If nothing from the past were left, 'where would social imagination find the stuff to invent from? How does one explain cultural continuities?' Researchers on oral tradition have indeed most recently assumed this mix of continuities and invention, as well as the interaction with printed sources, and interestingly, in recent studies, for example on praise poems in southern Africa or on Indian historical traditions in the Colombian Andes, have identified 'reinvention' and creativity as signs not of cultural pollution but of social adaptiveness and vigour. Vansina cogently sums up the debate:

Yes, oral traditions are documents *of the present*, because they are told in the present. Yet they also embody a message *from the past* at the same

time. One cannot deny either the present or the past in them. To attribute their whole content to the evanescent present as some sociologists do, is to mutilate tradition; it is reductionistic. To ignore the impact of the present as some historians have done, is equally reductionistic. Traditions must always be understood as reflecting both past and present in a single breath.<sup>92</sup>

Such a vigorous defence is scarcely needed for direct personal memory, although the argument would apply here, too; the balance of influences is clearly different. Quite often the myth-makers turn out to be not the direct participants, but the reporters, even the historians. The 'classic' southern Spanish anarchist rising in the village of Casa Viejas, seen by Eric Hobsbawm and other historians as a revolutionary response to hunger, 'utopian, millenarian, apocalyptic', has been shown by Jerome Mintz from direct testimony of the villagers themselves—with whom he lived for three years—to have been a conscientious but ill-conceived insurrection following the call from Barcelona militants during the 1933 general strikes in the cities. The village had not been a well-organised anarchist stronghold; the rising was brutally suppressed before its people had time even to divide up the land, let alone inaugurate a utopian society; and the man who held out longest was not its charismatic leader, but a heroic and unpolitical charcoal-burner. The myth of Casa Viejas survived because it suited the beliefs of both the Fascist authorities and the left, providing scapegoats and heroes. And through the Franco decades the survivors had to keep quiet, too: 'It's right and natural that not knowing someone well, one would lie. One has to protect oneself'.<sup>93</sup> But they still knew.

For direct memory, the past is much closer than in tradition. For each of us, our way of life, our personality, our consciousness, our knowledge are directly built out of our past life experience. Our lives are cumulations of our own pasts, continuous and indivisible. And it would be purely fanciful to suggest that the typical life story could be largely invented. Convincing invention requires a quite exceptional imaginative talent. The historian should confront such direct witness neither with blind faith, nor with arrogant scepticism, but with an understanding of the subtle processes through which all of us perceive, and remember, the world around us and our own part in it. It is only in such a sensitive spirit that we can hope to learn the most from what is told to us.

The historical value of the remembered past rests on three strengths. First, as we have demonstrated, it can and does provide significant and sometimes unique information from the past. Secondly, it can equally convey the individual and collective consciousness which is part and parcel of that very past.

More than that, the living humanity of oral sources gives them a third strength which is unique. For the reflective insights of retrospection are by no means always a disadvantage. It is 'precisely this historical perspective which allows us to assess long-term meaning in history', and we can only object to receiving

such retrospective interpretations from others—provided we distinguish them as such—if we want to eject those who lived through history from any part in assessing it. If the study of memory ‘teaches us that all historical sources are suffused by subjectivity right from the start’, the living presence of those subjective voices from the past also constrains us in our interpretations, allows us, indeed obliges us, to test them against the opinion of those who will always, in essential ways, know more than ourselves.<sup>94</sup> We simply do not have the liberty to invent which is possible for archaeologists of earlier epochs, or even for historians of the early modern family. We could not have presumed that parents did not suffer deeply from the deaths of their children, just because child death was so ordinary, without asking.

We are dealing, in short, with living sources who, just because they are alive, have, unlike inscribed stones or sheaves of paper, the ability to work with us in a two-way process. So far we have concentrated on what we can learn from them. But the telling of their story can also have its impact on them. And on ourselves too.

# 8

## Memory and the Self

Sometimes when starting an oral history interview the interviewer may sense that the interviewee has an audience and a message in mind. This audience may be as vague as posterity, or as specific as members of their family, their community, or their working group. The desire to speak about oneself, to reflect on one's life, to claim an identity, or to share the burden of a troubling or harrowing experience will not always fit with the interviewer, who may have approached the interviewee with quite another theme in mind. Reflections, emotions, and feelings may not seem relevant to a study of, for example, changes in the environment, or the development of an organisation or a new social movement. By contrast other interviewers will be primarily interested in exploring motives and intentions, with the idea that only an oral source will allow the unpicking of layers of memory, to dig back to reach a hidden truth about someone and their involvements. Yet whatever the intended focus, an oral history interview will always imply engaging with the self of another person, with who they think they are. For memory and the self are inextricably interconnected.

Today's obsession with the self, with self-expression, narration, and projection through new as well as traditional communications media in innumerable cultural forms and occasions, might suggest that this is a new interest, generated by a neo-liberalism that individualises and privatises so much of our lives. The history of the self suggests the need for a more complex understanding.

In the West the idea of a separate self, sometimes called a soul, with a conscience and individual intentions and the ability to separate itself in reflection from others, is first found in the writings of the early Greeks and Romans.<sup>1</sup> Since the Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century, there has been much philosophical discussion about the self. Perhaps most dominant has been the Kantian idea of the self as being independent of time and place, the spirit of an independent, active, and reflective individual, resistant to dominant ideologies, and able to determine how things are or should be through explanation and reason. Critics of this idea argue that the self that is capable of such reflection is itself a product of the world around it and so necessarily incorporates interactions with that world, from the earliest moments of an infant's life.<sup>2</sup> But the continual

process of social change makes this a complex undertaking. As societies change, as old orders disappear, uncertainties about the future, and sometimes the past, too, generate complexity. More recent writers, such as Foucault and Giddens, see the self as fracturing and fragmenting as individuals respond to risk, change, and the multiple opportunities and challenges of the contemporary world.<sup>3</sup>

In all this, memory plays a key part, providing connectedness, and through storytelling and narration a way of communicating experience and the life of the self. Jerome Bruner, a strong proponent of narrative as a crucial source of identity, also suggests how culture can shape how lives are narrated. Thus in Western societies the concept of life stages, and a shared chronology of events and changes, has shaped how lives are told, whereas there are other societies in which external forces are given much more prominence.<sup>4</sup>

Even within a given culture, how the self is presented is shaped by the occasion, the line of questioning, the destination of the interview, and the relationship with the interviewer. Being interviewed is a common—and usually very fruitful—element in the training of oral historians. Contrast this with the much more desperate context of asylum seekers who are pushed, as Caroline Moorehead observes, towards ‘necessary lies’: ‘Telling “good stories” to win asylum has become common practice among refugees terrified that their own real story is not powerful enough. How natural it is to shape the past in such a way that it provides more hope for a better future.’<sup>5</sup>

Alexander Freund argues similarly, but more controversially, that the oral history interview should be similarly viewed as being part of an evolving practice: the confessional relationship. He proposes that the oral history interview should be understood as being in the tradition of the religious confession, as ‘a tool with which confessions are extracted’, although without the coercive backing of church doctrine and more extreme sanctions, such as those used by the Inquisition of the past and in contemporary torture. He suggests that while oral historians use less brutal coercion, ‘psychological manipulation—intended or not—is frequently part of the interview’.<sup>6</sup> Echoing Foucault, he sees both the confessional and the interview as power relationships, and pushes the argument further, arguing that quasi-confessional talk in the oral history interview is an accepted and generally recognised process today. The revealing of the self, the admission of guilt, the desire to disclose the truth and to unburden oneself from shame and guilt shapes how the self is presented and told. It is a form and process recognisable not only from religious confession but also from television and social media. However, the whole practice of oral history centres on co-operation and consent and against coercion. Moreover, practising in a culture and in a society in which self-revelation has become more and more acceptable, oral historians have little need to use manipulation, coercion, or rewards such as recovery from mental illness or forgiveness of sins. In short, Freund suggests a role for the interviewer that is much closer to being a priest or a psychoanalyst than most oral historians would choose or claim.

But for a minority of oral historians, this has proved a tempting, fascinating, and fruitful path to explore. And why, indeed, not seize our chance, unique to us among historians, to ease our informants back onto the couch and, like psychoanalysts, tap their unconscious, draw out the very deepest of their secrets?

It is a beguiling call. Psychoanalysis is the magic of our time. The strange power of psychoanalysts to hear and to heal, to release trapped anger and shame from pasts we had forgotten and, through expression, to put them to rest, to win our love through listening to us and then to give it back to us as a new strength in our own self-confidence—in short, through penetrating to the deepest intimacy that we have shared with anyone, to change our most secret, inner selves—by its nature cannot be fully anticipated or logically comprehended. That alone makes it as threatening as it is compelling. Add a mysterious theory of the unconscious built around our personal sexuality, which is both the taboo and the altar of Western culture, and it is no wonder that their power makes psychoanalysts—and still more, psychiatrists, with their battery of drugs in the cupboard to offer solace to the mind—the witches, and also the oracles, of the twenty-first century. And for historians in particular they present the double challenge, professional as well as personal, of alternative professions manipulating the past according to different rules.

Like it or not, however, few oral historians are going to be able to practise psychoanalysis. It requires years of a different training. Equally important, oral history interviews are based on the assumption of other purposes: our informants cannot be asked to lie on their backs, to open their minds in free association, to talk while the interviewer keeps silent, or to report daily with notes on their dreams and fantasies. But oral historians certainly can learn a good deal from psychoanalysis about the potential of their own craft—both for themselves, and for their informants. Indeed, thinking about the implications of psychoanalysis has undoubtedly provided one major stimulus for the advances in our understanding of oral memory as evidence.

Thus Michael Roper, who is a historian of the psychoanalytic movement in Britain and also an oral historian, argues that we need to look beyond the surface interaction of interviewer and interviewee:

I am struck by a sense that something is missing, and that the reflexive turn does not quite capture the more subterranean aspects of the interview relationship . . . Such accounts are rarely attuned to what would for the psychoanalyst be a fundamental feature of any encounter; that is, the unconscious material which, on both sides, is being brought into the relationship.

He draws two points from this. The first is that to interpret a life story convincingly you need to explore the shaping of subjectivity in early family life. He cites Leonore Davidoff: 'It is within the family—however that has been

constituted—that formation of both body and psyche, literally and symbolically, first takes place'. Secondly he suggests that as well as analysing *an* interview for the new understanding it brings, we should think about what drew interviewer and interviewee to this particular interview and their ability to identify with, but not succumb to, the emotions expressed within the encounter.<sup>7</sup>

In many instances interest in the relationship between therapy and oral history has arisen through personal experience. We are fortunate to have a detailed exploration of this process by a leading oral historian, in Ronald Fraser's *In Search of a Past* (1984). This rare, original, and fascinating book would have made a marvellous piece of social history in itself. Fraser interviewed his own parents' servants. Through their sharp eyes he reconstructs the Home Counties upper-class social world of the 1930s, and the transformation wrought when the hunting ceased and the social fences came down in the Second World War. The servants' words give us, tellingly, the complex mixture of loyalty and hostility which bound both servant to servant and servant to employer; and also, chillingly, the emotional emptiness at the heart of the manor house family—the loveless couple, and their lonely, snooty son. But Fraser's courage and originality is to bring together and interweave these painful childhood memories with two other dialogues: with his father, once daunting, now pathetic and bewildered, his mind disintegrated to a blur in which patches of memory float loose, on the way to his end in an old people's home; and the second in discussion about his own memories with his psychoanalyst. The result is a completely new form of autobiography, confronting the great issues of time and class, yet intensely intimate.

It is also a fugue on the nature of memory. The apparently straightforward life story evidence of the servants is shown, by juxtaposition, to have its own silences and evasions, for example on the sexual relations between them; it is set against the severely eroded memory of the old man, which may be the fate of their minds, too; and it provides material for Fraser's unpeeling of his own unconscious memory in his psychoanalysis. It was his nanny, for instance, who told him how he was fed and changed on the clock, and potted from the age of four months: 'Later, I tied you on your pot to the end of the bed until you produced.'

Through his therapy, Fraser not only gives vent to his anger against his parents, but comes to understand how the social division between employers and servants in his childhood home was also an emotional split which he carried into adulthood. His tough, practical nanny was as much a mother to him as his elusive, beautiful mother; while it was the resentful gardener, who so hated his father's silent arrogance, who became the lonely boy's closest daily companion, listened to him, taught him to plant, to value working with his hands—a second father. It was the gardener who, through emotionally attaching him to a working man, unknowingly opened the political path which Fraser took much later, when he turned against the values of his class along with those of his rejecting father.



Thus, while at the start the psychoanalyst seemed to be looking for something quite different from the past than Fraser's own interest as a historian in the material world, in what really happened, brushing aside abstract theorising to concentrate on *feelings* about the past and on relationships between people, Fraser found by the end of his 'voyage of inner discovery' through analysis that the two dimensions of understanding had become part of a single interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

This does not mean, however, that such an interpretation could only have been reached through psychoanalysis. It would have been an equally typical outcome of the group discussion which takes place in family therapy, drawing out underlying feelings through direct confrontation with other family members in a situation where expressing them is safe, indeed expected. The specific techniques of free association and dream analysis are not part of this therapeutic approach. Nevertheless, it is as effective in uncovering the complexity of contradictory emotions, of intertwined love and anger, which are typical of intimate relationships; and still more so, through the insights brought from a family systems theory which looks for the structuring of relationships, in pointing to the equally characteristic intergenerational influences in emotional patterns.<sup>9</sup>

Take the case, explored in a family therapy session—and for this reason anonymised here—of a north Italian small businessman's beautiful teenage daughter, who was slowly starving herself to death. What was her protest about? The family could not understand, and the school, where she was working hard and doing well, could offer no clues. Desperate, they came for help to a charismatic family therapist in the big city. Their first accounts of each other were typically restrained: the children thought their mother could perhaps be a bit more independent, while she spoke of her husband as a good man whose only problem was that he never laughed, he was always so serious and sad. But it took scarcely an hour in the consulting room to lift the veil from the family secrets which had paralysed them all.

The husband came from a well-to-do family, but had married one of his father's maids after getting her pregnant. For him the affair had been a rebellion against his own father, who dominated his 'saintly' depressed mother; for the maid, a release from family poverty. But instead of escaping, they trapped themselves in the grandparents' problems, imposing them on their own children. He had done the honourable thing, but he had never forgiven his wife for seducing him and spoiling his life. He preferred to spend his free time with his own parents, sharing a common scorn of '*la serva*'. The wife found him always severe, hard with her, unable to listen to her problems, and his scarcely concealed anger had driven her into recurrent depression; the husband found her intolerably overemotional, was sick of her family's problems; the children complained of her crying and shouting.

Emotionally, rather than being committed to each other as a couple, both husband and wife remained primarily attached to their families of origin. Her family were not only socially inferior to his, but had remained much poorer,

and her bitterest complaint against him was his refusal to give money to help her sisters, while he saw her family as a recurrent drain on his resources, always asking for more. Yet he insisted that each Sunday she must cook a family meal for his own parents, who shared his resentment against her and her people. In this deadlock of emotional and class antagonism, the Sunday cooking was a form of hatred.

Even though none of them had understood before, it was clear enough now that the teenage daughter's refusal of food was a cry against the hidden but intolerable conflict between her parents. Her action was its mirror opposite: rather than food as hatred, starvation as love.

Family therapy is another special situation in which inner truths quite often emerge more quickly than in psychoanalysis. It has the advantage of interpreting the individual needs not in isolation, but in a social context. Through its perspective we can explore just why in one family each generation of sons quarrels with its fathers, while another hands down both the skills and ambition to succeed in just the same family profession; why in one family neither fathers nor sons can commit themselves to a single, sustained love relationship, but must always keep mistresses. In another it is the strong women who call the tune and the men flit through like marginal episodes; and in yet another, depressed mothers are followed by depressed daughters. This exploration of the diversity of ordinary experience is far more rewarding than the crude applications of individual psychoanalytic theory to whole cultures, which has unfortunately typified 'psychohistory'.<sup>10</sup> It is also much closer to the extraordinary variety in individual lives which oral historians typically discover and need to explain. One of the principal lessons to be drawn from both kinds of therapy is the need for an enhanced historical sensitivity to the power of emotion, of unconscious desire, rejection, and imitation, as an integral part of the structure of ordinary social life and of its transmission from generation to generation.

Similarly, it is not the specific techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of dreams which matter most, but the attention which it has drawn to the pervasiveness of symbolism in our conscious world. We could well ask for dreams from our own informants, for their nightmare fears, or their fantasies while daydreaming on the assembly line; and to learn the most from such expressions of their inner wishes and anxieties, we should obviously need to spot the typical tricks of 'dreamwork', its condensation of messages, reversals, substitutions, metaphors, wordplay, and visual images, through which dreams convey their symbolic messages. These tricks are one reason for the frightening power of fantasy and nightmare. But it is equally rewarding to know that these devices are also normal clues to the symbolic meaning of consciously conveyed messages: of social customs like rough music, or of jokes, or of traditional myths and personal stories.

They can also indicate the preoccupations of a community. Portelli contrasts symbolic Italian snake-handling in the Abruzzi area of Italy, where a statue of

St. Paul is covered in snakes, with live snake-handling rituals in the coal-mining American Appalachians. In the Abruzzi, the snakes are simply shown, without their deadly teeth, while in the Appalachians, poisonous snakes are handled in religious rituals despite being genuinely dangerous. Portelli sees these rituals as tests of faith in a community experiencing death and poverty. 'By taking up serpents and juggling them around, worshippers express and exorcise the awareness of daily danger by literally taking death and life in their own hands'. As J. C. Hall, a coal miner, told him:

I believe in handling snakes and believe in the word of God. The Bible says you shall pick up serpents, drink deadly poison, they will not hurt you, so, all my people done it, three generations . . . Some of my uncles, they've been bit. They just pray on it, and go sit down and eat a big meal and pray, and Lord, He'll heal.<sup>11</sup>

More directly, the re-interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis by Jacques Lacan brought special attention to the role of language as part of the symbolism. He believed that the unconscious is structured like a language, and he saw the acquisition of sexual and personal identity as a simultaneous and always precarious process, whose foundations are laid as the human infant enters language, through being spoken to, listening, and learning to talk. Masculinity and femininity are therefore imposed on the infant's inner psyche, long before sex differences have any immediate meaning, through the unconscious cultural symbolism of gender embedded in language. Lacan's reformulation of Freud's essentially male perspective on the development of human personality is less radical than those of Klein and Chodorow earlier; and, partly because he has put it forward in such willfully incomprehensible 'symbolic' language, as a theory it stands up much less well to logical criticism.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, it has undoubtedly helped feminists to show the inadequacies of straightforward deductions from the differences between male and female social achievement, and the hollowness of policies for equal opportunities which ignore the weight of culture. Right from those earliest moments of developing social consciousness, the little girl learns that she is a female entering a culture which privileges masculinity and therefore privileges men, just as in language itself the masculine form always takes priority as the norm and the feminine only enters as the exception. To take a positive place in the world of culture, she must fight from the start, but it is an unequal fight. In cultures with pictorial scripts, the same lessons will be internalised for a second time, as she learns to read her language: a Chinese girl will discover that the character for a man is made from the symbols of 'field' and 'strength', while that for a woman comes from 'loom' or 'womb'.<sup>13</sup>

The internalisation of such attitudes is equally clearly revealed in the different ways in which men and women may recall their pasts. It is not only that

their memories tend to focus differently, men more readily talking about work, women about family life, and also that women are likely to find it easier to talk about remembered feelings than men. They also use words differently. Even in childhood, girls are much more likely than boys to report what others said in detail. And among older men and women, Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame observed how among migrants to Paris from the French countryside, 'the men consider the life they have lived as their own', as a series of self-conscious acts, with well-defined goals; and in telling their story they use the active 'I', assuming themselves as the subject of their actions through their very forms of speech. Women, by contrast, talked of their lives typically in terms of relationships, including parts of other life stories in their own; and very often spoke as 'we', or 'one', symbolising the relationship which underlies that part of their life: 'we' as 'my parents and us', or as 'my husband and me', or as 'me and my children'.<sup>14</sup>

This is not, however, a universal difference. It depends partly on the cultural context. Thus, in the Caribbean, women may often present themselves actively, reflecting the pivotal roles they play in both family and work. The focus of the interview may be another factor. Kate Fisher wanted to explore how the changing birth control practices of interwar married couples led to the small family becoming normal from the 1920s onwards in Britain. She was interested in gender roles and recorded unstructured interviews with both men and women. Men, she found, were much more ready to speak and to tell, whereas 'the women were much more laconic, hesitant and evasive, less expansive and more uncertain'. Birth control was an aspect of married life that, as she discovered, was highly gendered in ways that had not previously been understood. Men's greater openness was linked to their wanting to be seen as knowledgeable about contraception, while the women talked of leaving decisions to their husbands. Understood in this light, life stories reveal unsuspected and important new messages, including the need to situate the internalisation of gender in specific generations and contexts.<sup>15</sup>

Lastly, we can understand more from what is not said. Again it is not the specific theories of psychoanalysis which prove most useful, so much as a new sensibility, an ability to notice what might have been missed. Freud's own original belief in total memory looks now more like a nineteenth-century fantasy wish to recapture the past, and has certainly no scientific basis, even though it has been so influential that most psychologists apparently 'believe all memories potentially retrievable'.<sup>16</sup> Freud was almost certainly wrong in explaining the absence of memories of infancy through repression: it is much more probable that infant experience is forgotten because the long-term memory is not yet organised than that it is suppressed because it is shameful. Nor will it help us much to consider whether or not the typical 'resistance' of the analysand—secretive, hidden, obdurate—might be understood through the analogy of childhood refusals to be fed or weaned or to defecate in the right place. The important lesson is to learn to watch for what is not being said, and to consider

the meanings of silences. And the simplest meanings are quite likely to be the most convincing.

What we may hope to gain through the influence of psychoanalysis is an acuter ear for the subtleties of memory and communication, rather than the key to a hidden chamber. What is typically repressed is also typically present—such as sex. What the unconscious holds may differ in proportion, and in power, but not in kind: it is simply human experience, accidentally or actively forgotten for all the reasons which we have seen. Concentration camp survivors dream about food and torture. The real world moulds even the delusions of the wholly mad. Victorian schizophrenics wove their fantasies around religion, while contemporary schizophrenics fantasise about sex; but both take off from the everyday concerns of their time. Fantasy and the unconscious are in the end no more than the reordering of lives. Sometimes they may present the world upside down; and they certainly have the power to change how people act in reality. The unconscious is there as a force behind every life story. But the mould of civilisation and its discontents is clear enough, from whichever side of consciousness we perceive it.

The emotions of people living in societies different from our own, in terms of both time and space, enable us to dig deeper into lives and relationships, making connections with ourselves but also noting the uniqueness of a particular way of life. While common humanity suggests that the experiences of death, love, and separation have always been keenly felt, in other ways there are many discontinuities between different cultures and communities. Hence we need ways to get a feel for life at other times, even within living memory.

Raymond Williams, theorist of culture, proposed a term, 'structure of feeling', to encompass what he calls 'a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience'. He suggested that there are 'three levels of culture'. These are, first, 'the lived culture of a particular time and place, only fully accessible to those living in that time and place. There is the recorded culture, of every kind, from art to the most everyday facts: the culture of a period.' There is also what connects the two, 'the culture of the selective tradition, or how we make sense of an earlier time period or place using the values and subjectivity of our own.'<sup>17</sup> His three levels of culture are helpful in thinking about how we use our awareness of emotion. Jenny Harding develops Williams' idea to argue that the expression of emotion has at times been discounted by being associated with 'irrational, disqualified subordinated groups' who typically might be 'black, working-class, female'.<sup>18</sup>

Attitudes such as these have permeated societies, affecting all levels in different ways, denying selfhood. Oral history draws us closer to the emotional lives of such disregarded groups. For example, the vividness and eloquence of Elizabeth Roberts' interviews with working-class women in Lancashire towns tells us much about how they coped with childbirth, illness, work, and the hardships of poverty and unemployment.<sup>19</sup> We can also explore the culture of

working-class life, the 'recorded culture' as Williams describes it, through sources such as newspapers, films, and entertainment. But Williams also urges that we pay attention to the 'selective tradition': the process whereby what we know of the past will be chosen through the perspectives of those living at the time.<sup>20</sup>

The selective effect of a 'precise, if overwrought, historical moment' on the recording of emotions is noted by Judy Livingstone, an anthropologist working in Botswana in the late 1990s during the worst of the AIDS epidemic. She describes the 'mood' of the times, when death was ever-present and watched constantly, excluding other social activities such as parties. Returning some years later when antiretroviral drugs had become available, she sensed a very different mood. Meanwhile, American and European psychologists were carrying out observations 'pathologising Tswana culture, explaining that Botswanans "don't grieve properly", and trying to retrain them to be more expressive'. From this she has learned to be aware of 'the politics of emotional expression'.<sup>21</sup>

The feelings and emotions of the women interviewed by Elizabeth Roberts might have been later overlooked, and were probably perceived as irrelevant and their accounts unreliable at the time they lived, and might have continued so if she had been satisfied with a 'selective' view of what they had to say. Fortunately for us, this was not her way. The oral history encounter works against such conventional selectivity, encouraging our awareness and respect for feelings across gender, racial, and class boundaries.

Acknowledging the emotional life of the self through the releasing of memory not only opens up possibilities for understanding the history of interpersonal relations, but can also be a therapeutic process in itself. Many oral historians have come to realise this by chance, through their own practice. They will learn—often through a third person—how being interviewed gives someone a new sense of recognition, importance, and purpose, something to look forward to, even the strength to fight off an illness and win a new lease of life. They may also have found that it is not always so simple. Some memories when recalled may release powerful feelings.

In the first edition of this book, published in 1978, there was no mention of what is now a central theme in many oral history discussions: traumatic memory. The next two editions, in 1988 and 2000, respectively, each included two pages where the impact on interviewees who cannot avoid the recall of threatening and frightening memories was vividly set out. Perhaps 1980, the date when the term post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) became officially recognised amongst psychiatrists working with war veterans, should be seen as the point when the tone and content of discussion changed. This is not to say that there had been no awareness amongst the military and the medical professions of the severity of distress that combatants and nurses could endure both on the battlefield and after discharge. But the vocabulary changed over the years, as terms such as nostalgia, shell shock, battle fatigue, or neurasthenia came and went out of use. After the end of the First World War, in Britain eighty thousand men

were admitted to nineteen specially allocated military hospitals with symptoms 'ranging from deep depression, compulsive shaking and nightmares to mutism and paralysis'.<sup>22</sup> Even so, there was resistance amongst military authorities and even doctors to accept that battlefield experience might be the cause, rather than individual weakness or unsuitability.

#### POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS: CASE 4

A major aged thirty-seven years directed some of the clear up of battlefield carnage. He saw and smelled many remains of Iraqi people but thought that he was not affected. He became uncommunicative but irritable; his love of life and the army diminished. Two years after his early retirement, he saw a television documentary on the Gulf and dramatically recalled the events of six years previously. The smell of off-fresh chicken meat focused memories of rotting flesh. Repeated recall of half-burnt Iraqi corpses forced him to re-experience the initiating trauma. His nightmares, insomnia, poor memory, fatigue, and irascibility became worse, and he developed headaches, musculoskeletal aches, and dyspepsia. His decision making and attendance at work suffered. General medical and rheumatological consultations were unhelpful. Post-traumatic stress disorder was diagnosed only after his battlefield and psychiatric histories were considered. Many symptoms had not previously been discussed. His wife felt 'trapped in a tunnel with no lights' and commented, 'I wish this Rupert could go to the Gulf and bring my old Rupert back . . . I don't know how to help him'.

Roger Gabriel and Leigh A. Neal, 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Following Military Combat or Peace Keeping', *British Medical Journal* 324 (9 February 2002): 340–41. Reprinted with permission from BMJ Publishing Group Ltd.

Second World War combatants were similarly seen to be suffering from observable stress of an acute nature, but tended to get a more sympathetic response when their symptoms were observed. When the Vietnam War produced a similar effect on veterans, who organised to get recognition for a condition which was beginning to be defined as PTSD, their efforts were rewarded by formal acceptance of the term by the American Psychiatric Association.

Tracing the history of PTSD as it came to be acknowledged by medical professionals, Edgar Jones led a study of post-combat syndromes from the Boer War to the Gulf War, reviewing medical and military records of servicemen. He found that although a syndrome with 'unexplained medical symptoms' had been identified



in all the wars that they examined, what was observed tended to change not only as medical diagnosis changed, but also as veterans themselves reported their symptoms following the greater awareness since 1980. The American Psychiatric Association describes the condition as a response to an event 'outside the range of usual human experience'. Even so, Jones and his colleagues urge that, rather than viewing the condition as 'unique or novel', post-combat syndrome should be recognised as 'part of an understandable pattern of normal responses to the physical and psychological stress of war'.<sup>23</sup> The experiences and post-conflict care of members of the military and peace-keepers have set criteria for identifying post-trauma symptoms in America and Europe over recent decades. The accuracy of a medical diagnosis for something that is often not acknowledged by sufferers or health professionals can be important, since identification may be followed by compensation in the form of pension entitlement.

Oral historians may find it helpful to know how PTSD manifests itself if, in an interview, they tap such deep, unresolved pain that it demands more sustained reflection with the help of a professional therapist. Clearly in such cases the best that the oral historian can do is to suggest how this help could be found. There are warning signals to watch for, such as general incoherence, long silences, repeating the same story of shock and horror, or bursts of rage or sobbing. Gadi BenEzer, who has traced the journey and arrival of black Ethiopian Jews as they sought refuge in Israel, noted changes in the voice tone of those he interviewed and their 'trembling and foetal postures'.<sup>24</sup>

Looking back at their own practice, oral historians have noted how in the past they considered traumatic memories to be somehow less 'clear' because of the mix and dominance of the emotions expressed and because they feared making people live through those experiences again. As a result, there was a tendency to avoid people who had painful stories to tell. It was also very difficult to verify such extreme memories. Indeed there certainly are dramatic 'false memories' which can be told for financial gain or to achieve self-publicity. But the sheer number of accounts, for example of the Auschwitz experience, in such contexts makes verification through cross-checking relatively simple.

From amongst the victim group there was also reluctance to speak. People who had experienced sexual or institutional abuse and those who had been victims of genocide felt the shame of degradation or of their survival. *Why them?* How could this be admitted? And there was, and still is, the problem of how to find the words, a common language, to describe what had happened.

Lawrence Langer, in his powerful exploration of testimonies of Holocaust survivors, talks of 'the difficulty of narrating, from the context of normality *now*, the nature of the abnormality *then*, an abnormality that still surges into the present to remind us of its potent influence'. Langer's analysis of videotaped Holocaust testimony has led him to distinguish 'deep memory' from 'common memory'. By deep memory he means attempts to remember 'the Auschwitz

self. Common memory, he says, works in two intertwined ways, retrieving the self remembered as normal, before and after the event, but also establishing from the perspective of the present how things were when they felt destroyed. Common memory of family life before the Holocaust is comforting and often starts the narrative, but deep memory may draw on emotions undermining supportive stories when events and choices which cast family members against one another are recalled. Children who survived separately from their parents might reject them when they were reunited, not only because their parents were unrecognisable after their camp existence but because they had not understood how they had been saved by being separated. For some there was to be no recovery from what Langer calls the 'wounded family'.<sup>25</sup>

#### THE GESTURE THAT FAILS, LOCATED IN THE 'DEEP MEMORY' OF A SURVIVOR OF THE HOLOCAUST

I'll never forgive myself. Even if I want to, I can't. I had a brother, he was sixteen or seventeen years old. He was taller than I, he was bigger than I, and I said to him, 'Son, brother, you haven't got no working paper, and I am afraid that you will not be able to survive. Come on, take a chance with me, let's go together.' Why did I take him with me? Because I had the working papers, and I thought maybe because I gonna go to the right, I know people who had their working papers, they gonna go to the right, because the Germans need people in the ghetto, to finish the job, whatever they had to do. He agreed with me. At the same time I said he is built tall, then maybe he gonna have a chance.

When I came to the gate where the selection was, then the Gestapo said to me (I showed him my papers), 'You go to the right.' I said, 'This is my brother'. He whipped me over the head: 'He goes to the left.' And from this time I didn't see any more my brother . . . I know it's not my fault, but my conscience is bothering me. I have nightmares, and I think all the time, that the young man, maybe he wouldn't go with me, maybe he would survive. It's a terrible thing: it's almost forty years, and it's still bothering me. I still got my brother on my conscience. God forgive me!

Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 32–33. Reprinted with permission from Yale University Press.

Work such as Langer's and many other studies of the Holocaust have shifted ideas about memory and forgetting and how to remember collectively now that new technologies have the effect of bringing those past experiences close to the present of audiences more than half a century away from those events. The

Holocaust stands for itself in all its horror, known, studied, and used as a reference for establishing the deepest level which organised cruelty can reach, but never fully knowable, given its extent and the many millions of people—Jews, Gypsies, disabled people, homosexuals, socialists, and Communists—who died. Sadly it cannot be held as the only ‘frame of reference’.

**CHAIM (HENRY) FERSTER SURVIVING TYPHUS AT GRÄDITZ CAMP  
IN 1943, WORKING IN AMMUNITION PRODUCTION**

Yes. The typhus broke out, yes, and the whole camp was closed up. And they were dying, about two hundred or three hundred a day. And you know, typhus was, there were a few which were immune from the camp, because once they had it before, they were immune, so there were a few who helped. There was no medication. And there were one or two probably, inmates, who were doctors, but they didn't have anything.

*How long were you in the camp while typhus raged?*

I had, I had, also had typhus in that camp. Yes, yes, I caught it, and I must have been knocked out for about two or three weeks, and I, you know, typhus, you get a very high temperature, and, because you've a high temperature, you just, you just knock out, you just, you, you're hallucinations you get, when you're knocked out, sort of thing. And ...

*What happened to you during this time? Were you just left in the ...*

I can't remember, actually. I was knocked out and I can't remember. I can't remember, but I remember having various hallucinations. I remember, then all of a sudden, I just begun to, I must have passed already the crisis, must have passed, and I tried to waken up, and I happened to be on the top bunk at the time, and I tried to get myself down, and I just couldn't lift myself, because my bones were out. There was nothing they could see, only like a skeleton or what. And I just didn't have the strength to get myself out. It must have been when I was knocked out, the other people who, who were immune, or the doctor, they must have fed me with something, with water or something, otherwise I wouldn't have survived. So eventually, I did manage to get myself down, I thought, 'I can't, I've got to do something. I can't just lie there on top of the cushion, and filthy dirty and everything.' Eventually, I managed to get myself down. Eventually I managed to get myself down, and got myself down and tried to get myself straight, and I thought, 'I'll have to wash myself a little bit', so I went down to the wash barracks, and they were stacked up, that high, dead people.

Six this way and six the other way and, all they were, skeletons, skeletons, and on top of it, I've never seen it yet. The bodies were brown, like they were, on cinders, burnt, you know, they were brown, like, from high temperature, or something like that. So, and hunger was exceptionally great then. I was hungry before, but this time, when I got myself together, the hunger was absolutely, I could eat stones. I remember that, I could eat, the hunger was so great. You see, and all the camp was closed up. All they did, the Germans were frightened to come in, you see, so you were, they were relying on internal organisation, you know, the *shiebers*\* and the doctors, and the people who were, the people who survived, because there was only a few hundred who survived, from a camp of about three thousand or four thousand. So, so, but you see, the food was just put in through the door, through the fence, gates, just left, and then had to be distributed. And all the . . .

*Did you manage to get food?*

I managed to get somehow a bit of food, yes. I managed to get some, some. And the camp was, stayed closed for about a month or two after that three months, and the people who survived were sent to, to another camp. I think they closed that camp, Gräditz.

*So what did you do in that period of time? Before they moved you on.*

Just nothing. Just nothing. Just walked about. Just nothing. Just left you alone, you know what I mean? They just left you alone, they just walked round, like, how can I say? Like, it reminds me of Lowry's pictures, you've seen those Lowry pictures, you've got people, you know, like shadows walking about. It was about, so it was about March, April, and the weather was very nice, I remember. So you managed to stay outside quite a lot, without being pushed about by anybody, because the Germans were frightened to come inside. So you were just left alone.

*Did anybody organise you at all?*

A little, to a degree. There must have been some organisation, because we got food. Well, they sent it to the *shiebers*, the *kapos* inside. And there were some people, some administrators, there was, it was also, you had, you also had a *Judeneltester*, a *Judeneltester*. In every camp you had a *Judeneltester*. The *Judeneltester*, he is the top man from the Jewish people, from the inmates, and, and, any orders or everything, from the Germans,

\* supervisor below the level of a *kapo*

from their top people, top orders from the Germans goes to him, and he then directs further the instructions. He is called the Judeneltester.

Interview with Chaim (Henry) Ferster, recording made for 'Jewish Survivors of the Holocaust', part of 'The Living Memory of the Jewish Community'. Recorded 1990–95. Interviewer Rosalyn Lishvin. BL shelf mark: C0410/080. © The British Library Board, used with permission.

Tragedies and horror recorded within living memory—the Armenian genocide, the Partition of India, genocide in Rwanda, ethnic cleansing in Palestine and Bosnia, famine in East Africa, AIDS in southern Africa, civil war in Syria—have their own histories and aftermaths, while other parallel experiences are ongoing and emergent.<sup>26</sup>

The act of communicating experience of an event 'outside the range of usual human experience' may not always be achieved easily, but there still may be a strong desire to tell, to pass on, what was witnessed. The process of recording the experiences of the death camps in the Third Reich began within months after the defeat of Germany in 1945, when David Boder carried out 130 interviews with survivors, in displaced persons camps, rehabilitation and training schools, orphanages, and other settings in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. Alan Rosen, who has written the history of Boder's work, estimates that between 1945 and 1949 over thirteen thousand interviews were conducted with victims of the Holocaust in Poland, Germany, and Hungary alone. Boder's aim was to reach the widest range of audiences possible, initially with a book titled *I Did Not Interview the Dead*. A psychologist with a background in interviewing and recording methodologies, he wanted academics and politicians to hear the voices of victims of the catastrophe, hoping to ease their entry as migrants, especially to the United States.<sup>27</sup>

Boder's interviews remained inaccessible for decades as the technology that he used for recording fell out of use. Since then, many other projects combine to ensure that the details of life and death in the death camps of the Third Reich are available for future generations to hear and learn about. The largest is Stephen Spielberg's Shoah Visual History Foundation, which includes over fifty thousand testimonies. The written and spoken testimony is now vast and is extending into the 'post-memory' of second generations, bringing debate and discussion as to claims to victim status by those who were not present but who may have absorbed traumatic experiences into their own memory. Dori Laub, a psychiatrist and child Holocaust survivor and co-founder in 1979 of the Holocaust Survivors' Film Project, has extended his work on trauma to survivors of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and to other sites of genocide. He points to three levels of witnessing extreme experiences: 'being a witness oneself', 'being a witness to the testimonies of others', and 'being a witness to the process of

witnessing itself'. He writes of 'the imperative to tell', insisting that people tell in order to survive, that those who are unable to tell are also unable to reflect and so risk distorting what is not told, even doubting themselves. Bearing witness through telling means accepting loss of close family and also of one's earlier self, but it also means that the survivor is 'not alone any longer'. This is a strong and compelling argument, to which current oral historians of genocide and ethnic cleansing have responded. He speaks with personal and professional experience when he talks of the need to be sensitive to what someone might want to tell and how they may want to tell their story to an interviewer:

There is a certain need [that people have] for someone to hear [their story] and for a connection and correlation [to be made]. It's not a newspaper interview or an historical interview. It's not only about facts but it's about facts embedded in so much memory and so much pain or terror. And inevitably you create a relationship with the interviewer and you pick up the subtle cues that tell you that he [*sic*] wants to hear or doesn't want to hear your story, and that makes the interviewee ready to tell more of their experiences. Now for people who are not trained, they will not necessarily be aware of or notice that. But the point is that the person will go through the painful experiences.

As he sees it, the 'emotional side' and the 'factual side' of the interviews cannot be separated:

... survivors often go on a history trip and that's the moment that interviewers can say, 'Yes, that is the history but we can read the books on history. We can only hear from you what you experienced.' Usually, we begin by saying, 'Imagine you are in your living room with photographs and you look at them. Tell us what you see.' So there's visual imagery elicited. I think that earlier interviews were more fragmented and detached. But as the interviewee gets more into the film playing in his head, and more involved with you as a listener, he can begin to live the film and then the film gets real color and is not just the brown color of the photographs.<sup>28</sup>

Dori Laub's appeal for sensitivity and awareness on the part of the interviewer is echoed by Selma Leydesdorff, who strongly identifies with the memories she recorded of the women and men survivors of the 1995 Bosnian genocide at Srebrenica. Her aim was to hear women speak because their testimony was not called on in what became the international legal process of establishing the guilt of the perpetrators. But for her there was another compelling fact. Dutch soldiers, part of the United Nations Protection Force, though present as peace-keepers, were implicated through their inaction and failure to protect the population of Muslims, who were subsequently massacred. She is

Dutch and perhaps felt the difficulty of that identity, but was also desirous of establishing truth. Interviewing with an interpreter, but understanding what was said, she feels that she was able to build trust with the survivors, who were living in poverty and neglect. 'For many of them there is no future, hence their stories are of total loss'. Their presence and grievances continue to disrupt the post-conflict society they live in. The 'deliberately staged terror' that they witnessed, herded onto buses, separated from their husbands and sons, meant that as they told their stories 'the interviewees had to allow both the images of the slaughter and their terror at that time to surface'. An interview was successful, she thinks, if 'the interviewee regained a part of her identity through the rediscovery of her personal history'; and so 'some of them felt lighter, even cheerful at the end'.<sup>29</sup>

### SREBRENICA SURVIVORS: A PSYCHOLOGIST'S ASSESSMENT

*Tuefika Ibrahimefendić, psychologist, questioned by a judge at the post Yugoslavia tribunal, July 2000:*

In my contact with the victims from Srebrenica, women and children, we used various questionnaires in order to assess their psychological condition. ... That level was exceptionally high, and the symptoms that they presented were at a very, very high level of trauma because the events relating to the month of July 1995 were, globally speaking, events that involved a very large group of women and children and also other survivors, such as elderly people, for example, who all happened to be at one place together, and they experienced that suffering together.

For all of them, it was a sudden event, unforeseeable, of course, and it is true that they may have felt a certain safety, security, at one point, but trauma occurs in a sudden manner and it has vast consequences. This all took place in an atmosphere which was beyond their control; there was nothing that they could have done. They were completely helpless ...

Their memories are still vivid. They still have images of what happened. These are so-called flashbacks. Suddenly, these pictures appear, excerpts from the experience they lived through. In the course of their normal activities, walking around town or somewhere else, they come across something that reminds them and this provokes the flashback.

Many of those women still suffer from terrible nightmares, feelings of fear, and other symptoms; irritation, nervousness,



aggressiveness, a loss of concentration, irritability. Many avoid talking about those events because they are so painful. These are also symptoms of avoidance. In contact with the victim, we can easily recognize the dominant symptoms depending on the personality, its structure, its mental functions, the way the personality reacts. But if this symptom of avoiding remembering dominates, they become depressed, apathetic, passive.

Selma Leydesdorff, *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide: The Women of Srebrenica Speak* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 204. Reprinted with permission from Indiana University Press.

From a previous position of avoidance, oral historians now employ trauma as a recurring theme in studies of displacement, political repression, child sexual abuse, family violence, shootings, terrorist attacks, and extreme weather events. Perhaps the term is beginning to be over-employed. Leydesdorff felt that the women she interviewed benefited from the experience, and her evaluation is not uncommon amongst oral historians who engage with people who have experience of extreme situations. Awareness of the danger of stepping into the role of therapist is something that many express, but nevertheless, as Roper describes, many find the language and concepts of psychotherapeutic interventions helpful. Even so, Caruth points out that the act of telling can have outcomes and repercussions not just for the witness to trauma. The listener also has to engage with what was experienced and may in turn be traumatised, and may find parts of their own pasts revealed: 'This speaking and listening . . . does not rely . . . on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don't yet know of our own pasts'.<sup>30</sup>

Oral historians interviewing people who have had horrifyingly extreme experiences are usually well aware that their interviewees will be vulnerable. Some think that these encounters are helpful. The concern to care is heard in the language of 'healing', 'closure', and 'giving voice'. But there are many situations in which talking does not seem appropriate to victims. Anna Sheftel also went to Bosnia, but it took her three months of refusals, even though she had learned the language, before she found someone who was willing to be interviewed about their experience of violence in the area around the city of Bihać. She ponders the refusals. People were no longer trusting of history, they said there was 'too much history', they wanted their city and surrounding area to be remembered for its beauty and a happily integrated past and not the violence of sectarianism. They were ashamed of what had happened and they did not want their history to be used by the politically powerful in Bosnia. Finally, she points out that remembering was a way of avoiding what people really needed: 'As Alen told me: "I don't need to remember the past. I need a job"'. In the end, though

many more people refused than agreed to be interviewed, she was able to carry out her doctoral project. But her reflections on refusal are a valuable corrective to over-easy confidence in the therapeutic value of the post-trauma interview.<sup>31</sup>

Interviewers may also need some therapeutic care if they are not to be overwhelmed by what they hear. Sean Field's powerful reflection on his feelings interviewing Rwandan refugees in South Africa helps us to see the limits of claims made for healing and empathy. He gives an example of a story told to him:

Memory of losing family, flashbacks, and women leapt in my eyes, women killed, the knife and gun in private parts. People dead still lying there after four days; their back has dogs eating their flesh. Over and over, others killed in my eyes. In my eyes waiting to be killed. That smell, the hospital, being in the roadblock, everyone, someone had to die. People, they are taking people from the mountains and bring them there and kill them there, so you can see. Those young guys taking women by force. Women raped by ten, eleven people. Some cut with machete here (he points to his chest) . . . He is there for four days can you imagine the smell?

When listening to accounts of escapes from murder, separation from family, betrayal, and degradation, he says, he could either lose sensitivity or become engulfed by his own reactions. Instead, he tried to retain 'composure' and allowed himself to experience 'empathic unsettlement'. However, 'this still left me feeling raw and jagged'. Outside the interview he was completely overcome when this same narrator told him that he was unable to bring his four-year-old daughter to be with him in South Africa. At that point, thinking about his own daughter, his empathy went beyond control and as soon as he was on his own, he 'cried and cried'. He concludes from this that while 'empathic listening' is important, it is too much to claim that oral history interviewing can be healing, describing the motive to heal as 'fantasy'. He agrees that the interview exchange can, as others have also found, help survivors of trauma to express their experiences and for stories to be heard, but 'there is no cure' and so there will always be 'silences and uncomfortable emotions'. He goes on to suggest that oral historians' most helpful role may be to create audiences, 'public spaces', so that survivors can be heard and their accounts told and performed in multiple and accessible contexts and formats. Communicating in these ways also means sharing experiences, offering an end to the isolation in which many survivors exist. Ultimately, he sees the whole process as one of 'regeneration' rather than healing.<sup>32</sup>

What Sean Field proposes may work in situations where the marginalised voice is valued and where there is a democracy of remembering. This is not always the case. Erin Jessee interviewed perpetrators of atrocities and ex-combatants in what she calls the 'highly politicised' settings of Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina. If narrators cannot be fully identified, for reasons of personal safety, or must be uncritically presented, for fear of becoming part of the

post-conflict official smoothing over of events, is there not a limit to what oral historians can claim to be doing?<sup>33</sup>

Certainly we cannot assume that witness accounts by survivors somehow stand alone, speaking an original truth. The contexts of the telling and of recalling will play their part. In the Balkans, the rhetoric of nationalist groups, selectively citing earlier accounts of events during the Second World War and before it, was part of the justification for their actions in the 1990s. Transcripts of oral testimony to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission show how 'good stories' emerged: narratives that provided the basis for a shared understanding of the apartheid era, and also stories from victims that included forgiveness and reconciliation.<sup>34</sup>

Hence the recent but questionable suggestion has been made that accounts of disaster situations collected by oral historians on the spot are likely to be more authentic, and different from the reports of journalists active on the scene. Ghislaine Boulanger points out that this new development, 'crisis oral history', makes the laudable claim that early intervention allows stepping in before 'the media's inevitable bowdlerisation and oversimplification have shaped public memory' and 'before it has been used for political leverage by elected officials'.<sup>35</sup> But this is an idealised assumption of truth and realism. Can there really be a point where the memory of an event is unaffected by context, but by culture and earlier history? The idea that we should seek to capture unadulterated moments of experience seems to go against oral history's commitment to memory as valued evidence. But an interest in the intertwining of time with memory is something that sets oral historians apart from journalists and psychologists. It is time that turns witnessing into testimony. 'It takes time for experience to become trauma . . . it takes time for the witness to come into being'. So writes Neale, making a comparison between the Holocaust testimony of Binyamin Wilkomirski, the identity constructed for a book published in 1995 that won many prizes before it was exposed as a fraud, and the 'post-memory' of a child of Holocaust survivors such as Art Spiegelman with his graphic story, *Maus*.<sup>36</sup>

The Columbia Center for Oral History's approach to recording in the wake of disaster and destruction has been longitudinal interviewing. In the first year after 9/11, Mary Marshall Clark and her colleagues interviewed people from various New York communities, including Muslims, Arab Americans, and Sikhs. They went back two years later and carried out follow-up interviews. All were life histories and what she describes as 'cultural interviews'. The project's intention was to discover the effect of what happened in people's lives as far as possible 'without adopting the nationalistic framing of the events within the larger collective sphere'. Their interest was not immediacy but the developing context. They wanted to hear people tell the story of what happened from within their continuing lives and to hear what followed, using themes around family, family loss, friendship networks, security and vulnerability, and affiliation to and estrangement from religion, community, and politics.

Time was built into this project in many different ways. People were given as long as they needed to talk and everyone interviewed was asked to imagine what they thought people might think about what they had said in fifty or a hundred years. The aim was 'slowing down the pace of telling and building memory, and achieving this with the thematic life history approach', and also encouraging people to read their transcripts before they signed them off. They have returned once to a third of the original interviewees, and those who were given that opportunity reported how much the time gap meant to them. They could reflect on their lives but also 'leave the time of the catastrophe in order to re-enter it at a later point'. They were able to video interview a few of the narrators again in 2005, finding that this group could now speak about what happened to them but also about their memories. This longitudinal project, unusual for oral history, has 'offered an alternative mode of living through and beyond the time of the crisis'.<sup>37</sup>

Loss is part of living, and in any interview even talking about a lost mother or father may evoke tears or anger. Usually an unembarrassed, sympathetic response is all that is needed in this situation: expressing the feelings will in itself have been positive. But traumatic memory is about loss on an unpredictable and extreme scale: loss of family, loss of friends, loss of dignity, loss of belief in other humans.

Anna Bravo and Daniele Jalla describe how forty years later two hundred Italian survivors of the concentration camps, mainly partisans or Jews, told them the stories that most had held back because they felt the full horror would be incredible to others, inexpressible in words, and too painful for those close to them to hear. They were only then able to talk of how they had been separated from all they knew, robbed of all their possessions, stripped naked, shaven of all their hair, given numbers instead of names, made to eat with their mouth and hands like an animal; lived every day within the sight and smell of death, smelling the burning bodies, seeing the human ashes used for road cinders, seeing piles of corpses. They had learnt, in order to survive, to eat grass to keep down hunger, to steal from anybody, to trust nobody but an intimate, to sleep undisturbed next to a corpse of a fellow inmate after stripping it of clothes to keep warm themselves, above all to think of death as ordinary, even when guards beat another prisoner's head open in front of them.

No wonder that, even today, the price of the telling may be weeks of renewed nightmare terror. Any witness of such atrocities is brave in coming forward to tell their experiences and bound to remain vulnerable in such a situation. For some these memories may tap such deep, unresolved pain that it demands more sustained reflection. There are warning signals to watch for, such as general incoherence, long silences, repeating the same story of shock and horror, or bursts of rage or sobbing, trembling, or a hunched posture. In such a situation the best that the oral historian can do is to suggest how the interviewee can contact a professional therapist, while recognising that most survivors will prefer not to take this up.<sup>38</sup> Memories of extreme experiences can be as threatening as they are

important, and they demand very special skills in the listener. They are, thankfully, exceptional. For most people the pain of the past is much more manageable, lying alongside good memories of fun, affection, and achievement, and recollecting both can be positive. Remembering our own lives is crucial to our sense of self; working on that memory can strengthen, or recapture, self-confidence. The therapeutic dimension of life story work has been a repeated discovery. Thus Arthur Ponsonby, the literary critic and anthologist of *English Diaries*, noted how many of his authors used their diary pages for the purpose of 'self analysis, self dissection, introspection, . . . for clearing their minds, for threshing out human problems, for taking stock of the situation . . . They may even derive from it the same sort of relief as others find in prayer.'<sup>39</sup>

Sociologists have also noted the confessional dimension to life story interviewing, and partly because much of their work has been with people labelled sexually deviant who are often personally isolated, have especially encountered unexpectedly warm responses to a 'sympathetic ear'. Annabel Faraday and Ken Plummer vividly illustrate this from a series of letters they received: 'If my reactions have been impulsive, it is because you have unexpectedly breached the wall of my isolation and I cannot help thinking of you as a friend in a special category. Hoping you can think of me in a similar way'. And from a later letter: 'I found great relief in talking to you today. Thank you for being such a sympathetic audience and for making me feel so relaxed'. And again, several months later: 'I feel I am overburdening you and using you as an outlet for my personal troubles, but it has been a case of opening a valve . . . '. As researchers, they did indeed find their shift from sympathetic observer, 'through sounding board to confessor and emotional prop', was a burden which could have consumed indefinite energies, given the severe problems of many of the people they were recording. But the positive changes which they saw in some informants were equally striking: the transvestite, for example, who suggested he was now 'strong enough to "come out" publicly—a move which he felt would inevitably result in the final breakdown of his shaky marriage and which he suggested could be done through the publication of his life history'.<sup>40</sup> The changes that oral historians may notice in their subjects may be just as important. The growing realisation that not only were people good for history, but that history might be good for people in themselves, and particularly for people in later life, has led to interesting and fruitful collaborations between oral history and gerontology.

Rather like oral history, what has come to be known as reminiscence work—or less appropriately 'reminiscence therapy'—on both sides of the Atlantic arose out of concern that in certain circles, older people's remembering was not being valued, to the extent that anyone looking back risked denigration and exclusion. This may be difficult to imagine now that memory and remembering are celebrated in the arts, literature, social and health care, education, and the media, not to mention advertising and public relations. But only a few decades ago the situation was viewed very differently. Anyone interested in the psychology of the

older self would have had little to draw on in the way of theories or exploration. Erik Erikson's concept of eight life stages, including old age as a developmental phase accompanied by reflection on past life, was the only well-known source.<sup>41</sup>

Erikson's concept of life stages provided the theoretical framework for the new interest in memory in late life that followed the publication of a key paper by Robert Butler in 1963. Butler was a principal investigator into the mental health of older people in the United States. He argued from observation and interactions with older patients that though talk of the past was considered a sign of mental deterioration by most psychiatrists and psychologists, the opposite was the case. Talk about the past was 'often fascinating and in no sense reflected pathology'. Life review, he argued, could have positive outcomes, especially for people living alone in the community. His paper was published in a biomedical journal but his ideas were taken up very quickly by people working and caring for older people in a variety of settings. Reminiscence became an activity to be promoted for its beneficial qualities. In 1984, Rose Dobrof wrote about the watershed effect of 'the Butler paper' where she worked in New York:

Perhaps tape recorders and word-processing machines are to the spoken word what the phonograph is to music: they make it possible for us to preserve the voices of our mothers and fathers telling us the history of their times.

Technology expands the possibilities, and interest rises with the dawning recognition of the possibilities. In the field of aging, interest began with the publication in 1963 of a seminal paper by Dr. Robert Butler . . . It is not often that one paper has so important and immediate an effect. I was then a very junior social worker on the staff of a home for the aged. I remember well being taught by our consulting psychiatrists and the senior social work staff about the tendency of our residents to talk about childhood in the *shtetls* of East Europe or arrival at Ellis Island or early years on the Lower East Side of New York.

At best, this tendency was seen as an understandable, although not entirely healthy preoccupation with happier times, understandable because these old and infirm people walked daily in the shadow of death. At worst 'living in the past' was viewed as pathology—regression to the dependency of the child, denial of the passage of time and the reality of the present, or evidence of organic impairment of the intellect.

It was even said that 'remembrance of things past' could cause or deepen depression among our residents, and God forgive us, we were to divert the old from reminiscing through activities like bingo and arts and crafts.

And then the Butler paper came out and was read and talked about and our world changed. The life review became not only a normal activity; it was seen as a therapeutic tool. In a profound sense, Butler's writings liberated both the old and the nurses, doctors and social workers; the old

were free to remember, to regret, to look reflectively at the past and try to understand it. And we were free to listen and to treat rememberers and remembrances with the respect they deserved, instead of trivializing them by diversion to a bingo game.<sup>42</sup>

Just over a decade later Butler would receive the Pulitzer Prize for his book, *Why Survive? Being Old in America*. His championing of older people and his outspoken criticism of ageism in US social and health care included a call to recognise life review as amongst the 'special characteristics of later life' and a positive and necessary activity. It also gave political weight to participation by those such as Dobrof who felt that older people were being neglected and their past lives and contributions to society devalued and unrecognised. The impact in American practice is poetically conveyed by Barbara Myerhof's account of her own work in a Los Angeles home for old people, and the storytellers among them, *Number Our Days* (1978).

In Britain this was also a time of much soul-searching as to the appropriateness of care provision for older people, provoked by Peter Townsend's searingly critical study in 1962, *The Last Refuge*. Here in practical terms the change was led mainly by social workers and hospital staff who were caring for older people. This had been followed by raised levels of activism amongst British pensioners and the publication of a poem variously titled 'Kate' or 'Crabbit Old Woman' which in its accusation of nursing neglect, told in life story format by a frail, mute, and hospitalised older woman, somehow struck a chord. It continues to do so even though it is now revealed to have been written by a nurse.<sup>43</sup>

While the collection of a 'history' by a doctor or nurse is a long-established part of the process of determining the nature of someone's condition, the idea that talk about the past, narrating a life story, might be an important part of assessing their needs is a recent development. There were already some closer precedents in social work practice, such as the use of 'life story books' of documents and photographs first developed for children in care, to help them keep or recover a sense of self after bewildering transfers between institutions or while settling in with foster parents. Perhaps the most crucial change from the new approach was a modification of 'the huge arrogance', as Malcolm Johnson has put it, of professionals—of a different class and generation—presuming they could define the needs of their clients without first listening to them and hearing their own understanding of their problems, so as 'to identify the path of their life history and the way it has sculpted their present problems and concerns'.<sup>44</sup> In recent years the use of the life story approach in negotiating choices for housing and care has been increasingly emphasised. Listening has proved to be professionally useful.

In terms of reminiscence work, these new ideas were taken up and developed first by Mick Kemp, an architect employed in a UK government department to advise on older people's accommodation, and then by the charity Help the



Aged. A team that included Joanna Bornat, with her experience of oral history, working in Help the Aged's education department, published a pack of reminiscence prompts, including archived photographs and music, singing, and spoken memories from the past. Help the Aged's *Recall* programmes were an instant success when they were first published in 1981, with a reception which to those involved felt very much like a movement for social change. *Recall* has been followed by many similar materials, produced in-house by service providers and by commercial publishers.

Reminiscence aids are still much in evidence, as a search of the internet will show, with activities involving memory boxes, music, and drama as well as cooking and art. Training and guides to the management of groups have also proliferated. Some group work has resulted in local booklets or exhibitions. In a whole range of situations, with groups ranging from active older people to those who are severely depressed, it became clear that reminiscence activities could bring great enjoyment, and sometimes effect striking changes of mood.

Thus typically in a normal group of rather bored, withdrawn old people, there would be a sudden change of atmosphere. As became evident early on, once the photo show and music in the *Recall* pack began, people would start to talk, and to sing the songs, and then go on talking afterwards. Still more remarkably, older people who had been mute for months suddenly spoke. Equally important, the atmosphere became more hopeful, for both staff and visitors. *Recall* sparked a common talking-point, a renewed sociability; once communication is restarted, people rediscover each other as human beings.<sup>45</sup>

While the enjoyment and social gains from reminiscence activities are clear enough, there has been little convincing evidence to support earlier claims that there could also be long-term beneficial psychological or medical outcomes, such as changes in mood or cognitive functioning. Peter Coleman emphasises that reminiscence does not suit everyone equally. His own research is exceptional. He followed up the eight survivors of a group of fifty-one people whom he had interviewed in sheltered housing in London ten years earlier. Originally he had found that twenty-one were 'happy reminiscers' who enjoyed talking about their pasts; but there were also sixteen who saw no point in reminiscing, because they were actively coping with life in other ways. The 'happy reminiscers' proved the most resilient group, but the active non-reminiscers only included a few with low morale, such as a lonely ex-prisoner; more typically, they were busily active and reminiscence seemed to them a waste of precious time. The more striking contrast was with two other groups. Eight were 'compulsive reminiscers' whose 'brooding in the past' was 'dominated by regretful memories': they talked a lot, but felt bad about it. Their prognoses proved bad, showing increased psychological disturbance. Such people might actually be harmed by group therapy; what they needed was skilled personal counselling. The prospects were equally bleak for the six who avoided reminiscing because it made them more depressed, since the present seemed to them so much worse

than the past. Typically they had suffered a severe loss, such as recent bereavement, and could not manage the difficult adjustment to widowed, single life without their lifetime companion. Again their need was more likely for individual therapy, which they did not receive: those who had not died were still depressed ten years on. There are, in short, no automatic solutions—‘each person needs to be considered in a special way.’<sup>46</sup>

The group of people Coleman studied in the 1970s were not affected by dementia, but it is sufferers of dementia who subsequently have become a focus for reminiscence work in the hope that stimulating people to remember might provide some way, if not to cure, then perhaps to alleviate dementia. This is now not thought to be the case, despite claims about the effectiveness of reminiscing in programmes of ‘mind fitness’ and ‘brain training’. But if participation is not a cure for depression or dementia, what researchers have noted is the effect that evoking and sharing memories has on changing attitudes amongst carers, including family members of people with dementia. Rose Dobrof’s account of the impact of permission to listen resonates in more recent observations and studies of nurses and care staff whose attitudes have changed when ‘the person behind the patient’ comes into view through talk about the past. Even if encouragement to remember does not halt or provide a remedy for dementia, the levels of engagement and empathic awareness do at least involve the person as an individual self.<sup>47</sup>

Social workers, nurses, doctors, and workers in the voluntary sector who include biographical methods in their practice may be inspired by psychodynamic ways of working with vulnerable people, or they may simply be looking for a way to enable vulnerable people to express their feelings and define needs and goals which are appropriate for them. But though biographical methods of working are well appreciated and recognised, they struggle to be included in the assessment and delivery of care and services in the face of health and social care policies, driven by the targets and outcomes demanded by recent managerial cultures. Nevertheless, these approaches have made a significant contribution to ways in which biographical talk can be used sensitively, affecting both provision and also the attitudes of providers of support and services.<sup>48</sup>

The linked influence of oral history and reminiscence work has played a crucial role in re-shaping attitudes to older people. Today’s culture is permeated by memory, and while prejudice against encouraging remembering still needs to be fought, it is no longer condoned by professional attitudes, and oral historians can rightly celebrate this important gain.

Oral history is grounded in the interactions between two or more people, the interviewer and interviewees. We have a much better understanding today of how those interactions can influence and change the self, both of interviewer and of interviewee. We have also developed much more subtle ways of evaluating memory as evidence and as cultural and personal symbol. In the wider view, we believe that a focus on the self should lead out rather than inwards,

making connections, imagining through subjectivity and empathy how different and yet how similar we all are. As Carrie Hamilton suggests, we should also avoid interpreting the past only in terms of trauma and mourning. Pleasure and playfulness also play a part. Moreover, it is not possible to know everything about someone else, and even the most convinced psychoanalyst would admit a limitation, but nor should we feel, as oral historians, that this is our goal. What we can do is to recognise emotions and feelings and how, over time and space, these may change and have changed, and how people give meanings to events and things which we ourselves have not experienced. Molly Andrews calls for a 'dialogic approach'. Imagination, she argues, should help us to understand 'the world of the other', so that we do not impose our own feelings and values on other selves. This is surely both the challenge and the benefit of oral history.<sup>49</sup>

# 9

## Projects

Oral history is peculiarly suited to project work. This is because the essential nature of the method is itself both creative and co-operative. It is true that oral evidence once collected can be used by the traditional independent scholar who works only in the library. But this is to miss one of the key advantages of the method, the ability to locate new evidence exactly where it is wanted, through going out into the field. To be successful, fieldwork demands human and social skills in working with informants, as well as professional knowledge. This means that oral history projects of any kind start with unusual advantages. They demand a range of skills which will not be monopolised by those who are older, expert, or best at writing, so they allow co-operation on a much more equal basis. They can bring not only intellectual stimulation, but sometimes, through entering into the lives of others, a deep and moving human experience. And they can be carried out anywhere, for any community of people carries within it a many-sided history of work, family life, and social relationships waiting to be drawn out.

Oral history projects can take place in many different contexts, both as individual and as group enterprises: in schools, colleges, and universities; or in adult education or local history or advocacy groups; from museums, from community centres, or just from a group meeting in someone's kitchen. Projects can involve all kinds of people: schoolchildren, students, people in or out of work, young people, working parents, or pensioners. Although sharing many features, each context provides a distinctive emphasis which carries its own advantages and its own problems.

Projects can also be organised in different ways. Especially when few people are directly working on the project, the style may be informal; or, at the other extreme, it may be strictly planned, with regular deadlines and daily time sheets, even for volunteers. There are valuable practical ideas in Worcman and Garde-Hansen's *Social Memory Technology* (2016) on how to involve volunteers, particularly on the first stage of a project which seeks to interest and involve a wider group, such as local residents in a community or workers in an industrial company. They describe a series of individual and group exercises, such as time lines or narratives of key episodes, which move from the individual into discussion in story circles.<sup>1</sup>

However, the essential point with any project is that key information needs to be shared and progress regularly reviewed. It is much harder to ensure this with a large project. Steven High has published a very helpful account of Montreal Life Stories, which brought together academic faculty and students, artists, and community members to record more than five hundred interviews over seven years. High describes how they sought to bind the project together. This was done partly through developing a special management software which allowed all the project's documentation—programmes, reports, transcripts, internal debates, reflections of interviewers, suggestions for new initiatives—to become accessible to every team member: 'nothing would be hidden'. At the same time the project was driven by a collective immersion in the experience of oral history. Every member of the project was an interviewer. After each interview there was a debriefing session, and project members were asked to write a two-page reflection on their interview experience. 'We wanted team members to *feel* these stories in their chests'. Not only the interviews but also the reflections were available to everyone, and became part of the outcomes. For anyone taking on a large-scale oral history project, Montreal Life Stories offers an important model.<sup>2</sup>

The ideas which follow are not just ideal suggestions, but have been shown to work.

### Oral history in schools

Let us begin with schools. Oral history in schools has never been more known about, or more popular, and where it is taken up by teachers and schools it continues to excite everyone who participates. There may be obstacles and a need for ingenious planning and resourcing, but the outcomes always seem far greater than what was anticipated. For one thing, oral history promotes discussion and co-operation. It helps children to develop their language skills, a sense of different kinds of evidence, social awareness, and technical aptitudes. Such projects thus develop several types of skill.

First, there are inquiry skills. Once pupils have started to interview, the desire to find out more from other sources can be very powerful, leading to searches through the internet or school or local libraries, learning to understand the difference between primary and secondary sources when presented with photographs, diaries, or letters and then having a chance to talk to the owner or originator. Sorting their evidence, they try out techniques like searching and saving in online folders, and using book indexes or the library cataloguing system. In these ways they learn through a range of techniques, not just by interviewing, and what they learn contributes to a wide range of subject areas.

Next, oral history can provide important assistance in the development of language and the speaking and listening skills on which schools place such emphasis at all ages and stages. We see this in the examples of school projects we have included from both sides of the Atlantic. These concern both written and spoken language. Before interviewing, the pupils need to work out the themes

to focus on so that they can find their own way as the interview develops. They have to discuss together the best wording of the questions which they might ask. And as well as understanding what makes a good question, they need to have an idea of why someone's experience may be important to the project in case their questions fail to get an immediate response. Both are important to learn.

Later on, when recordings are played back, they can also criticise the way in which questions are asked. While doing interviews themselves, they have to learn to listen to other people, and grasp exactly what they intend to convey. This can demand intense concentration. Without realizing it, they are confronted with the problems of comprehension and interpretation which are a standard part of language teaching in any curriculum. At the same time, through interviewing, or through being themselves interviewed, children can gain confidence in expressing themselves. This can be transferred from the spoken to the written word, for example, by getting them to write down what they can hear in the recording; or by using a duplicated version of a transcript as a starting point for discussions. This can lead to a discussion about the differences between written and spoken language.

They will also be able to develop their skills in recording, using audio and video equipment, creating and editing digital files, and generally developing their technical know-how. These skills can be carried further in the presentation of the project: for example, by editing extracts from recordings into an audio sequence, or by printing a booklet combining photographs and transcripts, or by an exhibition which makes use of all these means together. They can reach further with a website or by contributing pages to an existing site using interview summaries, audio and video extracts, and images as well as the story of the making of the project. All this can also help to build links with the community, especially when interviewees are also asked to lend old photographs, postcards, and other documents for the exhibition or booklet.

Crucially, children are not only learning to collect evidence. At the same time, they become creatively involved in assessing it. They face basic issues: when to trust or to doubt information, or how to organise a set of facts. They experience, through active involvement at a practical level, history as a process in the re-creation of the past. Like young archaeologists, they are given spades in the place of lectures—taken to the coal-face to hew as historical researchers.

Finally, students can learn fundamental social skills. Through interviewing itself, children may develop some of the tact and patience, the ability to communicate, to listen to others and to make them feel at ease, which is needed to secure information. Young people can be helped to learn to move in an adult world, and older people learn something about the worlds of younger members of their community whose backgrounds may be quite different to their own. At the same time, students may gain not only a vivid glimpse of how life was in the past, but a deeper understanding of what it is like to be somebody else; and how other people's experience, in the past and today, is different from their

own—and why this might be. They can thus be helped both to understand and to feel empathy with others, and to face conflicting values and attitudes to life.

But how does this work out in practice in today's schools? Since the 1990s, school education—in the English-speaking world at least—has changed. In many countries the curriculum is now set nationally by governments, fixing content and targets for learning with the expectation that teachers will constantly monitor and assess children from their first day in school. Many teachers left the profession as the role of a teacher changed and classroom practice was forced to shift. A new generation of teachers has developed teaching expertise under conditions which are quite different to what was around when oral history work was first introduced into schools in the 1970s.

Older freedoms and the autonomy to choose topics and their timing, with budgets to support creative developments, have gone. In their place in England and some other countries, such as Australia, we see a drive to standardise children's learning experience across all schools. There has been a succession of curriculum initiatives driven from the centre and supported by a deluge of teaching packs, information and advice, and audio-visual resources, both online and offline. Where schools can afford it, there are riches to be tapped, offerings to engage students and their teachers. The idea of a national curriculum seems now to be embedded in ideas about education, although in England this centrally driven policy only applies to schools run by locally elected authorities. Half of all schools, academies, and free schools are funded directly by the central government, and like private schools are not obliged to follow the national curriculum. In those which must, history is a compulsory subject only up to age fourteen, and so is not amongst subjects which students are obliged to study for their public exams.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States school curricula are set at the state or local level, and as a result more scope has remained for oral history project work in some states. Nevertheless, as in Britain and Australia, there has been a shift towards a centrally determined curriculum with specified learning outcomes. This has had one perhaps unexpected outcome. When the curricula are published, everyone has an opinion: teachers, parents, students, and in the USA special interest advocacy groups, as well as the civil servants and politicians who draft the documents. History as a classroom subject has become a matter for public position-taking across the political spectrum, its content hotly debated. In 2013 the first draft of an English national history curriculum evoked passionate responses from those who disliked its nationalistic and individualising 'great man' drive. The result was that changes had to be made.<sup>4</sup>

Through all this, where is oral history? In England, a history curriculum which aims to enable pupils to 'Identify different ways in which the past is represented' at Key Stage 1 (ages five to seven), to 'Note connections, contrasts and trends over time' at Key Stage 2 (ages seven to eleven), and to 'Understand how different types of sources are used rigorously to make historical claims' at



Key Stage 3 (ages eleven to fourteen) suggests great possibilities for oral history. Talking with enthusiasm about the latest version of the history national curriculum, one educational commentator and former teacher suggests that it raises the possibility of ‘regularly challenging tidy narratives . . . with new insights’. Does this mean that oral history now comes into its own?<sup>5</sup>

Talking to teachers, searching websites where teachers discuss and share lesson plans, assessment schemes, and teaching materials, reading articles in educational and oral history journals, all make it clear that oral history is well known, understood, and appreciated, as a method and source. Classes of school students may entertain a ‘visitor’ who will answer questions about a local topic or their experience of a national event. World War Two is a common favourite. Similarly, asking how people lived, how they went to school, where they worked, what clothes they wore, what games they played, can all help to develop knowledge and understanding. Teachers often find ingenious ways to get round the logistical obstacles now involved in getting visitors into a school. In correspondence, one teacher mentioned a colleague’s phoning his grandmother from the classroom, putting her on loudspeaker, and letting the class ask her questions about what wartime evacuation was like.

Sending pupils home to ask a grandparent about what school was like fifty years ago means that they are engaging with memory and the past through questioning and noting down answers. And this kind of activity extends beyond the history curriculum, playing a part in developing ideas about communication and skills in listening as well as sharing cultural knowledge. In other ways, oral history evidence comes into discussions of evidence about the past. Thus the testimony of a wartime conscientious objector, or of a suffragette, coal miner, or agricultural worker, or of a migrant, can take its place alongside contemporary newspaper articles, reports, and diaries.

In some cases the preservation and publication of what has been recorded become the focus, though this seems more typical amongst older age groups. The website of Swanshurst, a secondary school for girls in Birmingham, includes an oral history area which grew out of their annual Veterans’ Day. As Douglas Smith, the now retired history teacher who continues to be involved in supporting oral history at the school, explains, each year girls in year 9 (sixteen-year-olds) entertain about a hundred veterans from 1945 onwards. The girls work in pairs with one interviewee. Their interview encounters are uploaded onto the website, where they have been joined by others such as Anisa Younis interviewing Liz Hodgkin about her mother, the scientist Dorothy Hodgkin—the only British woman Nobel laureate—and Adeishe Hyera’s interview with Delphine Nurse, who was born blind in the 1950s. As the website points out, the aim is to benefit not just the school but also the general public and academic historians. Douglas emphasises that dedicated IT support is vital to the success of such a website, but points out that take-up by teachers is ‘spasmodic depending on how the teacher wants to use it’. Jim Allberry, who is head of history at

Swanshurst, finds that history is 'squeezed' at Key Stage 3, with many schools having less time to cover the material. And, he adds, 'putting together a bank of oral history resources connected in some way to the local area or community is a very time-consuming task. With the current workload pressure under which teachers are labouring they will find this hard to do'.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that to have the experience of carrying out a full-scale project in a school setting is less easy than it used to be, when oral history in schools was first being developed by pioneers such as Sallie Purkis in the UK and Eliot Wigginton in the USA.<sup>7</sup> What seems to be more likely is that outsiders with a teaching background, funding, and oral history experience will be taken on to run projects when there is time in the school day or school year.

### A PRIMARY SCHOOL PROJECT FROM THE LESS REGULATED 1970S

At a county primary school in Cambridge, Sallie Purkis used oral history with the younger-age groups. She began with a project, carried out over half a term on two afternoons a week, with a class of twenty seven-year-olds. It was a diverse group: some of the children came from abroad, and while nine children could not read, others were very bright. The project was to be their first ever experience in learning history. One of its objectives was to make this first encounter exciting and interesting, to get the children to feel that they could collect historical evidence, and that history was real and relevant to their own present. It was an advantage that the project was carried out in a school without subject boundaries so that the teacher could launch easily into art work, English, and outside visits.

She chose as a concrete starting point a photograph, suggested by a local librarian, of the school itself sixty years earlier, just opened, with its first pupils standing among the builders' rubble. The children were immediately interested by this, commenting on the pupils' clothes. They worked out where the photograph had been taken from, and how old these first children would now be—in other words, as old as their own grandparents. Following this, 'grandma' was chosen as the key symbolic figure of the project (aunts or other relatives could be substituted), and it turned out that it was a novel experience for grandparents to be involved in the school. Tape recorders were not used, but a written questionnaire was sent out. It was composed after discussion with the children, and, in retrospect, was too long, for it produced more material than could be organised satisfactorily—a few questions would have been quite sufficient. Most but not all of the grandmas responded, and one child, who called himself a 'historian' by the end of the project, interviewed three people. Another produced a typescript. There was thus an abundance of good material.

Sallie Purkis made a reading book for the class by selecting extracts on particular topics and writing them out herself. The first topic was 'What Grandma Said about Clothes': men's clothes, women's clothes, and shoes—one child's grandfather was a shoemaker. The children drew these. They also brought in photographs, often very precious, so that they had to be protected in plastic; these made a big show, and the children proudly identified with them. Then objects began to be brought in—garments, irons, and so on. Some of them were rather overwhelming, like 'the hat my father wore at grandfather's funeral', in a big box marked NOT TO BE OPENED. Some of the children went on to reading. Other children made a model clothes shop out of shoeboxes. The class went on a museum visit. All the children wrote essays: on shopping for clothes, on washing day, and on 'Grandma Day'. For the climax of the project, without doubt, was Grandma Day: the afternoon when, to their own very apparent enjoyment, the grandmas were invited up to school for talk and tea with the children.

Adapted from a report 'Oral History Society: Teacher's conference', Sunday 31 October, 1976, *Oral History*, 5, 1, 1977, pp 9–11.

Julia Letts is someone who has this kind of expertise. She has been able to put on oral history projects in 'more enterprising' primary and secondary schools, particularly where there are non-standard learners. Typically she will be invited to run an event or a day and design her own activity. Money is always a problem for schools, and though she has had success getting support from the lottery fund, this has its own limitations. Heritage Lottery will fund bids only for activity that is outside curriculum time, at lunchtime or after school. As she explains, 'it tends to be a few sessions across half a term, an interviewing day and then a production of some sort (an exhibition, radio broadcast, etc). Then I leave and that's it, even though the sessions are brilliant, the children love it, the teachers can't believe how much the children learn and get out of it, the interviewees from the community enjoy it and the whole thing glows in a positive light.'<sup>8</sup>

#### A RECENT ENGLISH PRIMARY SCHOOL PROJECT

*Julia Letts describes one of her projects, at St James's Primary School, Stourbridge, a town in the West Midlands:*

This is an example of using oral history in a very straightforward way, to add a new element to an existing local study project for Year 6 pupils (KS2 aged 10–11). The project was about the decline of traditional Black Country industries in the local area and had been introduced in 2012 as part of the school's Year 6 history curriculum.

With funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund via an arts organisation called Multistory based in West Bromwich, I was able to work with St James's Year 6's (two classes, approx 50 children) to introduce them to oral history, teach them some interviewing skills, and prepare them to meet and interview local people who had worked in various Black Country industries over the past fifty years. We started with two very hands-on classroom sessions in which the children learnt about the value of oral history, how to use digital recorders, what sort of questions to ask and how to organise and structure an interview. By the end of the two sessions, they were all thoroughly motivated.

This was followed by a homework task: to interview a friend or relative about their job. Inevitably the results of this were variable, but some were superb and parents commented on what a lovely homework project it had been, with their children sitting and chatting with their grandparents in a way that they never had before. Photo albums were unearthed and some wonderful stories emerged.

We then organised a 'Memory Collecting Day' in the school. The event was advertised in the school newsletter and we specifically invited a couple of people from the homework task.

On the day, thirteen members of the local community came into school, bringing photos and artefacts which related to their working lives. They were mainly connected to the glass industry, but other industries were also represented. The guests were asked to sit at different tables in the school hall. The children worked in groups of four and spent about twenty minutes at each table, before moving onto the next guest. They were able to interview almost all the visitors. There was a tremendous atmosphere and this was a highly successful event. It was too noisy to record interviews in the hall, so some of the guests were asked to move to smaller, quieter rooms, where the children were able to record.

A week later, four guests came back into school to record their work stories with the children. All the interviews were added to Multistory's 'Black Country Stories Archive' which is held by the four Black Country Metropolitan Borough Councils. The teachers used the interviews to add to and inform the project display which the Year 6's created at the end of their term's work on Black Country industries.

The only project costs involved were my time (4 half days at £100). I provided recording equipment and prepared the interviews for the Archive. The teachers sorted out any administration (thank-you letters to guests etc) and created the final display.

The children loved the project. From the very beginning, they completely got the idea that people would be a good source of information. They also clearly understood that history wasn't just about facts and political events but also about everyday life. They asked great questions about the nitty gritty of working life in the factories. They were particularly interested because the interviewees were talking about places they had heard about, or derelict factories which they passed every day on their way to school. The children commented on how much they enjoyed all aspects of the project, but particularly the social skills involved in inviting older people into their school, explaining the project and then interviewing them.

'I really feel that I learnt a lot of valuable skills, such as how to greet people; how to speak confidently; how to use appropriate questions to learn from people with firsthand experiences. I really feel that I will be able to apply these skills in the future.'—Andonis, age 10

'I learnt how to ask good questions that won't just allow answers of yes or no. They were called open questions and they meant that our visitors were able to give longer and more detailed answers. I had to listen carefully to responses, maintaining good eye contact so that they knew we were paying close attention.'—Izzy Harvey, age 10

Lastly, one teacher commented: 'Pupils with a range of abilities in literacy, and a range of behaviour challenges, really rose to the occasion. We have seen an improvement in the pupils' speaking and listening skills that they are now able to apply to other situations. Thanks to the project, we have now established strong links in the community that we will be able to continue to make use of in future projects. We are grateful to have been able to have been a part of this project.'

Julia Letts, 'Case Study 1, St James's Primary, Stourbridge', unpublished, 2014. See also Julia Letts, 'Oral History and Schools: Practical Tips for Getting Started in the Classroom', *Oral History* 39, no. 1 (2011): 104–108.

Over on the other side of the Atlantic and with an older group of school students, Howard Levin describes what he calls 'Authentic Doing', project work with students at the Urban School of San Francisco where he was director of technology. This aimed to produce 'web-based digital video oral histories'. It was part of an elective history course at an independent high school in the Haight-Ashbury district. Levin had recorded for the Shoah Foundation and thus was an experienced interviewer, working with Deborah Dent-Samake, a history teacher at the school. With support from the Kellogg Foundation they were able to run the project and also upload the results onto the 'Telling Their Stories:

Oral History Archives Project (OHAP)' website. This collaboration meant that the students learned a great deal about doing oral history but also could see how the results of their work could be shared way beyond their classroom and community.

A particular strength of the OHAP website is that it stores previous student research. This means that as part of their preparation students can look at 'notes, bibliographies, documents and interview questions', learning from other students' experience. In turn, their preparation and final project will be archived for others to use. The OHAP website has gone on to also include interviews carried out by other groups of students, including accounts from African Americans of the violence of the struggle for civil rights in Mississippi.<sup>9</sup>

In these projects the camera operator is also an active member of the team and can ask additional questions. The back-up camera operator's role is to check on shot framing and sound levels. Although camera operation is important, training is kept to a minimum. Levin feels that students should be focusing on the history making rather than technical preparation. Nevertheless he has strong views on how to use the cameras. 'We now shoot with everyone sitting around a table—preferably a kitchen or a dining room table—instead of on couches in the living room. This not only creates a more relaxed, intimate, and less formal atmosphere but also keep the witnesses' hands well above their lap so the camera can more easily capture gestures. This setting also relaxes the students and gives them space for their own notes. The table-top filming technique aids with lighting, as the table helps to reflect light up into the subject's face. We also shoot with the camera situated behind and between the primary and secondary interviewers. This results in a nice variety of left- and right-facing shots as the witness turns to address each interviewer. Finally, as soon as the set-up is complete, we bring the witness and interview teams into the "interview set" and we have them continue the *schmooze* process there. This helps the witness adjust to the bright light and become more comfortable in this now studio-style environment'.<sup>10</sup>

#### **CALIFORNIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS INTERVIEW HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS**

Howard Levin describes project work with students at the Urban School of San Francisco. The students were prepared for a project on the Holocaust with background historical reading, learning how to do oral history and focusing on interviewing people with a traumatic past. Preparation also involved finding out about the lives of the people they were going to interview. Half of the Holocaust survivors they would be meeting had already published their memoirs and experiences, publicly or privately.

Students carried out a 'pre-interview', which might be a visit by the interviewee to the school or a meeting at the interviewee's home, or a phone call or e-mail exchange. In this way some initial rapport was built up with teacher support. At the first pre-interview, students gather basic information about the person, including dates, chronology, and key aspects of the story they would be telling.

Before the interview, the team has to prepare their interview schedule, agreeing on the topics they want to focus on and a balance overall between different life stages, in this case before, during, and after the Holocaust. The students are encouraged to convert their topics into basic notes in order to make sure that what is filmed feels as much like a conversation as possible. Studs Terkel's approach is their inspiration: to arrive at something which feels 'natural' and not 'interrogated'.

After the interview, students write to thank their interviewee and are encouraged to say what they have gained personally from the encounter. Levin gives an example of a letter written to Harold Gordon, a child survivor of Auschwitz:

I want to thank you for giving up your Sunday for the interview. Your time and cooperation was really all we needed to get your story, but you gave us much more. You gave us real emotion and real investment in the words and the stories you told. Thank you for opening up to us and speaking with us without inhibition. The authenticity of your words and even your facial expressions proved to me how honest you were being. This sincerity is something that means a lot to me. I especially loved the story you told about how your mother would wrap chicken around you and your brother to bless you. You told the story so eloquently. I could see the memory in your eyes as you spoke. It relieves me to know that that story, along with all of the others, will be put up on our Web site so that anyone in search of knowledge and truth can find it.

Adapted from Howard Levin, 'Authentic Doing: Student Produced Web-Based Digital Video Oral Histories', *Oral History Review* 38, no. 1 (2011): 6–33; see also online at Telling Their Stories: Oral History Archive Project, <http://www.telling stories.org/about/index.htm>.

The team follows up the interview with a presentation to the whole class that includes critical reflection on how the interview went. The film is published very soon after the interview on the OHAP website, divided up into short twenty- to thirty-minute segments. In the early days they waited until the interview was transcribed, but putting up the video first means that everyone, children and



participants, can be involved straightaway. The video files also have the function of becoming part of the transcription process.

The students are being exposed to stories which are often extreme and horrifying in content and to emotions which may be hard to deal with, on both sides. Mindful of this, the project has invited in trauma experts to run role-playing sessions, discussions, and instruction as part of the preparation.

Students not only learn about the pasts of an older generation but may also find that they are having to reconsider their own histories. For example, Levin recalls how Vickie Malone, a student, interviewed an older black woman as part of the McComb High School project in Mississippi:

Much of the class centers on gathering oral narratives from residents who grew up in a radically different McComb, a place where inequality and violence was a part of life. In the middle of one interview at the home of Ms. Patsy Ruth Butler, this student asked an innocent question about the role of law enforcement during that time. [Vickie's] grandfather had been a McComb policeman and, later, chief of police during the 1960s. In her family's eyes, he was a hero. But, she says, her voice trembling as she recounts the answer: '[Ms. Butler] said you couldn't trust policemen, that they were just as involved as the KKK. Even now, it makes me want to cry. At the time I thought, I have to regain my composure, that I can't let this interfere with what I'm here to do. But I felt like I was in a tug-of-war. Here is this woman telling me this, but my family . . . they're such good people. What do I do?'<sup>11</sup>

Levin goes on to say that the student was able to reconcile her feelings for her grandfather with what she heard, but was so caught up by the experience that she repeated the course the following year in order to be able to find out more about the history of McComb during segregation and the civil rights movement.

Teachers who either lead or take part in oral history in the classroom continue to describe it as transformative. They see children who have been labeled difficult, who appear to struggle in the classroom with often quite basic learning, in a new light, enthusiastic, confident, and communicative. But how to identify these outcomes for a wider audience of managers, colleagues, assessors, or inspectors seems to be a problem. Lack of time, resources, and freedom to innovate has put off many, but what some miss is some kind of benchmarking to justify spending teaching time on oral history. Curricula set up at national or state level come with standards which children, and teachers, must achieve. In Britain failures carry a heavy price, threatening the ranking of a school when it is assessed by inspectors. One answer is to find ways to specify the specific learning outcomes for oral history.

Glen Whitman, an American educationalist working at secondary school level, sets out in a website and a book what these might be, specifying 'standards' for oral history project work at secondary or high school level. His broad-brush approach includes a wide range of subject areas, going far beyond the discipline of history

into social science, geography, English language, science, and civics and citizenship. He provides templates of charts, checklists, spreadsheets, teaching logs, and examples of release forms, transcription guidelines, and model interview analysis topics forms to help teachers get started and find ways to include assessment of oral history work within set standards. Whitman advocates an 'Assessment Rubric' that enables teachers to evaluate students' work and gives students 'visions of excellence'. Whitman's enthusiasm leads him to challenge the practice of teaching to standards using 'drill and kill' exam preparation techniques which, he argues, turn students off learning. By contrast, a project 'reinvigorates the teaching and studying of history and is a more authentic way to learn'.<sup>12</sup>

### GLEN WHITMAN: AN ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FOR AMERICAN SCHOOLS

Glen Whitman's 'Assessment Rubric' divides oral history project work under weighted headings adding up to 100 per cent each, with sections ranked from A to F, explained with comments. Analysis is weighted at 25 per cent, judged according to whether it includes a thesis that establishes the historical value of an interview; demonstrates in-depth analysis and interpretation; draws conclusions; applies historical contextualisation and interview transcription through quotations; and is revised in final draft. Biography is weighted at 10 per cent, with sections which evaluate the work in terms of: historical accuracy; whether dates, details and anecdotes are used; whether the interviewee is placed in historical context; whether visual material is included; whether the length requirement (one page) is met and the quality of the final draft. Historical contextualisation is given 25 per cent, with 'mechanics' and 'technical requirements' making up to the total of 100 per cent.

Ben Cantwell, a student who did courses assessed in this way, comments:

The oral history project provided me with one of the most rewarding experiences in my high school career . . . For me, the reward that came by the end of the project is priceless: confidence. History aside, this project taught me about life and relationships.

Glenn Whitman, *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students and Meeting Standards Through Oral History* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004), 87 and ch. 7.  
Reprinted with permission from Altamira Press.

For any project, a key choice will be the choice of a theme which is both interesting for the students and also practicable in terms of finding interviewees. For younger age groups, family history is particularly suitable. It helps a child-centred

approach, drawing on the child's own access to family memories and documents, and at the same time encourages parents or grandparents to participate in the work of the school. A whole variety of themes can start from developing family trees with different kinds of information. With older groups there are many more choices: homes and houses, food and clothes, work (including domestic work), family life, games, or leisure—and any of these can be made comparative with memories from other countries. A project can be about a local event, or focus on the story of a particular street. It is not always easy to see any boundaries or shape to local or community history in a big city. But a single street can offer a microcosm of some aspect of its history: of changes in working-class community life, or shops and trading, or of successive patterns of immigration.

### **Oral history in higher education**

Let us turn now to oral history in higher education. Here, despite many changes, oral history in colleges and universities has never been more popular. Rather like the situation in schools, it is well known and practised, if not always well supported or recognised for what it can contribute to learning outcomes and to skills and knowledge at all levels. Al Thomson's evaluative survey of British courses in 1991 found over a hundred examples, primarily in history but also in sociology, English, and other disciplines. Since then the range and spread of courses and projects has further widened, as has the type of work that students undertake. Oral history has been used in vocational courses in health and social care which take a biographical approach to promoting sensitive care and support, in teacher training, with law students as they learn about ethical issues, with geographers working with environmental knowledge and land use, and across all areas in the arts and humanities. Just like in the schools sector, in higher education, course leaders and teachers are sharing online resources and examples of successful teaching and learning strategies through Creative Commons.<sup>13</sup>

Through all this, however, sometimes the support for oral history amongst historians in more traditional institutions and arenas in higher education is still lacking. It could be that these more conservative spaces will be left behind. A factor which is working in favour of oral history project work in higher education in Britain is the new requirement (or, in the United States, encouragement) that academic work should reach a public beyond the student seminar or academic publication. Research has to show its worth to society and the economy. One way to demonstrate this is to provide evidence of involvement and benefit to people outside the academy and audiences who might have an interest or be affected. What better than an oral history project which directly engages with people and which, with careful planning and dissemination, can result in outputs which are there to be seen, contributing to local knowledge and skills and to the heritage of society more generally?

Some institutions have a good understanding of these rewards and their support is leading to oral history teaching and project work of the highest quality

in terms of innovation and impact. At some universities, an Oral History Centre has become a successful model, where resources and leadership mean that work goes on at all levels, with seminar series, training, and links to a variety of outside partners and affiliates. Two high-profile centres have even forged links across the Atlantic. The Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at the University of Concordia, Montreal, and the Scottish Oral History Centre at Strathclyde have organised joint international conferences, with staff at Strathclyde having Research Affiliate status at Concordia.

Whether or not they are attached to a centre, course leaders and teachers are developing successful approaches which draw on student interest and expertise. Three aspects have been particularly significant for their contribution. First, interest in the methodologies of oral history, discussing issues such as intersubjectivity, the re-use of archived data, and ethics, have brought oral history into discussions alongside psychosocial and qualitative approaches, which some students find absorbing. Secondly, the use of digital media has made a striking change, expanding the range and reach of students' work as well as corresponding with the real worlds of today's students. More substantively, there is a third area in which students engage readily and which links back to oral history's origins in labour history and women's history. This is the focus on social justice, in which oral history projects continue to make an important contribution and draw on student energy and commitment to change in society. The examples we draw on below all build on and respond to these developments in various ways.

At Monash University in Australia, where Al Thomson has been offering oral history at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, students are introduced to topics on history and memory, trauma, and subjectivity which always include a practical element. In Scotland, at the University of Strathclyde Oral History Centre, directed by Arthur McIvor, there is a similar 'Theory and Practice' course for undergraduates with learning outcomes which include 'a wide knowledge of key aspects of oral history', 'skills of oral history interviewing and analysis', and 'an understanding of the application and use of history in the public arena through engaging with work on oral history and public history'. Many of the Centre students work on a year's placement in a museum or other heritage or public history partner, which means that their project report must fit the needs of the external partner hosting the placement.

The linking of theory and practice inevitably leads students into considering their approach to interviewing and to reflecting on their own and their interviewee's participation and relationship. This encourages a critical, reflective approach through which students can become authorities on oral history as process, exploring how memory is generated.

Rina Benmayor was an early advocate of using digital communication with undergraduate students. This second approach has seen rapid development in higher education teaching and learning. Writing in 2000, she described a fifteen-week course in which students each put together an oral history project, 'from

design and implementation, to analysis and dissemination, including some form of public “return” of the research to the relevant communities and interviewees’. Her students, at California State University, Monterey Bay, followed what is now a conventional format for project work but with the difference that the process was embedded in digital and electronic communication from start to finish, including assessment and archiving. Benmayor describes what happened as she worked with what was then a fairly new approach to teaching oral history project work.

The whole experience changed her practice, as new media in the classroom meant that students could engage more directly with all the stages of doing a project. She emphasises that the focus was not the technology itself but rather that technology facilitated and enhanced the students’ learning experience. She was able to teach oral history in ‘a more interactive, participatory and collaborative way’. Today’s students are familiar with the Virtual Learning Environment, Moodle, or other similar shared digital spaces, but she was working with few precedents to go on. Students worked with her by e-mail, with a class folder she had set up to include templates for ‘field journaling’ and interview transcription. In this way she was able to work with students, both collectively and individually, reviewing and assessing work as it came in. As the project progressed, the class was able to construct an interview guide collectively, face to face but with the added advantage of discussing suggestions, projected onto a screen they could all respond to. None of this was to substitute for ‘real’ classroom experience. Though ‘the digital world provides exciting new possibilities for representing, interpreting, archiving, and teaching ethnographic and field-based research’, for her these are only the means to an end: the ‘project-based, collaboration workshop’.

Her group comprised eighteen students who conducted thirty-two interviews with other students, all carried out face to face, transcribed, and critically annotated, through a collaborative process. The result was a four-page feature article, ‘First in My Family to Go to College’, a web page that included group members’ personal stories, interpretations, photographs, class documents, narrative excerpts, audio, and video. Uploaded onto the university’s electronic archive, it came to have a permanent presence.<sup>14</sup>

Fast forward only a few years and we are able to see how these first developments have been followed with exciting work by students coming more recently onto the digital oral history scene. Steven High’s students at Concordia University, Montreal, embed their oral history projects in digital media and, similarly, the aim is to enhance rather than substitute for the student experience of doing oral history and presenting their findings. His students worked on artistic projects in a community setting, taking part in a cross-disciplinary course comprising oral history, art history, and theatre. With the title ‘Right to the City’, the course, as its website explains, was engaging with social justice issues as ‘students are working directly with social and economic problems that have a deep historical basis and whose effects can be seen in Pointe (Saint-Charles) today’.

Steven High describes how his oral history component, 'Working Class Public History', trains students to use the cumulatively archived interviews from previous years, as well as collecting their own. The students use a software package, 'Stories Matter', specially developed at the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University. This free, downloadable program is presented as 'a real alternative to transcription'. Those who use it claim that it presents a solution to what Michael Frisch describes as the 'Deep Dark Secret' of oral history, that 'nobody spends much time listening to or watching recorded and collected interview documents'. The Stories Matter software means that students and project leaders, as well as interviewees and community groups, can work together, each having access to project materials, clipping, exporting, and indexing transcripts, audio and video files, images, and reflections. Techniques involve 'tagging' interviews to link themes and topics. Each person seen speaking has a short biography, 'inviting you into the life behind the words'. Being web-based, it can be accessed remotely and also take in local databases to its online server.<sup>15</sup>

#### **'WORKING CLASS PUBLIC HISTORY': A POSTGRADUATE ORAL HISTORY COURSE AT CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL**

*Steven High describes the course at Concordia's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling:*

We taught the three unique courses in the same space, a former church within the neighbourhood, now run by a secular community group dedicated to food security—Share the Warmth. This was done in partnership with a number of community groups, including the Atwater Library (the old mechanic's institute). The students in all three classes had to research their way into the neighbourhood. Working with a sound artist and a graphic designer, my students then developed a one-hour beta-audio walk based on an archive of thirty interviews as well as a fifty-page bilingual illustrated booklet . . . The other classes developed site-specific performances and a visual arts exhibition. Each student became an 'expert' in one of the recorded interviews, databasing that interview and writing a report as part of our shared research base.

One of the ways that the three classes connected with each other was through a 'speed dating with history' exercise where students sat in two concentric circles facing each other. Each paired student had become an 'expert' in the life of one interviewee from our archive. They each had ninety seconds to perform their interviewee (speaking

in the first person, with all of the ethical alarm bells that involved) before we banged a gong and they had to rotate away from each other and do it again and again. In doing so, they had to decide how to represent another person and their story—not only in what to share, but how to say it. Should they try to mimic the sound of their voice or a recurring gesture? The theatre students so enjoyed seeing the students do this that they did a small project about them that is available online (<http://righttothecity.atwaterlibrary.ca/speed-dates-with-history/>). The course culminated with the beta-walk, exhibition and performances that were attended by nearly two hundred people. This was the first year of a three year commitment to the neighbourhood.

Next fall, we are adding a fourth course—from Art Education (mural makers). I think what is interesting about oral history here in Montreal is the extent to which it is not only cross-disciplinary but cross-faculty. The fine arts have an enormous presence within our community—profoundly shaping our practice. Most of the MA and PhD students in my classes, and who I (co)supervise are therefore in interdisciplinary studies, the humanities, art education, communications, and not simply ‘history’ per se.

Online as Right to the City Water Library; Steven High, personal communication, 12 January 2015; Steven High’s students’ oral history project work can also be found online as the Lachine Canal and ‘La Pointe’ Audio Walks. [www.postindustrialmontreal.ca](http://www.postindustrialmontreal.ca).

Over in Australia, Al Thomson similarly writes enthusiastically about students’ use of digital media. His second-year course, ‘Making Histories’, has resulted in fifty three-minute-long videos, eight of which were shown at an event held at Melbourne’s Victoria Museum. The videos grew out of a collaboration with the museum, the aim being that students would develop their own history projects and find their own research sources. Many chose family or local history stories about migration, the environment, war service, the Holocaust. Students had access to the museum’s archives and were able to draw on sources from Australian history and history further afield for work which was not exclusively oral history. Using historical sources, they were to create a three-minute film using sound, images, and narrative. This was to be an exciting process and not just for the students, as Al Thomson explains:

I’ve never known students to be so committed to a course and their assessed work—they knew that the videos would be online and seen by family and friends, indeed by the whole world, and not just their examiners. So they



worked hard and were extraordinarily imaginative. Marking the videos was a pleasure for tutor Johnny Bell and myself, and some of the videos will be linked to the Museum's online collection for future researchers to use. Believe it or not, perhaps the most gratifying moment for me was marking the exam the students wrote after they uploaded their videos.

They were asked 'what have you learnt about history from making your own history?' Students wrote that researching and making their video history had transformed their understanding of history. They realised that everything and everybody has a history, and that small stories can illuminate big issues. They discovered that histories are made and not found, that all historians make creative and historical choices.

They realised that today's histories are influenced by today's ideas and audiences, and that sometimes history-making involves compromise. How do you tell a difficult family history when participants are still alive? They were immensely proud that they had created histories for all the world to see, and perhaps especially pleased knowing an elderly relative or neighbour would appreciate the care and insight the student had brought to their life and history.<sup>16</sup>

Digital oral history projects like these and 'Stories Matter' owe their origins to developments in digital storytelling, which was emerging in the 1990s as computer-based tools began to support the mixing of sound and visual media. The photographer Daniel Meadows was an early proponent. He had been teaching an undergraduate course, 'Digital Storytelling and Photography', at the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies and in the early 2000s ran 'Capture Wales', a BBC Wales digital storytelling project. Stories from all over Wales are now archived, each with transcripts, sounds, and images, inspiring in their everydayness and each with its own unique qualities. Digital storytelling continues to have a huge influence and following, at all levels of education, including university and college. Centres in Berkeley, California, and at the University of Houston, Texas, promote the educational rewards of an approach which, though sometimes more documentary than critical or historical, promotes individual telling as well as listening. Rather like oral history, proponents see the value of integrating the practice into all parts of the curriculum, stressing its open approach to sharing experience and technologies.<sup>17</sup>

We have been looking in detail at examples of oral history digital project work because these are particularly exciting new developments in higher education with wide implications for all kinds of teaching and learning. But with such projects, what kinds of themes have worked best?

Social justice themes link especially well with oral history's tradition of exposing hidden lives and experiences and challenging dominant orthodoxies about the past, and they continue to provoke and support student enthusiasm.

Sometimes students pick their own topics, but an oral history course may be designed in such a way as to deliberately unsettle students' assumptions. This was how Riki van Boeschoten taught anthropology to students at the University of Thessaly. She needed to lead students into understanding the viewpoint and culture of the 'other', a core skill of the anthropologist. What is familiar needs to be sensed as strange and assumptions need to be questioned.

She settled on migration, a topic that is highly familiar to Greek people and also one fraught with prejudice and xenophobia. She devised a project with students working together in a joint research team interviewing Albanian migrants to Greece and former Greek migrants to Germany. She wanted them to find out what was common to both groups and also to discover for themselves experiences which were not reflected in public accounts and public memory. The students were to go on to use their interviews to prepare teaching materials for schools. The results exceeded her and her students' expectations, and one reason for this was the Albanian migrants' intense desire to be heard. Racist stereotypes were challenged and identities were refashioned as stories emerged from the interviews. But these discoveries went beyond simple re-education, as one student eloquently describes:

The interview is a search for the self through the other. That's how I experienced giving the floor to an Albanian Gypsy and I asked myself what alterity actually is. For what is familiar is also what we know less, and the unknown is most frightening because it can at any moment reveal itself as desperately familiar.

This was the 'culture shock' that Riki van Boeschoten had hoped for and which the students were able to pass on as they disseminated their materials to audiences beyond the university.<sup>18</sup>

Focusing on a very different aspect of social justice, for two decades the Open University's School of Health and Social Care has had an interest in promoting an inclusive approach to understanding the lives of people with learning disabilities at undergraduate level. This has led to PhD projects that focus on life and work in large institutions, oral histories of families' campaigning, and research into work opportunities for people with learning disability over the last fifty years. Revisiting twentieth-century military history also continues to draw postgraduate student attention with its potential for explorations of the intersection of public and individual memory, as much as for revealing fresh insights and uncovering hidden scenarios. Gender and sexuality also attract an eclectic range of topics: women cricketers; masculinity and the home; gay liberation; pornography; 'divine prostitutes' in India.

With a well-chosen topic, a single student or a group can make a real contribution to historical knowledge through new fieldwork. The possibilities are limitless. And the gains are equally clear: the personal fulfillment, co-operative

spirit, and deeper understanding of history itself which can result—and beyond that, the breaking down of the isolation of academic study from the world without.

### Community projects

The locally based community project has been an ideal context for many oral historians working co-operatively, sharing skills in histories with meaning to ordinary people. It can contribute to many different enterprises. From different starting points, including learning English as an additional language, an adult education class in history, the University of the Third Age, the local history society, groups researching their own health conditions or experiences of disability, work with young adults in care or who are homeless, a reminiscence group for older people in a care home or day centre, a museum exhibition, the neighbourhood group with its own website or blog, all can be the starting point for a collective oral history project. Some such projects have proved strikingly successful in their social impact.

For example, the New York Chinatown History Project aimed to help build a democratic community structure precisely by a highly politically conscious but sensitive interpretation of older and newer immigrants, community bosses and sweated laundry workers, to each other. In Sweden in the 1980s, Sven Lindqvist's 'Dig Where You Stand' factory history tent toured the country, stirring the solidarity of old industrial communities.<sup>19</sup> Earlier, a project in the condemned slum neighbourhood of Nöden in the city of Lund in the 1960s so revived local community feeling that Nöden was permanently saved from the motorway project which would have destroyed it.

Funding for community oral history comes from differing sources in different countries. Thus most current projects in central and west Africa have been funded by Western NGOs. At the other extreme, in the United States, in addition to established charities there is a strong culture of giving by local business, and local media, libraries and museums, charities, ethnic or civil or professional societies, schools and universities, clubs and churches are also important sources. There has been generous state funding through the National Endowment for the Humanities, and some states, most notably Kentucky, have set up their own oral history commissions. Similarly in Britain there has been a succession of different kinds of funding for community groups.

Local charities, trade unions, colleges, universities, parishes, the Arts Council, the Workers' Education Association, and local authority education departments and arts and culture committees have all contributed. Their support meant help with transcribing and publishing, thus speeding up the whole process of reaching a local readership. Some local publishing groups, such as Queen Spark in Brighton, Centerprise in Hackney, and The Living Archive in Milton Keynes, date back to the 1970s or 1980s with a continuing history helped by varying kinds of support. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, most local funders have become less and less able to provide money. They were either struggling

to survive in the face of cuts which were shrinking the public sector, or were themselves being forced to become the providers of services and support and so had few resources to spare for oral history projects. Even so, through all this, oral history at a community level has, perversely, survived. The British example is not unique but offers an interesting insight into how local projects have taken different forms over the years.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Conservative government's Manpower Services Commission's (MSC) Community Programme was set up as a response to unemployment, particularly amongst new graduates in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus the official focus was on training participants in the many skills that are needed for oral history work. Many of the current generation of leading British oral historians developed skills at that time, developing and managing short-term community-based projects funded by the MSC. Ironically, as Graham Smith points out, they were working in areas of industrial decline and change, recording older people who remembered those industries and also historical unemployment. Most of these oral history projects did not survive for more than their initial period of funding, but some had longer lives, for example in Bradford, Southampton, London, and Edinburgh.<sup>20</sup>

Today the main sponsor of community oral history projects in Britain is once again government initiated, if not directly funded: the national lottery with its special funding stream 'Heritage'. The Heritage Lottery Fund has been funding projects with an oral history content since it was first set up in the 1990s. Over just one ten-year period, between 2002 and 2012, it awarded more than £81 million to over 3,100, projects all of which included an element of oral history. Its funding policy echoes Raphael Samuel's call for a re-mapping of local community history in which people are as prominent as places, and the two are more closely intertwined.<sup>21</sup> HLF endorses oral history's original principles with suggestions to: 'give a voice to ordinary people—by recording their memories'; 'reveal the stories of the area's diverse groups'; and 'discover the origins of the place where you live, . . . explore the events that helped to shape it'. As someone who participated in producing a heritage trail comments: 'There's so much you can achieve through a heritage project—from revealing a little-known part of local history to giving people a real sense of belonging'.

There is no doubt—and the HLF's own website and the journal *Oral History* with its section 'Current British Work' provide ample evidence—that lottery funding has led to an extraordinary amount of oral history activity by local groups, museums, schools, archives, veterans; in parks, villages, theatres, former hospitals; on rivers, canals, industrial sites, and farms. As well as spaces and places, HLF-funded community projects include groups from widely diverse backgrounds, all ensuring that their histories are recorded, preserved, and disseminated in as many formats as possible: theatre, websites, printed publications, walks, talks, exhibitions, and films.<sup>22</sup>

It is a striking outpouring of memory but, as with all community oral history, not without pitfalls. The essential merit is still to encourage co-operation, on an unusually equal footing, in the discovery of a kind of history which means something to ordinary people. Of course these are tendencies which have to be nurtured, but they can create problems. There are now many useful sources of advice on how to set up and run a community oral history project, and examples can be found on the internet and in books by experienced oral historians like Donald Ritchie and Valerie Yow. The Oral History Society's website includes sections of practical advice on how to get started, find people to interview, choose equipment, and carry out an interview, as well as information about short courses for beginners. The site also provides advice on ethics and copyright (on the basis of EU law) and a software review for oral historians, all regularly updated.<sup>23</sup>

Any oral history project will confront some basic issues. The first is the level of equipment. If you want to record for others to hear or to set up an archive, you need to buy good quality equipment. For a group project you will need to have workspace and all that goes with it, space to meet and talk and if possible play back recordings without disturbing others. You will need a computer that you can share and you should think about video cameras too.

The next issue again concerns the choice of topic. For many of these purposes the best topic may seem simply to be one which will catch immediate interest. Here the goal of the local group and the policy of the funder may be at odds. HLF, with its broad view of what is meant by heritage, may encourage bids that seek to establish a middle, non-controversial ground. Groups bidding may find that they have to tailor their original ideas if they are to be successful. An emphasis on 'value for money' and the need to conform to the lottery's notion of what is meant by 'heritage', as well as exhortations to be mindful of the lottery-ticket-buying public, may mean that initial ideas must be scaled down to have any hope of success. And the time limits set are not generous, meaning that work may have to be completed in only a few months, leaving few opportunities to dig deep, explore controversy, or uncover new insights. Surprisingly, HLF has not kept a publicly available record of projects funded and their outcomes. This creates the risk that smaller local HLF-funded projects may turn out to be hasty and shallow, ironically with little or no 'heritage' outcome in terms of archived in-depth interviews or lasting outputs, such as films or books of genuine value as resources for the future.

Getting funded is a lengthy process and highly competitive. HLF is careful to ensure that projects are dispersed as equally as possible across the UK and across a wide range of interests and identities. Because of this, the process of securing funding has become more professional, requiring skills that many local groups simply may not have. There has also been a degree of standardisation in what community-based projects should look like and achieve. There are certainly benefits as volunteers are drawn in, skills are learned and

disseminated, and histories are recorded and displayed, but too little scope for lateral thinking. Perhaps the kind of remapping of local community history which Raphael Samuel envisaged can only be carried out by enthusiasts working in small groups or researchers with their own time frame and schedule. He argued with passion for an approach where a historian from any level of expertise can

explore the moral topography of a village or town with the same precision which predecessors have given to the Ordnance Survey, following the ridge and furrow of the social environment as well as the parish boundaries, travelling the dark corridors and half-hidden passageways as well as the by-law street. Reconstructing a child's itinerary seventy years ago the historian will stumble on the invisible boundaries which separated the rough end of a street from the respectable, the front houses from the back, the boys' space from the girls'. Following the grid of the pavement you will come upon one space that was used for 'tramcars', another for hopscotch, a third for Jump Jimmy Knacker or wall games. 'Monkey racks' appear on the High Street, where young people went courting on their Sunday promenades, while the cul-de-sac becomes a place where woodchoppers had their sheds and costers dressed their barrows ... (And similarly in) particular woods or fields ... here mushrooms could be found or rabbits trapped; there potatoes were dug or horses illegally grazed, or long summer days were spent at haymaking or harvest ...

Or again, instead of taking a locality itself as the subject, the historian might choose instead as the starting point some element of life within it, limited in both time and place, but used as a window on the world ... It would be good to see this attempted for nineteenth-century London. A study of Sunday trading in Bethnal Green, including the war waged upon it by the open-air preachers; of cabinet-making in South Hackney, or of Hoxton burglars ... would take one closer to the heart of East End life than yet another précis of Hector Gavin's *Sanitary Ramblings* ... Courting and marriage in Shepherd's Bush, domestic life in Acton, or Roman Catholicism among the laundrywomen and gas workers of Kensal Green might tell one more about the growth of suburbs than logging the increase of streets ... The study of social structure, too, might be made more intimate and realistic if the approach were more oblique, and focused on activity and relationships. A study of childhood in Chelsea (of whom you could or couldn't play with, of where you were allowed to go), masculinity in Mitcham, the journey to work in Putney, or of local politics in Finsbury, would tell us a great deal (more) about the way class differences were manipulated and perceived, and social allegiances expressed in practice ... than a more flat-footed approach taking the Registrar General's fivefold divisions as markers.<sup>24</sup>

If the identification of a topic and a way to research it may have to be developed through compromise, then another area strewn with pitfalls is the very notion of community itself. Earlier concerns that community-based oral history might not be fully representative of difference and diversity have been to some extent met by the wide range of different histories that HLF has been willing to fund. The past is no longer understood to be white, non-disabled, or heterosexual. So much for differences between what are understood to be communities, but what about differences within them? How willing are today's communities to stir up memories of isolation, exclusion, or oppression, by one family or group, of another? Group memories of disability or chronic illness now feature amongst the list of oral history groups' achievements. But how easy is it for groups to critically review their jointly constructed public account to include those private accounts which may expose now disapproved practises or revive socially segregated areas?

Linda Shopes, in a critical overview of her own involvement in community oral history, asks if 'defining a particular community around a single dimension of identity cancels out significant differences?' She advises anyone designing a group project about a community to ask, 'who am I missing ... Who are the outliers, the people we don't necessarily think of, the people outside the circle of community as we've defined it who are nonetheless related to it in some way?' To be able to answer this means ensuring that those who might most easily identify those 'outliers' need themselves to be included in the making of the project.<sup>25</sup>

However inclusive a project, there may be limitations to what a community chooses to remember and what a project team feels it should include when it comes to publication. Paul Thompson and Brenda Corti led an HLF-funded project which drew on the memories of people living in the large village of Wivenhoe, nearby the University of Essex. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the university was newly established, having made its name during the student revolts of 1968, Wivenhoe also had a reputation for being 'a hotbed of heterosexual experiment', given national radio publicity by the broadcaster George Gale, who lived in the village. But these were not memories that people were keen to talk about, though they were happy to talk about Wivenhoe's well-known gay community. The project found one interviewee, an artist, who was less inhibited in talking about local goings-on amongst the young married university staff households then newly arrived in the village, but even in an anonymised form, the project committee decided this could not be published in the book of the project:

This was an irony for the history of a village which in the 1960s was well-known for including a significant number of university staff and students who were rebelling against the then prevailing conventions of sexuality and marriage: a frontier of change which it seems that local people prefer to forget.<sup>26</sup>



A third pitfall is how to ensure the project's own legacy and lasting presence. Community oral history projects now have their own histories. QueenSpark, a Brighton community publisher, has survived through many changes of direction. It began in 1972 as a campaign to prevent a building from being turned into a casino rather than a nursery. Its first publication in 1974 was an autobiography written by a local man who remembered the poverty and hardship of growing up in Edwardian Brighton. Others followed and in the 1980s QueenSpark became distinctive for its collaborative way of working with group authorship. The often turbulent story of Lorraine Sitzia and Arthur Thickett's joint production of his life story is an open and honest account of how this kind of partnership can work. Around this time, several of QueenSpark's publications had the aim of questioning past and present policies in areas such as housing and took a strongly political line. In 1991 the group moved into ways of reaching local people directly with what were called 'Market Books', cheaply produced and sold on market stalls by volunteers. Interviews with lesbians and gay men who lived in Brighton, with members of the local fishing industry, and with some of Brighton's Jews followed. More recently a series of publications and activities celebrated the local trans experience with 'Brighton Trans\*formed'. QueenSpark continues to publish local writing and run projects which attract funding and national attention. Its website chronicles QueenSpark's history and illustrates how community oral history survives by changing itself.<sup>27</sup>

Projects that have survived are now able to provide a continuing resource for others through online archiving. This is particularly the case when a group has been able to secure sufficient funding to digitise their interviews and transcripts. Sad to say, many of the early UK groups' interviews are hard to find, either because they were never archived, or because they went to a local archive which has not survived. As a result, some very significant collections are at risk: for example, Bradford Heritage Recording Unit's interviews of the 1980s, which remain on audio cassettes, and the recordings of Elizabeth Roberts, which are preserved in their original hard copy format. Recognising this, the British Library, funded by Heritage Lottery, is endeavouring to preserve as many of these early collections as possible through digitisation. The project, 'Save Our Sounds', aims to rescue a wide range of oral history and other sound collections, with a £9.5 million grant to the British Library with partners around Britain. It began in 2015 with an outline *Directory of UK Sound Collections*.<sup>28</sup> More recently, projects have fortunately been able to take a longer view. Even so, the information archived may be tantalizingly vague, or incomplete. Interviews logged without information as to the age or occupation of the interviewee or the date of the interview are unlikely to have much future use.

Fortunately there are many good examples to follow. Thus interviews and transcripts created between 2004 and 2007 by the King's Cross oral history project are available on the London Borough of Camden's website and are fully searchable. In a rural area, Ambleside Oral History Group in the English

Lake District has been in continuous existence since 1976. They were able to digitise their earlier interviews with funding from HLF and continue to add to their archive of 450 interviews, all now accessible online, searchable by topic or keyword. Some collections find ways to make the interviews available by publishing selections as podcasts. Eastside Community Heritage publishes 'bite size stories' from their archive, organised by theme and changing every two weeks.<sup>29</sup>

Documentation, which includes copies of a project's recruitment and publicity, funding and organisation, may help a later group to understand an earlier project's aims. The north London social housing estate Woodberry Down, in Hackney, has been the focus of no less than three community oral history projects over the last thirty years. The original project, run as an adult education class in the 1980s, produced a book, sold at minimum cost locally. Working on what was once a show estate opened in the late 1940s, but beginning to suffer from lack of investment, social workers saw oral history as a way to raise levels of self-esteem within the estate, especially amongst those who had been the first tenants. *Woodberry Down Memories* emerged through a collaborative process. A small group of older residents with two facilitators developed a narrative from their recorded oral histories which celebrated the diversity of the tenant community and the importance of social housing for the lives of families who had been in great housing need when they first moved in. All the materials, tapes, transcripts, photographs, and other ephemera were later deposited in Hackney Archives.

Then, in the early 2000s, Tom Hunter, a Hackney photographer, was commissioned by the Serpentine Gallery in central London to produce a piece of community artwork. Working with groups of older people on the estate, he produced a film, *A Palace for Us*. As in the earlier project, he aimed to present a positive view of social housing, at a time when regeneration plans threatened the future of the estate. He drew on individual older people interviewed at an afternoon club and then made a film using actors with a soundtrack of the recorded voices. He suggests that the earlier, more formal account of the history of the estate helped him to 'liberate his practice' so that he was able to 'drift off into quite magical things'.

The third Woodberry Down project has been developed with an approach quite different to the earlier two. 'The People's Story', working from a 'Memory Shop' with HLF support, encourages people to drop in to learn about the history of the estate, contribute their own stories, and take part in 'family art workshops', 'reminiscence events', and 'mini- exhibitions'. Meanwhile the estate itself is being transformed by a coalition of private developers and social housing providers into a highly desirable but controversial development in which social housing tenants will co-exist with private owners and renters. Woodberry Down's third community oral history is happening in the context of gentrification which

threatens to smother the estate's origins. These three projects, each in its own historical timeframe and each taking a different approach, combine to create a narrative of change, but with a continuing theme: the changing fortunes of social housing tenants. Legacy and lasting presence may be ensured if projects connect with local issues and, as Linda Shopes suggests, the oral history 'engages with living people who may have a stake in change'.<sup>30</sup>

Projects such as those described here are successors to and inspired by Raphael Samuel's call to 'a window on the world' which initially allowed him to catch the imagination of trade unionists on adult education courses at Ruskin College, Oxford. He got them to explore the histories of their own occupations, and subsequently to stimulate the History Workshop movement, which spawned local groups through the districts of London and other large cities. Today the academic style of the movement's semiannual *History Workshop Journal* should provide sufficient reassurance to those pessimistic enough to fear that such enthusiasm must prove incompatible with scholarly standards.

History Workshop's early activities nevertheless presented a challenge to professionalism as such, 'dedicated to making history a more democratic activity', and attacking a situation in which '"serious history" has become a subject reserved for the specialist . . . Only academics can be historians, and they have their own territorial rights and pecking orders. The great bulk of historical writing is never intended to be read outside the ranks of the profession.'<sup>31</sup> A similar opposition to this view underlies the activities of oral history groups in all parts of the world. But the spirit in which they have been produced by co-operative work can be equally striking.

At Centerprise in Hackney (itself now the subject of an oral history project),<sup>32</sup> groups working in the 1970s insisted that anyone can record anyone else, and all should contribute to the process of presentation. The purpose was as much to give people confidence in themselves, and their own memories and interpretations of the past, as to produce a form of history. In this context, the professional, confident in self-expression and backed by the authority of higher degrees, can become a positive menace, tearing at the roots of the project. Of course a complete absence of the wider historical perspectives of an experienced historian can be equally damaging to a group's work. It will lead to the creation of one-dimensional historical myths rather than to a deeper social understanding. What is needed is a dynamic relationship, with interpretation developing through mutual discussion.

The success of the local group project will thus depend partly upon how it makes use of the differing talents which each will bring to the work: their own life memories, ability as technicians, knack with organizing, or skill in getting others to talk will be as important as a reservoir of historical information. In some projects roles can be best divided up within a normal committee structure, while in others a professional will be the informal leader of an egalitarian group.

## Oral history with NGOs and for health projects

Just as many oral historians work in countries other than their own, so there are community projects, mostly in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, led by Western researchers. One outstanding NGO initiating projects of this kind has been Panos. Panos has used testimony to highlight the impact of development, displacement, and conflict. Over twenty years, with fifty projects in forty countries, Panos has recorded people's views and feelings about problematic changes in their communities and lands. A successor organisation, Oral Testimony Works, has carried on recording. One of their current projects is on combating stigma with people living with HIV in Swaziland, Ethiopia, and Mozambique. The Testimony Works website carries extracts from interviews recorded as part of the 'Give Stigma the Finger' project. Interviewees were recorded in their own language by a counsellor or activist but are anonymised on the website for protection. Stigma was still too strong. In contrast, Panos India, working with a local NGO in Jharkhand, recorded interviews with people who had been displaced by open-pit coal mining. Determined to reach as wide a range of types of audience as possible, Panos disseminated the interviews in a published booklet in Hindi, at a roundtable conference which included government officials, academics, activists, and people who had been displaced, as well as coal technologists and the mining industry. This conference was followed up by a set of recommendations given press coverage, where the testimonies played a significant role. All India Radio produced two short programmes using the testimonies, two of the interviewees were interviewed on local television, and Panos produced two books on mining issues in India.<sup>33</sup>

Another particularly significant area in which community group work has developed is the oral history of specific health conditions, and also with people who are dying. Oral history groups run by people who are HIV positive have changed over the years, as treatment now means that the condition is no longer always terminal, yet the motivation to tell, in this case to counter stigma, is strongly felt, and projects from across the world testify to this. Parents wanting to leave a legacy for their children, most often a memory box, have joined projects run in communities where deaths are still common. Guidelines describe working with the dying person, opening up discussion of illness, death, and loss with even very young children. In KwaZulu Natal, volunteers worked with families, making recordings and creating a story with photographs, collecting objects and sometimes drawings to help to sustain memories of a parent or other family member.<sup>34</sup>

Following on with earlier oral history work in hospices, Michelle Winslow has been running projects which have been looking at the role of oral history in palliative care and bereavement. Working in the north of England and in Northern Ireland with colleagues, patients, and their friends and family members, as well as professionals, she has investigated the impact of creating an oral history with a dying person. The results have helped participants. One

interviewee expressed feelings of release but also of continuity: 'I found it really satisfying . . . It's like having a bit of a clear out, you know, like clearing out your cupboards. And I'm really glad that I've got all that down, that I have said all that and I've got it recorded and it's there now, it's there forever'. And a family member's feedback makes it clear just how important the recording is to them: 'Having his voice on CD is the most precious thing I could have . . . next to the person being there, you know, it's so moving . . . It's very, very precious'. Participants can keep recordings and with their consent the interviews become available for research.<sup>35</sup>

Projects run by or with people who have specific health conditions often have the additional aim of educating wider society and of advocacy. So, for example, 'Diabetes Stories' aimed to cover the history of the condition, from the 1920s, when insulin first became available, to the present day, as treatment has changed. Though people had given their medical histories many times over, they rarely had a chance to tell 'what it's really like' to have diabetes. A hundred interviews with people with diabetes, their family members, and health care professionals have been saved on a website which includes audio recordings as well as navigating tools leading to topics and phrases. 'Speaking for Ourselves', a project funded jointly by Scope, a leading UK disability charity, and HLE, trained sixteen disabled volunteers with cerebral palsy to record the life histories of others. The result was a teaching pack for older school students, which included extracts from the interviews as well as a booklist.

Another group consisted of people with haemophilia who had been diagnosed with HIV and hepatitis C after being given infected blood imported from the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. Several hundred had died, but survivors were keen to tell their stories of stigma and struggle to the 'Living Stories' project. Their interviews are lodged at the British Library 'with the expressed wishes of participants'.<sup>36</sup>

Depending on what has been agreed with interviewees, oral history recordings and transcripts may be confidential. While the project is going and until final archiving arrangements have been made, you will need to think about where to keep the material so that only project members have access to it. A lockable filing cabinet is one possibility, as well as a secure, password-protected area of your computer for any digitised material. Before you start, you should make sure that everyone involved in the project, from interviewers to transcribers, is aware of confidentiality issues. One good way to go about this is to draw up a confidentiality statement for each member of the group, and also anyone that the group employs, to sign.

### **Choosing who to record for a community study**

For any community project, and indeed for any oral history work, a crucial choice is whose memories to record. This is an issue both of categories and of personalities. First, what matters is the *direct* personal experience that somebody

has, rather than their formal position. This is a particular trap for local historical societies. It can mean that the people chosen to record are those very dignitaries, such as mayors and council officials or members of the Round Table or Rotary, who have the most need for caution and thus the least to give. It is 'almost axiomatic', as Beatrice Webb very correctly observed,

that the mind of the subordinate in any organization will yield richer deposits of fact than the mind of the principal. This is not merely because the subordinate is usually less on his guard . . . The working foreman, managing clerk, or minor official is in continuous and intimate contact with the day-to-day activities of the organization; he is more aware of the heterogeneity and changing character of the facts, and less likely to serve up dead generalization, in which all the living detail becomes a blurred mass, or is stereotyped into rigidly confined and perhaps obsolete categories.<sup>37</sup>

Always be aware of the social balance of the accounts which are being collected. In the past, but more rarely today, there was sometimes a tendency for projects to record more men than women. This was partly because women seemed to be more diffident, and less often believe that their own memories might be of interest. It is also because men may be more often recommended as informants by others. Even when this is recognised as a problem, it may prove difficult to solve. For example, if the subject is a local industry, it will be easy enough to find men who worked in it; indeed, they may still meet together as old workmates at a pub or a club. But their wives, or women workers in the same industry, although equally vital to its functioning, will be much harder to trace, because they will not normally be locally known by their occupation, and their social networks will be those of the neighbourhood rather than the workplace. Similarly, there is an equally strong tendency for a community project to record its central social stratum—normally the respectable working class and the lower middle class—at the expense of both top and bottom. There are difficulties in tracing the retired works director, chief accountant, or chief executive, who have most likely resettled elsewhere. And again and again, the very poorest, who were a vital part of the community, prove equally elusive. They are not suggested as informants because the more 'respectable' old people either positively disapprove of what they would say, or simply regard them as too pathetic or unintelligent to have anything worthwhile to say. Yet they are often precisely those whose different views, richly expressed in dialect and unofficial stories, can provide the most valuable recording of all. And it is the juxtaposition of live experience, from all levels of society, which makes the most telling and thought-provoking local history.

Finding a sufficient range of informants is thus a key task. A self-selected group, responding to a public notice or a local newspaper or radio appeal, can certainly provide the best start for some projects, but it will rarely be representative enough. People can be located in many other ways: through personal

contacts; at old people's clubs; through trade unions or political parties; through radio appeals or a notice in a local shop window; through social workers or doctors, voluntary organisations, care homes, religious centres, or befriending organisations working with people who rarely speak to another person because they may be frail or isolated in some way; even by chance encounters in the street or a pub or a park. It is always much easier when you can approach someone with a personal recommendation. Although there will be refusals, which can be disheartening, provided that you keep a clear idea of whom you are searching for, this part of the project depends above all upon persistence. But it will be worth persisting.

## Outcomes

Lastly, what about the outcome? For the future, your recordings and transcripts must be deposited, along with photographs, documents, and other material you have collected, as a resource for future public use, and the best place for this is likely to be your city library or county archives. Funders will expect you to produce outputs that reach a range of audiences. Most typically projects draw on their recordings to produce educational packs, including DVDs of interview extracts; to stage small travelling exhibitions, again combining sound with photographs and text; and to make sound and photographic shows for local groups to stimulate even more memories of the community's past. You may be able to find a drama group with whose help you can develop some of your material into a stage production. You can publish your material in printed form: as newspaper features, as local booklets, or as annual calendars with text alongside old photographs.

## Websites and programmes

Most groups now include in their list of outputs a website which tells the story of the project, and includes audio extracts, and sometimes even whole transcripts, of interviews, blogs written by group members and interviewees, and scans of documents and photographs which may turn up during the project. This means that your recordings are available to a worldwide audience through the internet for the duration of the project and after. However, websites require technical maintenance and the updating of information, which is hard for a brief project to ensure. A nice example of a particularly long-lasting website is 'Stories of the Croft'. The Croft was a home for single mothers, which was set up by Ruth I. Johns in Nottingham in 1966. At a time when to be pregnant and unmarried risked destitution and ostracism, the Croft offered shelter and support to young women and their babies. Funded by HLF and Now Heritage (a community interest company), the Children of the Croft project interviewed women who lived and worked there, as well as Ruth I. Johns herself. From this an exhibition was created with an audio-visual display, photographs, and information panels. The website includes a selection of clips from the interviews; full versions together



with logs and transcripts were lodged in local archives. This small but effective website manages to keep the project alive with the voices of participants in a way that does not become dated.<sup>38</sup>

### SOCIAL ENTERPRISE AND COMMUNITY INTEREST COMPANIES

Not-for-profit social enterprise and community interest companies such as Now Heritage are becoming more typical on the community oral history scene. Usually set up by graduates with experience in oral history, and sometimes with drama and digital skills to offer, they tend to work with community groups and schools. Digital Works, an arts and education charity with a commitment to partnership and inclusivity, developed 'Banging Out: Fleet Street Remembered' with two inner London primary schools, collecting the memories of printers and journalists who worked in Fleet Street. On retirement day a printer would be 'banged out' by colleagues who 'serenaded him by whacking the metal benches with their hammers'. In the end Fleet Street banged itself out when everything was shut down and newspaper printing was moved out to Wapping in the 1980s. Work with the schools led to a film, viewable online, and a DVD with a booklet including children's writing and oral history excerpts.

On the Record is another small company, a co-operative that aims to 'uncover untold stories' by means of participation and involving people actively in the process of recording history and deciding how to disseminate what they find. Their projects have included an oral history of Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, London as well as an oral history of the Centerprise bookshop and community publisher, and delivering training and advice in oral history, reminiscence work, and historical research skills.

For some groups, the creation of a community interest arm provides a sustainable base as funding opportunities change and public sector support and sponsorship have become elusive. Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop, which prides itself as 'London's longest-established oral history group', is one such; beginning as an adult education class in 1983, it has survived various periods of expansion, recording several hundred hours of audio and publishing the outcomes along the way. The group now operates as a community interest group, enabling the group to act as an independent company whose assets can only be used for social objectives, benefiting the community rather than shareholders.

See online as Digital:Works Banging Out, [www.bangingout.org.uk/film.html](http://www.bangingout.org.uk/film.html) or [www.digital-works.co.uk/news/film](http://www.digital-works.co.uk/news/film); Now Heritage, [www.nowheritage.org](http://www.nowheritage.org); and Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop, <http://www.wforalhistory.org.uk/>.

Another possibility is to use your recordings to make programmes ready to be used by local radio, or for a podcast on an available website. Radio used to be a crucial channel for oral history, but times have changed. Unfortunately, in Britain there is now only a little local radio using oral history—most notably BBC Oxfordshire and Hampshire. Most channels just broadcast cheap deeJay programmes and phone-ins. Radio 4 does continue some life story and oral history elements in some of its programmes, which include some oral history elements—for example by Mark Burman on Britain after 1945, Sue Mitchell on the disenfranchised, or Alan Dein's *Don't Log Off*—but unfortunately the continued shrinking of funds has undercut the creative side of oral history radio. There is the BBC Listening Project, though this sets out to record conversations between two people rather than oral history. Perhaps the most popular programme, broadcasting very compressed life stories interwoven with music, is *Desert Island Discs*. Do we think of this as oral history? In general, through editing and packaging and the format of programmes, the oral history element is now reduced to sound bites. So in Britain looking for a website to host your own audio extracts is more likely to be successful.

The simplest and often most effective form may be a collage of extracts with minimal linking by a narrator. However, there are more complex possibilities if you do your own editing on a computer. There are now numerous software packages available on the market—and some free ones on the internet—which you can use on your own computer. This will allow you, for example, to produce a programme for radio or educational use which mixes fieldwork recordings—including your questions—with atmospheric background sounds, including music, fading in and out, and as a third layer, your own reflections on the meaning of the recordings. This can give much more variety to the sound, while crucially opening up the decisions behind the editing process, and so presenting in a single form both experience and its interpretation.

A video recording can give insights into interviewee body language, gesture, and facial expression. However, it can also result in a more laid-back engagement where the camera takes over and the interview becomes less descriptive or in-depth. Long interviews with the interviewee sitting throughout in the same position can become tedious and distracting. Audio may have the advantage of encouraging interviewees to be more relaxed, expansive, and expressive. With a handheld camera it is possible for a lone interviewer to film every interview recorded, but this is likely to prove a mixed blessing. As an end product, a video documentary is technically demanding, because it has to look good as well as sound good, and that implies close-ups and changes of angle on the person talking, and also the use of other visual material to conceal the awkward jumps where cuts are made. All this means that it is usually better to record in sound first, choose what you think is best for your video, and only at that point film, with the technical subtlety needed.

## Audio walks

A more ambitious outcome is a video documentary. If well done, this can be a particularly compelling form for presenting oral history. Along with the interview it may be possible to capture images of where someone lives or places important to them, environmental sounds, works of art, or someone just going about their life. This may mean taking people to different places or showing them taking part in doing things, all as part of the interview or used as prompts. Of course a simple 'talking head' can sometimes be powerful, if the teller looks and speaks compellingly. Your choice of distribution should be part of the decisions you make, from the start. You, or your interviewees, may prefer a DVD format which may limit viewings, but if you want to reach a wide audience, then playback on a website or on YouTube is the answer.

Another fast-developing potential outcome is the memoryscape or sound walk. Community-based projects and also students are using this approach to imaginatively bring place, history, and memory together. Steven High describes how his own approach evolved. He was building a website to commemorate the decline and closure of a mill which had been the main employer in an Ontario town. He built what he calls a 'millscape' of documents, photographs of the mill in production and in dereliction, voices of employees and their families, newspaper articles, and key events. The website includes audio clips linked to images, a truly dynamic production. High tells how the website was put together with local people, but then ends by asking whether the whole point being made, the destruction of a mill, a way of life, a community perhaps, might not be more powerfully told if the listener could hear the story on the very site of the mill itself: 'The effect of hearing those stories *in situ* would be significant, as the chain-link fence now encloses an empty field'. Others were developing similar ideas. Indeed, two of his own students had recorded members of Montreal's Chinese, Portuguese, Italian, and Jewish communities and had created an audio track to be used on an MP3 player or iPod ready for listening during a trip on a number 55 bus in the Old Port of Montreal. 'Mobile methodologies', as High calls them, are now a part of community oral history.<sup>39</sup>

The audio trail or memoryscape is only possible because of changing technology. As Toby Butler points out, museum visitors have been used to audio guides for fifty years, but the idea that a sound trail could be used out of doors at the point where someone is standing or walking, with sounds recorded to a professional standard, created with local people and for community use in an unobtrusively personal way, has only become possible through software and hardware developments which are very recent. Butler has made two sound walks, 'Drifting' and 'Dockers', both linked to the River Thames. For 'Drifting' he created a sound trail with a float which bobbed down the river in its middle reaches, colliding with the bank at various points. When it stopped he interviewed someone about their relationship with the river and about their lives,

thus using 'paths, routes, networks and trajectories to give a more complex idea of place, talking to a series of people who might not ordinarily meet, or consider themselves part of a group or a community'. The result is a highly original and creative journey along the river which people can listen to as they walk along the bank, or at home. 'Dockers', by contrast, was created from an archive of interviews collected by the Museum in Docklands when London's docks were being closed. Interview clips are linked to places on the walk. A visit to the website shows a map where each spot is marked with a red dot. A click on a dot brings up a page with a sound file, a transcript, images, and a brief description of the particular piece of hidden history to which the audio walk has taken you. Listeners have the choice of virtual walking or walking in the real landscape, either way with a soundscape accompaniment which is freely downloadable.<sup>40</sup>

How quickly the technology has changed is evident when comparing sound trails created within just a few years of each other. Graeme Miller's 'Linked' was commissioned by the Museum of London as part of a programme of 'sonic works', free to listeners from 2003. Following the trail of demolition and the ensuing bitter protest when an extension to the M11 motorway was built through a mainly residential area of East London, Miller set up twenty transmitters along the three miles. With a receiver and a map, listeners can hear continuous broadcasts of the people who lived there and lost their homes and those who stayed to protest. More than a decade later, though with some wear and tear, the trail can still be followed with receivers available from local libraries, together with maps and information sheets, to be returned by post within three months.

'Hackney Hear' was launched in 2012, winning a prize in the Prix Europa Radio Production of the Year Awards innovation category, out of six hundred submissions from thirty-eight countries. It includes clips from local residents, writers, and musicians. Hackney Hear's technology is triggered audio but using GPS-location technology with a downloadable app free from iTunes. This combination of exciting possibilities allows listeners to create their own soundwalks from what is on offer. A review of the app points out how

Hackney Hear serves as an audio-guide to this cultural crossroads, but with several twists that set it apart from the sonic porridge of existing audio guides to London. And, unbelievably, it's free . . . Once in London Fields, the app takes care of itself. Simply start it running, pop your phone back in your pocket and wander round wherever you will. Different voices fight for your attention as you move from one part of the park to another . . . The big 'oh wow' moment came as we approached the south-east corner of the fields. From the ambient background noise of the app, we began to make out a faint rhythm, which grew louder as we walked. A stone ping-pong table came into view at exactly the moment the audio track resolved itself into the sounds of two people playing.<sup>41</sup>

With strongly evocative but very different intentions, Steven High's students and colleagues have found ways to create an audio walk in Montreal to commemorate acts and experiences of genocide in Rwanda. The route of 'A Flower in the River' takes in 'a church, a postal box, a telephone booth, the university, a flower shop, a historic statue, the river ...'. It is also the route which the Rwandan community follows annually and the audio walk includes stories linked to the chosen 'sites of connection'.<sup>42</sup>

Audio walks, sound trails, memoryscapes—all involve community groups in their making, even if leadership comes from an individual or an organisation, and as people become more familiar with the newest technologies and production they are increasingly likely to be outcomes chosen by community-based oral historians. Here are two more ways oral history has been used to reach out to audiences, small and large: reminiscence drama and museums.

### Oral history and theatre

Oral history and theatre make natural partners. Interviews are a form of performance in themselves. They enable meaning to be conveyed across time and generations, embodying childhood memories, teenage crises, separation, loss, and celebration in performance. So it is not surprising that oral history projects have often turned to drama to present the stories they have recorded, or that theatre has taken to oral history to reach out to groups and communities who may not often cross the foyer threshold. Thus in New York the famous Apollo Theater in Harlem has been collaborating with the Oral History Center at Columbia University in education projects with local schools. First working on materials drawn from over 150 interviews with people from the theatre's history, from stars like Smokey Robinson and Gladys Knight to staff members and business supporters, the collaboration grew into a community-based project. The Harriet Tubman Learning Center, a nearby community school, and the Apollo educators worked with a group of local residents who were invited to be interviewed as 'Significant Elders of Harlem'. The pupils, who were between nine and eleven years old, were trained in oral history methods by members of the Apollo team. Together they developed theatrical vignettes and an edited radio programme, and performed on the Apollo Theater stage. The result was a powerful story of pride in Harlem's history in all its richness, but including realism with stories of life under segregation. The Apollo Theater's educational work with children continues.<sup>43</sup>

Earlier, in London in the 1980s, the Royal Court Young People's Theatre worked with London schools, and its director Elyse Dodgson drew on her own remarkable experience in creating and producing theatre with West Indian girls in an inner south London secondary school. Three of their plays reached the London stage, culminating in *Motherland*, a deeply moving but beautifully controlled drama of West Indian experience—hopes and dreams, reality and rejection—in coming as migrants to Britain. The starting point was a set of

interviews with the girls' mothers and others of their generation in Brixton, collected by a former pupil for a funded project. This personal testimony fired the girls' imaginations and sustained them through the long period of working together as a group, for six hours a week over several months, to create the play.

The emphasis was on group work rather than individual performance, with all expected to participate in every rehearsal, each playing a variety of roles, and all decisions taken through mutual discussion. The drama was developed through experimental role play: responding to themes taken from the recorded testimonies, the girls developed expressive mimes and wrote the words and music of songs to match the individual words. At a later stage, the mothers were drawn in to see rehearsals and make their own suggestions. Ultimately *Motherland* interwove three levels of expression: the remembered real experience of the text from the interviews, spoken by narrator or chorus; the girls' own imaginative songs, like 'Searchin' for housing; and the symbolism of group mime. Thus the experience of asking a landlady for accommodation and being turned away was expressed through a ritual of the whole group, walking, knocking, and freezing, which became a central image of the whole play. It is this combination of creative but highly disciplined group expression with the words of individual life experience which makes this young people's drama so unusually compelling.<sup>44</sup>

*Motherland* drew on the collective memories of a particular generational experience, migration from the Caribbean to Britain. Some more recent theatre projects have responded to the diversities typical of British cities today. In Wolverhampton, an HLF-funded project managed by Arena Theatre produced *Counter Culture* with a primary school class of 10- to 11-year-olds and a special needs school of 16- to 17-year-olds. The theme of 'Counters' explored what the word 'counter' has meant in different cultures, for shopping, trading, in libraries, at the job centre. After initial training the young people spent a day interviewing people working in a soup kitchen, a credit union, a job centre, and a toyshop. This provided the theatre group with material which was transcribed. Next they went out onto the city streets, where they interviewed a variety of people, including market traders. They sent comments as they went along. Amrinder blogged, 'I wanted to say I am looking forward to the market. When my mom found out that I was going to do a project she was so happy. Because she wants to find out what I learn in the project'. Lisa (project leader) came back, 'Hey Amrinder! I heard that you were really good at listening and responding to your interviewees on the market, and particularly good at asking open questions off script. Well done you!' Later Simrit blogged about the performance that they were rehearsing, 'I am so nervous and feel so responsible for my part, remember this is more than a class assembly because we are performing in front of MORE people and we are also expected (to) do well ... I couldn't believe people started booking to see it so early!' The play, which was performed twice

at Arena theatre, involved all the children, including those in wheelchairs, and was followed by a book, a DVD, and an exhibition of photographs.<sup>45</sup>

With her background in theatre in education, early in the 1980s Pam Schweitzer recognised the potential of drama for presenting oral history and reminiscence to audiences of young and older people in community centres, care homes, schools, and old people's clubs. In and around London she and her Age Exchange Theatre Company of professional actors devised plays from the reminiscences of groups of older people, taking up a variety of themes: working on the River Thames; the founding of the NHS; women on the wartime home front; seaside holidays; 'my first job'; rehousing on the new social housing estates in the 1950s; the Jewish East End; stories of migration and settling down from Asian, Chinese, and Caribbean elders; and memories of hop-picking in Kent. These were just a few themes from a continuing repertoire over more than twenty years. The work developed further with a company of older people, *Good Companions*, performing their own memories, and later into drama work with people with dementia and their caregivers. All the plays, scripts, interview recordings, photographs, transcripts, and ephemera connected with each production are archived at the University of Greenwich, where they are available for a succeeding generation of drama students to explore, learn from, and develop their own productions.<sup>46</sup>

The most engaging plays are often developed by drawing eyewitnesses into the production process to make their own suggestions about words, props, and atmosphere. Elyse Dodgson made sure that, when her students were dramatizing the story of their parents' arrival from the West Indies in 1940s and 1950s Britain, the girls' mothers were part of the play's development. The company that staged a dramatisation of the 1937 Flint auto workers' sit-down strike in Michigan devised their play through what they called 'interactives'. The actual 'sit-downers' were invited in so that they 'critiqued our work, corrected our vocabulary, and fleshed out our emotional understanding. A remarkable mentoring relationship developed . . . Oral history became a process shared across the generations, creating a bond in which the performer, performance, and audience became one'. Achieving such bonding can, however, be a very delicate process, because within most communities there are competing interpretations of the past. And drama itself pushes for a clear message. Judith Ridner and Susan Clemens-Bruder give a very thoughtful account of how they encountered—and solved—such problems in creating their play about the struggles of three African American communities in Pennsylvania.<sup>47</sup>

Lastly we turn to oral history project work involving museums. Recorded voices are now a feature of many museum collections: played through headsets; triggered by sensors; floating as ambient sound; or activated by press buttons as part of displays. Originally the aim was to help curators present, say, life in a stately home by interviewing former hall or estate workers, or find ways to interpret objects. Today in Britain and North America most larger museums will have



an outreach officer whose job it is to interest and engage members of the public with the museum's collections and, in some cases, to make and shape those collections directly. Oral history plays a key role in this, helping to transform the way people think about a museum and enter it.

In the United States the lead in using oral history has been taken especially by two national museums, both in Washington: the Smithsonian, which has promoted a series of oral history projects, and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, where a visit culminates in a large auditorium where visitors sit to watch and listen to powerful testimonies. Similarly, at the Museum of London, eyewitness testimony recalling the London Blitz during World War Two makes a powerful contribution to the soundscape, which accompanies a visual display. Voices engage directly with visitors in a darkened space, heightening emotions as large images, recognisable and central to the national story of resilience and survival, successively appear.

Sometimes the story is more complex and ways have to be found to portray different memories. At the Foundling Museum, also in London, a temporary exhibition, 'Foundling Voices', told the story of the Foundling Hospital and the children who were cared for there between 1739 and 1954. This presented the curators, Sarah Lowry and Alison Duke, with a dilemma. How were they to curate an exhibition that would be acceptable to people whose memories of being Foundling children were not all happy? How could they present the truth of what they heard from people who cried and were angry about their treatment, while others were objective, even appreciative of what the hospital had enabled them to become? They had to acknowledge these feelings while also reassuring the trustees of the current Coram Foundation and its reputation as a forward-looking children's charity today.

Lowry and Duke were insistent that every one of their seventy-four interviews should be included. Working with representatives from the Coram Foundation, they chose a balanced selection of the extracts, some strongly critical, others evoking more affectionate feelings. These voices were able to speak directly and variously to visitors in what was a very small gallery with hanging speakers, or 'earpieces'. This meant that the sound was playing on a continuous loop, through clusters of single speakers hung from the ceiling. To hear a voice, a visitor had to move to be near the earpiece—further away, the sound was more like a distant hum. This solution allowed the audio to be focused on a particular part of the exhibition, and thus less likely to bleed into different areas. As well as the hanging earpieces, Lowry and Duke included listening posts and directional speakers providing a mix of sound sources to match the mix of voices and memories.<sup>48</sup>

The Museum of London took a similarly varied approach with its exhibition entitled 'Belonging: Voices of London's Refugees'. It worked with a charity, the Evelyn Oldfield Unit, as well as with the London Metropolitan University and fifteen field-workers, who were mostly themselves refugees. Oral history

testimony was at the heart of the displays. The aim was to create a space which would correct the prevailing bias in portrayals of refugees by 'positioning the voices of the interviewees centre stage, both physically and conceptually'. The curators created 'listening pavilions' where visitors could sit and listen to refugee voices, focusing on objects, images, and texts. Layered above and around were ambient voices which permeated the consciousness of visitors. In this exhibition, oral history was central, 'conceptually as well as physically'.<sup>49</sup>

The Herbert Museum in Coventry has long used oral history, often combining it imaginatively with other activities. For example, they organised exhibitions from their projects which included tea dances with jazz bands, at which old couples spun the floor in rejuvenated delight to the sound of long-lost tunes. These occasions also proved catalysts for the reunion of old workmates, and even of two sisters who had not seen each other for forty years. Alison Taylor, the museum's senior learning and inclusion officer, believes that oral history works better when edited into a film than simply as audio. To accompany a touring British Museum exhibition, young people bilingual in Chinese were offered oral history training and then interviewed local Chinese elders in Cantonese and Mandarin. The result was a film, with English subtitles, illustrated by images of what the old people were talking about. Alison Taylor argues that the result was better than just audio, as it 'held visitors' attention longer' and 'created a more powerful connection with interviewees'.<sup>50</sup>

Let us conclude by crossing the Atlantic again to highlight the particularly creative ways in which the relationship between museums and their communities has developed in Brazil. Since the 1990s a key role here has been played by the Museu da Pessoa—Museum of the Person—founded by Karen Worcman. From the beginning, the museum's projects have used multi-media methods. A very early one was the setting up of a museum for the São Paulo football club. It centres on a 'coporama', a display of the many cups the team have won, but alongside this were terminals which revealed the potential of multi-media. For a museum such programmes need to be easy to understand, fast-moving, and elegantly designed. The attraction is in seeing what you can find. Thus here you could take the 1940s, choose famous goals, see a snatch of film in which a goal is scored to the roar of the crowd, find a witness, read his story, listen to half a minute of it, see his photographs, view a map of his migrations through his life, and so on, constantly flicking from one bit of information to another. In some cases you could choose one of a list of questions to put to a witness. These compilations were a type of programme then new, now familiar, on the internet.

More recently there has been another wave of innovation in Brazil, this time with political support, following the election of Lula's socialist government. Gilberto Gil, a charismatic musician and only the second black Brazilian cabinet member, became the national Minister of Culture and introduced a new cultural policy that led to some remarkable results. The idea was to create

'points of culture' around the country, centres of energy in the grassroots, recognising that culture was being lived there and did not need to be brought to people from museums. In this way culture was seen as outside of institutions, a living Brazilian popular creation. With small amounts of money and the distribution of multi-media equipment, this revolutionary move was to lead to more than eight hundred organisations taking up the new approach. The Museu da Pessoa was invited to be a '*pontão*' or 'big point' of memory, to lead initiatives involving memory, and to offer training. Karen Worcman, the museum's founder, describes how they worked to create a community museum in Lomba do Pinheiro, a district of Porto Alegre:

We started doing life stories with the people who were born in the neighbourhood in the '20s and '30s. Our goal was to build the story of the neighbourhood told by the people who felt they belonged to the place. We decided only to use oral history, no other kind of research, even documents.

We worked with focus groups, what we called '*rodas de memória*' or 'story circles', because we wanted to know about places in the neighbourhood where people met that were important to them but did not exist any more. We thought getting people together around the same subject would work well. In fact the main theme that emerged through this method was the Pinheirense Futebol Clube. We made an exhibition based mainly on memories and with things that players brought to our meetings. We also organised a database and a documentary on the life of the players and we were helped by the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, as we didn't have any video equipment.

As well as the oral history of the football club, local people wanted to collect the life stories of women who know about the medicinal use of traditional herbs, the '*rezadeiras*' or '*benzedeiras*'. We invited women to tell their stories in groups and they would bring their recipes for teas, '*unguentos*', and other traditional medicines. We recorded them making these and made a small documentary and an exhibition. The old women planted herbal medicines at the memory point of Lomba do Pinheiro and this became another way to spread and preserve their knowledge.<sup>51</sup>

There are many other examples on other continents, for example the remarkable project work with museums in South Africa, such as Cape Town's moving District Six Museum. In short, round the world in many different countries, with people of all ages and diverse ethnicities and religions, oral history project work flourishes. And its source and fountain is living memory itself, continually renewing itself over the generations, which can be tapped almost anywhere: rich, surprising, inspiring.

# 10

## The Interview

To interview successfully requires skill. But there are many different styles of interviewing, ranging from the friendly, informal, conversational approach to the more formal, controlled style of questioning. While an oral historian or life story researcher will certainly be interested in memory, and concerned to create an empathetic and responsible listening relationship, there is no unique form of oral history interview. In oral history practice there are many cross-influences from anthropology and sociology, and good interviewers eventually develop a variation of the method which, for them, brings the best results, and suits their personality. Nevertheless, there are some essential qualities which the successful interviewer must possess: an interest and respect for people as individuals, and flexibility in response to them; an ability to show understanding and sympathy for their point of view; and, above all, a willingness to sit quietly and listen. People who cannot stop talking themselves, or resist the temptation to contradict or push an informant with their own ideas, will take away information which is either useless or positively misleading. But most people can learn to interview well.<sup>1</sup>

You can learn independently or in a group: the key issues will be the same. Learning in a group does have two important advantages. Firstly, you can try out your first interviewing in a safe context, and get an informed comment on the strengths and weaknesses of your approach. Secondly, you can experience being interviewed yourself, which is likely to teach you a lot about the experiences of interviewees and the dynamics of the interview relationship. But it is certainly possible to develop your skills on your own—as did many of the most outstanding oral historians.

### **Before interviewing**

Before starting interviewing for any project, it is essential to think about the ethical issues that might arise from it. Could you risk harming interviewees by raising traumatic issues, or by getting information from them that could be damaging? You will also need to design a very brief project description to give to participants. Perhaps linked to this, you will need to design a copyright transfer or license form.

The next point is the preparation, through reading and in other ways, of background information. The importance of this varies a good deal. The best way of starting off some pieces of work may be through exploratory interviews, mapping out a field and picking up ideas and information. It can be particularly worthwhile to organise a group meeting with members of a community or organisation: this will almost always generate ideas for themes and key stories, and also point to worthwhile potential interviewees. With the help of these you can define the social and historical themes and problems and locate some of the resources for exploring them.

This kind of exploratory interviewing is most worthwhile at a very early stage. It does not matter if you have only an initial understanding of the theme. There is of course no point in having any interview at all unless the informant is, in some sense, better informed than oneself. The interviewer comes to learn, and indeed often gets people to talk, in just this spirit. For example, the Scottish oral historian Roy Hay found in his research with the Clydeside shipbuilders that quite often 'one's own ignorance can be turned to good use. On many occasions older workers have greeted my naïve questions with amused tolerance and told me, "Naw, naw laddie it wasn't like that at all," followed by a graphic description of the real situation'.<sup>2</sup> Such early interviews can be invaluable in suggesting new and original perspectives on the theme, which would not have been picked up through conventional sources.

Nevertheless, once started, it is generally true that the more one knows, the more likely one is to elicit significant information from an interview. For example, if the basic narrative of a political decision, or a strike, has been established from newspapers, it will be possible to place the informant's own part within the events exactly, to identify where he or she may have special direct experience and observations, to realise which recollections are secondhand, and to spot elisions of memory between similar events at different times. This background information may itself have been built up very fully through earlier interviews, as with the systematic reconstruction of Jewish persecution and resistance during the Second World War, or of the local Partisan movements in Italy, where the point of a testimony may be to corroborate and fill out in precise detail the hourly events of a day in 1944 when a man's family was destroyed.

Pre-knowledge of such details is the exception in most oral history work, but it becomes essential if you are carrying out an 'elite' life story interview with a public personality, such as a writer, an artist, or a media star. It is now usually easy to get an outline biography through the internet as a starting point. When interviewing for 'Pioneers of Social Research' I usually read five or so of the researcher's key works, while from the biographical information on the internet I try to work out a provisional plan for the interview, taking into account the researcher's shifts in interests, changes of institution, and family developments. At the same time I thought out ways of stimulating discussion of their work, through questions which showed that I had grasped some of the key issues, but encouraged them to make their own evaluations. Some of the interviewees

produced much more information on paper as a result of the first interviews, leading eventually to more interviews at another level of questioning.

Of course not all prominent informants are willing to be subjected to a step-by-step research process. Thomas Reeves similarly found that interviewing American liberal intellectuals required exceptionally painstaking and thorough preparation. They were often too busy to grant more than brief interviews, so that 'specific, highly informed questions' were essential. Worse still, should he

appear hesitant, or seem to be fishing blindly, the relationship between the participants in an interview could be quickly destroyed. Liberal intellectuals seem especially interested in testing your credentials to be an oral historian by probing your knowledge of the subject under discussion. I have often felt, particularly at the beginning of an interview session, that they were interviewing me . . . These sorts of queries are ploys in status games.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately such challenging informants are rare. Nevertheless, even with a more general social and historical study of a community or an industry, it is important to pick up a knowledge of local practises and terminology as quickly as possible. John Marshall, for example, points out how misleading the question 'At what age did you leave school?' could be in the Lancashire cotton towns. A former mill girl would answer, 'at 14'; and it was only because he knew that the majority had been half-timers in the loom-sheds long before leaving school—a fact which they took for granted—that he then went on to ask, 'When did you begin work?'<sup>4</sup>

Many oral historians have found that a basic knowledge of work terms is useful, as a key to establishing mutual respect and trust. Beatrice Webb, decades earlier, made the same point with a characteristic sharpness:

To cross-examine a factory inspector without understanding the distinction between a factory and a workshop . . . is an impertinence. Especially important is a familiarity with technical terms and a correct use of them. To start interviewing any specialist without this equipment will not only be a waste of time, but may lead to more or less courteous dismissal, after a few general remarks and some trite opinions . . . For technical terms . . . are so many levers to lift into consciousness and expression the more abstruse and out-of-the-way facts or series of facts; and it is exactly these more hidden events that are needed to complete descriptive analysis and to verify hypotheses.<sup>5</sup>

Nor is this true only of the specialist. It is an equal 'impertinence' to subject numbers of working people in a community or an industry to questions without first ensuring, as far as possible, that the questions are historically relevant and correctly phrased for the local context.

## Forms of interview

A broader study of social change, depending on a relatively wide spectrum of informants, also demands particularly careful preparation of the form of questions before interviewing. Asking questions in the best way is clearly important in any interview. This is, however, an issue which can raise strong feelings among historians and sociologists. A contrast may be made between so-called box-ticking 'questionnaires' whose rigidly structured logical patterns so inhibit the memory that the 'respondent'—again the choice of term itself is suggestive—is reduced to monosyllabic or very short answers; and, at the other extreme, not so much an 'interview' at all, but a free 'conversation' in which the 'person', 'tradition-bearer', 'witness', or 'narrator' is 'invited to talk' on a matter of mutual interest.<sup>6</sup>

There have also been important discussions by feminist researchers and ethnographers of the issues of control in the interview relationship which underlie these choices. Sharing a belief that their research should be not only about women but also for them, some have gone on to reject any hierarchy in the research process, and argue that those researched should become partners and collaborators. The interview thus becomes either non-directive or co-negotiated in form and themes.<sup>7</sup>

The contrasting merits and drawbacks of the 'two schools of interviewing' are nicely summarised by Roy Hay:

Firstly there is the 'objective/comparative' approach usually based on a questionnaire, or at least a very highly structured interview in which the interviewer keeps control and asks a series of common questions to all respondents. The aim here is to produce material which transcends the individual respondent and can be used for comparative purposes . . . In the hands of flexible, sensitive interviewers, who are prepared to abandon the script when necessary, this approach can generate very useful material indeed, but it can be deadly. Promising lines of inquiry are too easily choked off and, worse still, people are forced into the predetermined framework of the interviewers and so large relevant areas of experience are never examined at all.

At the other extreme is the free flowing dialogue between interviewer and respondent, with no set pattern, in which conversation is followed wherever it leads. This method occasionally turns up the very unexpected and leads to completely new lines of inquiry. But it can very easily degenerate into little more than anecdotal gossip.<sup>8</sup>

The truth is that when interviews are well carried out, the contrast between the two schools is much less drastic. For one thing, the principles are always mitigated by the effect of the personalities involved in each particular interview. Some interviewers are naturally more chatty than others, and can draw out an



informant this way (although this is relatively unusual, and a more common effect of chattiness can be to shut people up). And informants vary from the very talkative, who need few questions, just steering, or now and then a very specific question to clarify some point which is unclear; to the relatively laconic, who with encouragement, broad open-ended questions, and supplementary prompts, can reveal much richer memories than at first seemed possible.

Secondly, no oral historian or life story researcher, even when using an interview guide, would want to go for a caricature of the classic survey's search for 'objective' evidence, with its instrument a rigid inflexible questionnaire style of interview carried out by a dehumanised interviewer 'without a face to give off feelings'.<sup>9</sup> As Pierre Bourdieu puts it in his reflections at the end of *La Misère du monde* (1993), the innumerable writings on survey methodology, while useful in describing unintended effects which an interviewer may produce,

almost always miss the point, not least because they remain faithful to old methodological procedures, often derived from the desire to imitate the external signs of the rigour of the best established scientific disciplines. It does not seem to me, at any rate, that they do justice to what has always been done—and known—by those researchers who are most respectful of their object and attentive to the almost infinitely subtle strategies that social agents deploy in the ordinary conduct of their existence.

In his life story research, Bourdieu has therefore aimed 'to instigate a relationship of *active and methodical listening*, as far removed from the pure laissez-faire of the non-directive interview as from the directiveness of the questionnaire survey', in which 'a *reflexivity* based on a sociological "feel" or "eye" enables one to perceive and monitor on the spot, as the interview is actually being carried out, the effects of the social structure within which it is taking place'.<sup>10</sup>

The French life story approach of Bourdieu, and also of Daniel Bertaux in his *Récits de vie*, fits well with the typical technique of the oral historian. Those oral historians who use interview guides do so not in order to introduce rigidity to their research, but principally because some types of research make advance planning of questioning essential. This may be because the theme, or the interviewee's life, is complex. Additionally, planning the interview is essential in any project where interviewing work is shared in a team, or where paid interviewers are used, or wherever material is to be used for systematic comparisons.

Thirdly, the free form may also mislead. Alessandro Portelli, while favouring a flexible interview form which he calls a 'thick dialogue' or 'deep exchange', is equally against 'the myth of non-interference' which would push this to the extreme of non-interaction to avoid distortion. For it takes great deftness, and a well-chosen informant, to be able, like the oral history pioneer George Ewart Evans, to get outstanding material from an apparently free-flowing interview, while remaining 'relaxed, unhurried', and giving the informant 'plenty of time

to move about': 'Let the interview run. I never attempt to dominate it. The least one can do is to guide it and I try to ask as few questions as I can ... Plenty of time and plenty of tape and few questions'. Those few questions are based on years of experience, combined with a clear idea obtained in advance of what each particular informant may tell.<sup>11</sup>

The strongest argument for a completely free-flowing interview is when its main purpose is less to seek information than to record a 'narrative interview', a 'subjective' record of how one man or woman looks back on their life as a whole, or part of it. Just how they speak about it, what they miss out, how they order it, what they emphasise, the words they choose, are important in understanding any interview; but for this purpose they become the essential text which will need to be examined. Thus the less their testimony is shaped by the interviewer's questions, the better.

However, it is questionable whether a fully subjective narrative interview could exist. In order to start at all, a social context must be set up, the purpose of recording explained, and at least an initial question asked; and all these, along with unspoken assumptions, create expectations which shape what follows. Some researchers have reported that simply to ask 'Tell me the story of your life' produced results which were generally disappointing. 'It tended to result in a brief, even terse account', Janet Askham found, simply because 'they did not know what I was interested in'. Stories flowed much more freely once she started to ask questions. A further problem is that because the follow-up questions need to go over much of the same ground as the first account in order to draw out more detail, there is a lot of time-wasting repetition in the recording. In a strange way, the 'narrative interview' can suppress the interviewer's responsiveness just as much as the survey instrument.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years different researchers have devised various ways of tackling such problems, often inventing at the same time a new name for the method, such as the 'narrative gerontological' approach recommended by Roberta Greene and her colleagues. An interesting alternative opening for the start of a life story interview is posed by the psychologist Dan McAdams. He starts, 'I would like you to begin by thinking about your life as if it were a book', and then says, 'Please divide your life into its major chapters, and briefly describe each chapter'. In a different way, this seems equally challenging for most interviewees. Hence other researchers also favouring the narrative form of analysis have argued instead for a form of 'interactive interviewing' which gives more explicit weight to the interviewer's contribution and explicitly sees interviews as co-constructed.<sup>13</sup>

There are, however, some contexts in which a more structured form of life story does bring marked advantages. The most distinctive variant of narrative interview was developed in post-war Germany by Fritz Schütze, Gabriele Rosenthal, and other sociologists to deal with a situation in which many younger researchers felt a strong hostility towards the attitudes and experiences of the

older generation, which had failed to combat Nazi ideology and the Holocaust. They therefore developed a special form of non-confrontational interview in which the most difficult issues, and the researchers' own agendas, were held back until the final stage of the interview.

The German biographical narrative interview is also analysed in a distinctive way, through group sessions. The interview itself is divided into three stages. It opens with a wide, non-contentious question, such as 'Would you please tell me the story of your life?' and in the first phase the interviewer simply offers non-verbal encouragement. In the second phase, details may be drawn out by asking the interviewee to say more about themes which he or she has already mentioned. Only in the third phase can new topics and potentially challenging missing themes be cautiously raised: 'Did your parents ever remark on the disappearance of Jewish families in your neighbourhood?' As Alexander von Plato puts it:

The interview is a dialogue. We will never be neutral, but we can give the interviewees as much room as we can for their own narratives and constructions . . . We should not pose leading questions or provoke expectations. Even if we know that we cannot achieve neutrality and that the interview is a dialogue in which we generate certain prejudices by the very fact that we belong to a different generation, we should still act in a way that is as neutral as possible, and at the same time empathetic . . . Only at the end, and not before, should we raise with the interviewee any critical points we absolutely feel we must mention . . . We do not want the fountain to run dry after we have only just found it . . . We must be patient and avoid hasty judgements on the one hand, and on the other have the courage to ask at the end for clarification of the attitudes we reject.<sup>14</sup>

This form of biographical interview developed in the German context also has proved influential elsewhere, including some British oral history research. A few projects have tried to follow its methodology closely, but because it is very expensive, involving much repetition between the sections of the interview, and also time-consuming in the team analysis of the transcripts, most researchers have used it in a more exploratory fashion, both in fieldwork and in interpretation. Probably the commonest shortcuts are to open with a more focused question ('Can you tell me how you became a feminist?'), moving after the first answer to an unstructured thematic interview, and using group analysis for only a few interviews. This makes it possible to draw on a wider interview sample, but at the expense of the analytical power of the more focused German model.

### **Asking questions and shaping the interview**

Whatever the overall form of the interview, there are a few basic principles in the phrasing of questions which apply in any case. Questions should always be

as simple and as straightforward as possible, in familiar language. Never ask complex, double-barrelled questions—only half will usually be answered, and it often won't be clear which half. Avoid a phrasing which points to an unclear answer: for example, ask, 'How often did you go to church?', rather than, 'Did you often go to church?' Of course occasional hesitation does not matter at all, and may even win a little sympathy from the informant. But frequent apologetic confusion is simply perplexing, and is especially to be avoided as a style of asking delicate personal questions, since it only conveys your own embarrassment. A careful or indirect question, previously worked out and confidently put, is much better. It shows you know what you're doing, so the atmosphere is more likely to stay relaxed.

You will need a different kind of phrasing to establish specific facts and to get description or comment. The latter demands an 'open-ended' type of question, like 'Tell me all about . . .', 'What did you think/feel about that?', or 'Can you describe that to me?' Other cue words for this sort of question are 'explain', 'expand on', 'discuss', or 'compare'. If it is a really important point, you can encourage at length: 'All right, so you're in —. Shut your eyes, and give me a running commentary—what you see, hear . . .'. A physical description can also be suggested as a lead into an evaluation of a person's character. Right through the interview, whenever you get a bald fact which you think might be usefully elaborated, you can throw in an inviting interjection: 'That sounds interesting'; or more directly, 'How?', 'Why not?', 'Who was that?' The informant may then take up the cue. If, after some comment, you want more, you can be more emphatic ('That's very interesting'), or mildly challenging ('But some people say that . . .'), or try a fuller supplementary question. In most interviews, it is very important to use both kinds of questions. For example, you may be told, as a general comment, that 'we helped each other out', 'we were all one big family in the street', but if you ask a specific question such as who outside the family helped when the mother was ill, it may become clear that neighbourly aid was less a practice than an ideal. Getting behind stereotyped or noncommittal generalisations to detailed memories is one of the basic skills, and opportunities, of interviewing work.

Leading questions must normally be avoided. If you indicate your own views, especially early in an interview, you are more likely to get an answer which the informant thinks you would like to hear, and will therefore be unreliable or misleading as evidence. There are some exceptions to this. Certainly a project with an ethnic or religious minority has to be founded on the building of mutual respect and sympathy to get started at all. Also, in order to allow the possibility of some responses which would be conventionally disapproved by most people, it may be best to ask a loaded question: 'Can you tell me of a time when you had to punish severely . . .?', 'Were most people taking home materials from the factory in those days?' But such questions are dangerous on most occasions, and are not normally appropriate. Most questions should be carefully phrased to avoid suggesting an answer. This can be quite an art in itself. For example,

'Did you enjoy your work?' is loaded; 'Did you like your work or not?' or 'How did you feel about your work?' are neutral.

Finally, avoid asking questions that make informants think in your way rather than theirs. For example, when dealing with concepts like social class, you get much stronger evidence if you encourage them to produce their own basic terms, and then use these in the subsequent discussion. And try to date events by fixing the time in relation to their own age, or a stage of life, such as marriage, or a particular job or house.

The main themes of the questions will of course reflect the interviewer's interests, and this can result in different types of interview. Thus Carole Counihan created 'food-centred life histories' with Colorado women. By contrast Bob Blauner interviewed Californians to create a racial life history:

We looked at the role of race and racism in the everyday lives of blacks and whites . . . We were interested in the personal as well as the political, but especially the connection between the two . . . We asked blacks about racism: how they coped with it day-to-day, how it affected their manhood and womanhood and the relations between the sexes. They talked about black culture, about the ways they were different from or the same as whites.<sup>15</sup>

Another source of variation may be the culture in which the interview takes place. Anthropologists especially are likely to need subtle adaptations to get the most fruitful results. Thus Janet Hoskins found that among the Kodi in Indonesia 'the notion of telling one's life story directly to another person did not exist', and direct questioning seemed 'either indiscreet or uninformed'. But the Kodi are great storytellers. And she discovered that by asking them about their personal possessions and domestic objects—'biographical objects'—she was nevertheless able to record introspective and intimate accounts of their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Even if you are going to carry out only a small project of your own, it is worth thinking about the sequence of topics for the interviews and the phrasing of questions. The strategy of the interview is not the informant's responsibility, but yours. It is much easier to guide if you have a basic shape already in your mind, and questions can lead naturally from one to the other. This also makes it easier, even when you digress, to remember what you still need to know about. In addition, for most projects you will need some basic background facts from all informants (such as origins and occupations of mother and father, own birth, education, occupations, marriage, and so on). You will also find a recurrent need for basic and supplementary questions on many topics. If you have already worked out these questions in your head, and can toss them in when needed, you can more easily concentrate on what the informant is saying, instead of trying to think of how to get your own words in.

In deciding on the possible shape for your interview, a fundamental issue is whether to focus overwhelmingly on a single theme—for example, an event, a period like wartime, a particular industry or sport—or to aim for a full life story, beginning with family background and running on through childhood and education to work, and later personal and family life. Because one of the greatest strengths of oral history and life story evidence is its potential to connect up different spheres of life, the life story approach, while more time-consuming, is more likely to bring new insights. It also makes a fuller use of the opportunity in recording the memories of people who may never have been previously recorded, nor will be recorded again. For both reasons, the life story form is worth considering seriously for most projects.

While for your own purposes when working alone a skeleton list of headings, along with wordings for key questions, may be sufficient, certainly for teamwork, or for a comparative project on any scale, a more fully elaborated interview guide is desirable. This will have different priorities, depending on the scale and themes of the research. For example, with life course research, where different time waves of information are to be analysed together, the most essential quality is ‘some type of longitudinal framework’.<sup>17</sup> And provided the interview schedule is used flexibly and imaginatively, a guide can be advantageous; for in principle, the clearer you are about what is worth asking and how best to ask it, the more you can draw from any kind of informant.

With relatively reticent people, who say right at the start, ‘It’s all right as long as you use the questions’, this is obvious enough: and such informants are quite common. You can then follow the guide more or less methodically. With very talkative people, the guide should be used differently. If they have a clear idea of what they want to say, or of the direction the interview should take, follow them. And wherever possible avoid interrupting a story. If you stop a story because you think it is irrelevant, you will cut off not just that one, but a whole series of subsequent offers of information which may be relevant. But sooner or later, they will exhaust their immediate fund of recollections, and they too will want you to ask questions. With this kind of informant, several visits will be needed, and afterwards you can play back your recordings, checking against the guide what has been covered and what is worth asking in later sessions. The printed form of the guide in this case becomes particularly useful. But normally it is much better to know the questions, ask them directly at the right moment, and keep the guide in the background. Essentially it is a map for the interviewer; it can be referred to occasionally, but it is best to have it in mind, so that the ground can be walked with confidence.

### Choosing equipment

Certain other decisions need to be taken before the interview. First, what equipment should be taken? In a minority of contexts, the best answer is none. Even note-taking, let alone audio recording, may arouse suspicion in some people.

Fear of recording is quite common among professionals whose work ethic emphasises confidentiality and secrecy, like civil servants or bank managers. For different reasons it can also be found among minorities who have experienced persecution, and fear that any information recorded might get into the hands of the police or authorities and be used against them; or in close-knit communities where gossip is feared. Some people may object to recording, but not to note-taking. Even if neither is possible, a skilled interviewer can learn to hold enough of the main information and key phrases to jot down soon afterwards, and make an interview worthwhile. Indeed, before tape recording made such a method seem by comparison impressionistic, this was the commonest sociological practice.

Most people, however, will accept an audio recorder with very little anxiety, and quickly lose any immediate awareness of it. The recorder can even help the interview. While it is on, people may be a little more likely to keep to the point, and other members of the family to stay out of the way. And quite frequently, when it is switched off, some highly significant additional facts may be given, which could have been held back if there had been no recorder at all; information which is meant to be known to the researcher as background, but in confidence (and must of course be treated in this spirit).

You also need to decide whether to use audio or video or a mix of both. Although video recording is still more expensive than audio, the difference in cost has been narrowing. Ultimately it depends on your aims. Pure audio makes magical radio and website material, and can be combined with photos for books, DVDs, or TV. Video is immediately compelling because it gives us the speaker's face, expressions, and gestures. But a long sequence of video from a single camera in one position becomes very boring. Hence ideally you should have two cameras and also a separate audio, because transcribing from video is more difficult and costly than from audio. There are two possible solutions. The first is to record a full audio interview first, and then record a second session going over the highlights of the interview in video. In addition, you can try to record the video with the interviewee next to a landscape or building which has proved important in memory, or in a workplace, or with tools or instruments, or with professional clothing, or in their current living room. The second possibility is to bring in professional filmmakers once you have completed the audio, so that they can re-record interview highlights to make a high-quality DVD or TV programme with their own equipment.

Whatever you decide, you need to think very seriously about your choice of machine because this will be crucial not just for the quality of recording, but also for the editing process. For a really good recording, of the quality needed for a radio programme, you will need to come with good equipment and to use it properly. At present the technology is evolving rapidly, with the introduction of digital audio recording making choices difficult, since equipment quickly becomes obsolescent: hence, before buying, you would



be wise to check the latest opinion with the British Library, or the website of the Oral History Society. Digital recording has the double advantage of enabling processing and editing on a computer; and also of perfect copying. Although reasonable quality recorders are available for around £100, if you want broadcasting audio quality you will probably need to spend £300 or more. It is always advisable—but above all when filming—to have a separate microphone, and some extra money spent on quality in this will be especially worthwhile. Whatever machine you use, avoid drawing attention to it by fussing about it. If it is a new one, make sure you have read the manual which goes with it, and practised operating it and setting it up. Before you set out, check that it is functioning.

### **Memory aids and the interview setting**

You can also take with you various aids to memory. A newspaper cutting or a local street directory can help. George Ewart Evans often took a work tool.

In the countryside I often take along an old serrated sickle. With that there is no need of any abstract explanation of what you are going about. He sees the object, and if you choose well he won't need any prodding to open up. We are both right into our subject from the beginning. In the same way if I was going to see an old miner, I'd take a pair of yorks or a tommybox.<sup>18</sup>

Since the focus of his interviews was the work process, such a tool was an ideal starting point. If it was to be childhood in the family, a piece of clothing might be better; or for a political life story, an early pamphlet. For a community study, local photos can be very stimulating. These might also stimulate the production of earlier letters, diaries, cuttings, and photographs, which is particularly worth encouraging and could be an especially valuable by-product of an interview.<sup>19</sup>

Next, where should the interview be held? It must be a place where the interviewee can feel at ease. Normally the best place will be their own home. This is especially true of an interview focusing on childhood or the family. An interview in a workplace, or in a pub, will activate other areas of memory more strongly, and may also result in a shift to a less 'respectable' style of speaking. A trip round the district can—as with a set of old photos—also prove rewarding, and stimulate other recollections.

Nearly always, it is best to be alone with the informant. Complete privacy will encourage an atmosphere of full trust in which candour becomes much more possible. This is usually true even of an old married couple who are particularly close to each other. Of course it is not always easy to find a tactful way of seeing them apart. (It is easier if you interview both of them; and particularly if two of you arrive together at the couple's home, and then pair off into different rooms.)

## Individual or group interviews

The presence of another person at the interview not only inhibits candour, but subtly pressurises towards a socially acceptable testimony. Fortunately, however, this is not all disadvantage. An old couple, or a brother and sister, will often provide corrections of information which are positively helpful. They can also stimulate each other's memory. This effect becomes still more marked when a larger group of old people get together. There will be a much stronger tendency than in private to produce generalisations about the past, but as they argue and exchange stories among each other, fascinating insights can emerge from these forms of collective memory. To a more marked extent than in an individual interview, these stories, many of which are likely to be about other people, need to be understood in the first place as narrative art forms, conveying symbolic meanings.<sup>20</sup>

Unstructured group interviews can be very suggestive in highlighting key local stories and in mapping out the themes to cover in a project, and as an exploratory form of interview at an early stage of a project are likely to be very worthwhile. Similarly focus groups may provide a way of refining themes at a later stage. However, if your main focus is to be collective memory, then group recordings could be the backbone of your project. Sometimes a group, for example in a pub bar, may also offer the only way to get good information about a hidden world of a common work experience, such as sabotage or theft, or the secret devices of animal poachers or drug dealers.

The group can also be useful in other situations. John Saville and a research student met with three leaders of the Manchester Unemployed Workers Movement of the 1930s, and in five hours of co-operative discussion reconstructed many of the gaps in the newspaper evidence which they had previously assembled. With more self-defended public figures, such as Canadian politicians, Peter Oliver has found cross-examination by two or even three interviewers effective, and David Edge used a triangular interview for his work on radio astronomers. Beatrice Webb, although strongly favouring privacy for the normal interview, also developed a technique of 'wholesale interviewing' in the more relaxed atmosphere of social occasions, once with a party 'even telling fortunes from their hands, with all sorts of interesting results!' She found that 'you can sometimes start several experts arguing among themselves; and in this way you will pick up more information in one hour than you will acquire during a whole day in a series of interviews'.<sup>21</sup>

Though the face-to-face interview provides the most powerful context for expressing empathy and hearing and interpreting intimate or contentious stories, because of the improvement in telephone and online communication services, it is now possible to consider interviewing from a distance. This option may help to secure some kind of interview from very busy individuals. But telephone and Skype interviews are unlikely to achieve the deep interview which can be made in person. Also their audio (and visual) quality is limited. There is,

however, one context in which they can provide an unmatched advantage: that is in a project which aims to interview internationally.<sup>22</sup>

### **Making contact**

Once the preliminary decisions have been made, you have to make contact with your interviewee. You can call in person, but it is usually better to e-mail or to write (enclosing a stamped addressed envelope), and follow this up by telephone. You have to convince them in simple, straightforward terms that your project is worthwhile, and you should emphasise its relevance to their own experience. It will also always be much easier if you can say that somebody else in the informant's own social network has recommended them. Tell them that you want to record their experiences and memories. Make it clear that it's their right not to answer a question, or to end the interview. You need to explain briefly, too, how you want to use the interview. Suggest a possible time for a first visit, but always leave the informant the chance to propose another, or to refuse altogether. Don't be disappointed by a refusal: depending on the topic, you may get as many as acceptances. With a minority of informants, like politicians or professionals, it may be wise to send your research proposal and put in writing the use you intend for the interview. This will help them to decide whether to see you, and will help to clarify your future right to use of the material. Some may begin thinking about the topics which interest you and search out some old papers before you come.

Most people would be more likely to find a long letter forbidding, so it is best to wait until your first meeting. Either way, you need their 'informed consent' before starting to interview. You should begin by explaining the subject of your project or your book or video, and how they can help you. Many people will protest that they have nothing useful to tell you, and need reassurance that their own experience is worthwhile, that it is unfamiliar for younger people whose lives have been very different, and essential for the making of real social history. Some may be genuinely surprised at your interest, and you will need to be more than usually encouraging in the early stages of the interview. You should give them a brief description of the project, and explain to them about the copyright transfer or release form which you will be giving them to sign at the end of the interview. Some will explicitly raise the question of confidentiality, and not want their names given. Be sure to follow their wishes in this respect. Be open about your intentions, and honour any promises you make. Most people will trust you to be discreet with what they tell you—and this trust must be respected. Do not attach their names, without their explicit consent, to potentially damaging quotations about themselves or their family or neighbours.

Some researchers believe in using the first meeting as a brief, exploratory visit, for preparing and getting to know an informant, without using a recorder. The drawback is that, even in trying to establish basic facts about an informant's background, it is difficult not to tap the essence of their memory. You can go

over the same ground on a second visit, but it is likely to be presented in a much more stilted way. In my own experience, it is best to get the recorder going as quickly as you can once you start talking.

### Recording sessions

Before starting to record, you need to consider possible acoustic problems. Too many oral historians are in such a rush to get on at this point that they fail to take sufficient trouble over the sound quality of their recordings. But it is well worth knowing how to get the best out of your machine, just as there is no special virtue in driving badly or typing with two fingers.

First of all, try to use a quiet room where you will not be disturbed by others talking, and there are no loud background noises, or acoustic problems like those caused by hard surfaces. Traffic outside can be dulled by drawing curtains, but birds or barking dogs can be much harder to deal with. In his experience with recording dialect in ordinary homes, Stanley Ellis found that radio and television, a ticking clock, or a budgerigar could 'spoil a recording completely . . . The acoustics of the room itself should be observed. A tiny room, well stuffed with furniture and with washing airing on a clothes-horse, can be an excellent studio. A large quarry-tiled kitchen with plastered walls may give a tremendous reverberation sufficient to spoil the whole recording.' So you might need to tactfully suggest moving into a different room.<sup>23</sup>

Next, consider where to put the recorder and the microphone. The recorder is best tucked away unobtrusively, out of the interviewee's main view but where you can watch it yourself and glance from time to time to see if the sound level is correct or whether the card is nearly full. The microphone should not be placed on a hard, vibratory surface, nor several feet away from the speaker. Don't record across a hard-topped table. Ideally the microphone should be a foot away from the informant's mouth. With a firm hand, if you choose to sit side by side, you can hold it; or you can place it on a stand; or you can use two clip microphones, one on your informant and one on your own clothing. But avoid clip microphones with very thin leads, because they can cause rustling sounds when either of you moves. All this can be done very quickly. You can stress that it is their voice you need, not the clock or the bird or the radio. And make sure at the same time that the interviewee is sitting comfortably, and has not given up a favourite chair. Until all this is completed, you need to avoid talking about the subject which you want to record. Then switch on the recorder and let it run, while chatting. Play this back to test that the recording level is correctly adjusted. Then set the recorder running again and, apart from changing flashcards, leave it running while the recording session continues. It is a bad practice to keep switching off when the informant wanders off the point, or during your own questions. And never begin with a formal announcement into the microphone, 'This is X interviewing Y at Z'; it is a formalising, freezing device.

You are now ready to launch your opening question. What follows will vary greatly depending on the kind of informant, the style of interview you favour, and what you want to know. But again, there are some basic rules. An interview is a social relationship between people with its own conventions, and a violation of these may destroy it. Essentially, the interviewer is expected to show interest in the informant, allowing him or her to speak fully without constant interruption, and at the same time to provide some guidance of what to discuss if needed. Lying behind it is a notion of mutual co-operation, trust, and respect.

An interview is not a dialogue, or a conversation. The whole point is to get the interviewee to speak. Your role is above all to listen. You should keep yourself in the background as much as possible, simply making supportive gestures, but not thrusting in your own comments and stories. It is not an occasion which calls for demonstrations of your own knowledge or charm. And do not allow yourself to feel embarrassed by pauses. Maintaining silence can be a valuable way of allowing an informant to think further, and drawing out a further comment. The time for conversation is later on, when the recorder is switched off. Of course you can go too far in this direction, and allow an interviewee to falter for lack of comeback. To grind to a halt in silence at the end of an exhausted topic is discouraging, and a firm question is needed before this point. But in general you should ask no more questions than are needed, in a clear, simple, unhurried manner. Keep the interviewee relaxed and confident. Above all, never interrupt a story. Return to the original point at the end of the digression if you wish, with a phrase like 'Earlier you were saying . . .', 'Going back to . . .', or 'Before we move on . . .'. But it is axiomatic, if the informant wants to go on to a new line, to be prepared to follow.

Keep showing that you are interested throughout the interview. Rather than continually saying 'yes'—which will sound silly on the recording—it is quite easy to learn to mime the word, nod, smile, lift your eyebrows, look at the informant encouragingly. You must be precisely clear where the interview has gone, and especially avoid asking for information that has already been given. This demands a quick memory and quite intense concentration. You may find you need to take rough notes as you go along, although it is best to do without this aid if you can. At the same time you should be watching for the consistency of the answers, and for conflicts with other sources of evidence. If you are doubtful about something, try returning to it from another angle, or suggesting, tactfully and gently, that there may be a different view of the matter—'I have heard' or 'I have read that . . .'. But it is particularly important not to contradict or argue with an interviewee. Beatrice Webb observes with characteristic pungency: 'It is disastrous to "show off" or to argue: the client must be permitted to pour out his fictitious tales, to develop his preposterous theories, to use the silliest arguments, without demur or expression of dissent or ridicule'. And certainly, the more you can show understanding and sympathy for somebody's standpoint, the more you are likely to learn about it. Bourdieu puts this vividly:

At the risk of shocking both the rigorous methodologist and the inspired hermeneutical scholar, I would willingly say that the interview can be considered a sort of spiritual exercise, aiming to obtain, through forgetfulness of self, a true transformation of the view we take of others in the ordinary circumstances of life. The welcoming disposition, which leads one to share the problem of the respondent, the capacity to take her and understand her just as she is, in her distinctive necessity, is a sort of intellectual love: a gaze.<sup>24</sup>

Discussion of the past can recall painful memories which still evoke strong feelings, and very occasionally these may distress an informant. If this happens, don't be embarrassed by the tears, or apologise: just be gently and naturally supportive, as you would be to a friend; and after an interval ask whether they would like to continue. In some countries with traumatic histories, such as South Africa, this kind of difficulty is more likely, and Sean Field has offered sensitive advice, centering on the need for mutual trust and 'attentive listening'.<sup>25</sup> With some interviewees it may be wiser to leave the more delicate questions to a later stage in an interview. If it is absolutely essential to get an answer, wait until the end, and perhaps switch off the recorder. But never press too hard when an informant seems defensive or reluctant to answer. It is generally best to try to steer towards a more open conclusion, asking for a summing up of feeling about an experience, or whether anything needs to be added. An interview which ends on a relaxed note is more likely to be remembered as pleasant, and lead on to another.

You need always to try to be sensitively aware of how informants are feeling. If they seem fidgety and are only giving rather terse answers, they may be feeling tired or unwell, or watching the clock for some other engagement: in which case, close the recording session as quickly as possible. While avoiding glancing at your own watch, always fit in with their times, and turn up punctually when you are expected, or they may become tense waiting for you. In normal circumstances, an hour and a half to two hours will in any case be a sensible maximum. An older person, in the interest of the occasion, may not realise the danger of becoming overtired, but will certainly regret it afterwards, and may not want to repeat the experience.

### **Social class, race, and gender in the interview context**

In most interviews, part of the context is an unspoken stereotype of the social interaction that takes place. Thus in most interviews the expectation is that interviewers, whether professional historians or research interviewers—usually women—are middle-class, and in their thirties or forties. Their informants are normally ordinary working-class or middle-class people, and in oral history work often considerably older. Thus to their normal modesty, or even undervaluation of self, may be added a special vulnerability to discomfort or anxiety.

It has been suggested that the forethought and unrecorded negotiations that take place before interviewing are one of the key distinguishing skills of life story and oral history researchers. This may be especially so when potential social or political differences need to be overcome. Certainly changing the usual social balance in the interview relationship can have implications for interviewing which need considering. Thus you need to think about the message that your clothing might be giving. A very young person, or indeed by contrast somebody with a very superior manner, may have more difficulty in gaining trust. Considerable problems of reticence may be encountered if you interview a member of your own family.

On the other hand, it may be particularly worthwhile to interview other people you know well. For example, Judith Okely deliberately sought out anthropologists she knew and respected for her account of fieldwork practice: 'Contrary to some still prejudiced views within social science practice which insist on the interviewer and interviewee being "uncontaminated" by prior communication, I did not select strangers. The relaxed atmosphere of mutual trust ensured free flowing narrative and intellectual honesty'.<sup>26</sup> Remember how there are differences between what may be told to a community outsider or an insider. Either position brings both advantages and drawbacks, and it is important for any interviewer to be sensitive to this. Similarly a person from the same working-class background and community as an informant will win an initial rapport, although later on may find difficulty in asking questions because of a common social network, or because the answer (often mistakenly) seems obvious.

Merida Rua is the daughter of a Puerto Rican immigrant worker, but just because of this she was given a rough start when she began interviewing in a Puerto Rican neighbourhood in Chicago: 'Why don't you live with your family?' 'Why are you asking me these questions, you know the answers, don't you?'<sup>27</sup> Race can provide another kind of barrier: surmountable, but complex. Innumerable white anthropologists have won the confidence of non-white communities, and I experienced this myself with Elaine Bauer in researching *Jamaican Hands*.

By contrast many researchers, especially in the United States, have reported striking difficulties and differences in outcome. In the 1930s the white anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker lived for a year in a Mississippi town to study the culture of racial segregation, and felt that she could not start interviewing black people without first gaining acceptance from the town's white leaders. 'Their acquiescence was essential; Negroes could not afford to work with anyone whom the whites did not accept'. Without this precaution, interviewees might be sacked or attacked. Nevertheless, she went on to interview nearly a hundred black people, talking with some of them fifty or more times. Did she win their trust in the end? 'I felt, too, without much objective evidence, that there was another factor which contributed to the response. Frequently the interview seemed to have a cathartic value for the colored informant. For the first time he



was having an opportunity to tell a white person what he really thought about the situation in which he found himself. By contrast Portelli recounts how a black Kentucky minister's wife at one point, after talking to him for hours in depth about her life, told him, 'there's always gonna be a line' between them, because, as Portelli was white, 'I don't trust you'.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the most contentious issue is the role of gender in the interview. Thus, while an interview between the sexes will often help to encourage sympathy and response, it is also most likely that some kinds of confidence, for example about sexual behaviour, are probably much more easily exchanged between people of the same sex, even though the most skilled interviewers do overcome this difficulty. For example, in the pre-feminist mid-1960s, Dennis Marsden carried out all the interviews himself for his classic study of single mothers, *Mothers Alone*. Years afterwards he recalled, 'I was a bit miffed later on when the Women's Movement started, in the early seventies, claiming that only women could interview women, . . . Well, how could I [accept that], you know? I mean, I'd had women writing in and saying, "You've absolutely caught my story". You know, that *Mothers Alone* had illuminated their life'.<sup>29</sup>

More recently Kate Fisher interviewed on sex and birth control in Britain. There were also two men on the project. She refutes the simple view that most women will talk more openly to other women. They found that both age and gender gave certain advantages and disadvantages. Thus a male interviewer who had children could, unlike a much younger woman, build empathy from common experience. But conversely, a young female interviewer could use lack of shared experience to 'justify interest in the past' and to obtain 'frank accounts' of sexual practices and abortion. In other cultures, however, gender may be much more crucial. Thus the psychologist Michael Gorkin, recording women in the very different gender cultures of Latin American and Palestinian women, has always worked with women co-researchers from those communities. He says,

To the simple and blunt question, can a man interview women as successfully as a woman can, I now reluctantly say, 'No, he cannot' . . . Even when social conventions allow him access to them, women almost invariably talk less freely, *and* differently, to him than they do with female interviewers . . . Women have a prejudice—or maybe the word is 'awareness'—that another woman will understand and appreciate what they relate of their lives far better than a man will.<sup>30</sup>

In the Anglo-American context, the debate on the relevance of gender in interviewing has proved long-standing, and closely linked to feminism. Shulamit Reinharz's *Feminist Methods* gives a whole chapter to the oral history variant. However, the most influential single publication has been Ann Oakley's much-cited article arguing that women interviewers, when interviewing women, should encourage a more confiding approach, and at a later stage encourage

talk mutually, and sometimes offer practical help. For her own earlier study of housework, she had used an elaborate formal interview schedule, but investigating the experience of childbirth through repeated interviews and sometimes presence at the birth itself required a more flexible, intimate, and mutual approach. But more recently she has changed her position, arguing that she no more favours a 'feminist' than a 'masculinist' approach to research interviewing. So the debate remains unresolved.<sup>31</sup>

### Elite interviewing

The other major issue is that of an 'elite interview' with a public personality as informant. Such people are generally tougher and fitter than the typical interviewee. They may have such a strong idea of their own story, and what matters in it, that all they can offer is stereotyped recollections. They often also, 'in the course of long careers in public life will have developed a protective shell by which they ward off troublesome questions and while seeming to say something worthwhile in fact give away as little as possible'. It is this defensive veil that the interviewer must penetrate.<sup>32</sup>

This kind of interview not only requires much more detailed preparation, but also different tactics in questioning. One way of getting off the prepared script is to ask about something quite unexpectedly mundane and everyday, rather than challenging. Once more spontaneous talk has started, it becomes easier to shift to more significant themes. Occasionally innocence itself can penetrate the shell. 'Politicians have the right experience to be able to deal very cleverly with a young innocent historian', observes Asa Briggs. But 'a very young man can . . . get a lot from a very old man that members of his own generation don't get'. More usually, there is no alternative but to try to be 'sensitive and tough at the same time'. Some of the basic rules still apply: the danger of breaking up the interview through too challenging cross-questioning, and also the positive advantages of, for example, an informal social discussion outside the interview.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, several oral historians, such as James Wilkie in Mexico, Lawrence Goodwin in the southern United States, and Peter Oliver in Canada, have argued for the need to 'cross-examine' in a much more vigorous manner. The researcher, according to Peter Oliver, while avoiding an openly 'adversary' posture, should not hesitate to challenge the answers he receives and to probe: 'Come on now, Senator, surely there was more to it . . . ? Mr So and So claims that . . .'. Most politicians are pretty worldly and hard-skinned types; few will resent being pushed to re-examine their initial responses if it is done with some tact and skill, and often it is only by doing so that the interviewer will uncover truly significant material. Studs Terkel remarks that 'there are times, particularly when interviewing a public figure, that it is necessary to ask an impertinent question'. Portelli similarly suggests that 'a (respectfully) antagonistic interviewer may induce the narrator to open up', and he describes how he took a frank approach especially with informants to whose position he felt

opposed: 'One cannot expect informants to tell the truth about themselves if we start out by deceiving them about ourselves. Fascists and capitalists who knew which side I was on often gave me much more vivid and motivated accounts and explanations than if they had blandly assumed I shared their party or class line'.<sup>34</sup>

A comparable instance is provided by the leading radio astronomers interviewed by David Edge. His interviewees combined a very idealised image of science and what was important to its history with the defensiveness needed for success in the competitive grant-aided politics of the scientific world. He developed a triangular method, in which the radio astronomer was interviewed at the same time by Edge, who as a former scientist and perhaps personal friend, and already in possession of inside secrets, was equipped to challenge on technical issues, and by Mike Mulkay, a scientifically naïve sociologist, waiting to pounce on wider inconsistencies and points of interest. Edge normally led the interview, chasing detailed points, challenging, and arguing; Mulkay came in as an 'outsider', and there was often a notable change in the informant's voice when a question came from him.<sup>35</sup> This argumentative technique depends partly on some sort of common membership of a social group, and partly on knowing exactly how far the challenge may be pressed.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, special skills are also needed for interviewing in situations where meanings are only exchanged with difficulty, such as interviewing people with learning disabilities, or in another culture in which not only language but also basic concepts such as counting differ sharply from those in the West. These situations present particular difficulties in negotiating consent to the interview and its use. In drawing out information in such contexts, visual cues, such as time lines or life maps, friendship network diagrams or family trees, can be especially helpful.<sup>36</sup>

### **Beyond and after the interview**

It is important to remember that the interview is not your sole source of potential information. As well as printed and archival sources, you can also approach your own fieldwork in the spirit of anthropological participant observation. At the least, you can note the context of the interview. But often more is possible and rewarding. For example, for *Living the Fishing* I would sit in the harbour café at Buckie in northern Scotland with a group of old skippers, discussing the boats as they came in. I also went out on the mackerel fishing in a purse seine netter, an experience which proved particularly revealing in observing the egalitarianism of skipper-crew relations. Similarly, for *Jamaican Hands* Elaine and I have been to numerous family meals as well as church services and funerals, where the informal talk can be very revealing of the culture. It is easy to interweave this kind of participatory activity with formal recording.

But to return to the interview: do not rush away after the recording session. You need to stay, to give a little of yourself, and show warmth and appreciation

in return for what has been given to you. Accept a cup of tea if it is offered, or a whisky, and be prepared to chat about the family and photographs. This may be the moment when the interviewee is most likely to lend you documents. He may bring out treasured old letters or photographs. When complex intergenerational families have been discussed, it may be a good time to try drawing family trees, or—as Gabriele Rosenthal suggested for *The Holocaust in Three Generations*—make family sculptures. It is a good time for fixing another visit. You may find that you can give something in return with some immediate practical help, lifting or repairing something, or some advice about how to set about solving a worrying problem. Indeed, as Ann Oakley cogently argued, it may sometimes be ‘morally indefensible’ to hold back from helping in this way, and sharing experience, by talking gently about yourself and your own ideas.<sup>37</sup>

Just now and then, this will be the beginning of a friendship that will last. Cliff Hills, to whom *The Edwardians* is dedicated, not only gave us one of the longest and most perceptive of all our interviews, but became a family friend, coming up to help us catch moles, or playing and singing hymns at the piano, and we came to see him at his bedside in his last days. Moving around my corner of Essex, I especially remember the field where his shepherd father taught him to handle sheep. It was Cliff above all who gave us the conviction that we could learn a whole new dimension of social history from memories. Similarly, for *Living the Fishing*, I first got to know and interview Andy Noble as a seine net fisherman with a taste for history. He became a crucial source of contacts and information, with whom I had many lengthy and fruitful arguments about the interpretation I was developing. Forty years on, we are still good friends. This kind of experience is particularly likely with long-sustained projects involving re-visiting, as with much anthropological fieldwork.<sup>38</sup> But it is important to go forward with tact and caution. Friendship needs a commitment of time and understanding on your part. And whether or not you are not hoping to see a particular interviewee again, at the end of the interview, talk with care. Do not get into an argument on subjects likely to be controversial, such as teenage behaviour or politics.

If you have completed the whole interview, this may be a suitable moment for getting a signed permission agreement. And then after leaving, some things remain to be done. First, record as quickly as possible any comments of your own on the context of the interview, the character of the informant, additional remarks made off the tape, and what may not have been said. When you are back, save the audio with the interviewee’s name and date of recording. Later on, play back the recording to check what information has been obtained and what you still need. In particular, make sure that you have the basic facts about the informant which any researcher would want to know in order to use it as evidence: the interviewee’s age, sex, home, and occupation, and also his or her parents’ occupations. At the same time you can make a list of any names whose spelling needs to be checked with the informant.

Finally, if this was your last visit, you can verify these points along with your thank-you letter. This letter can usefully restate the general purpose of the interview, and again if appropriate go into questions of confidentiality or copyright. But it is in any case a courtesy which will be valued. And it is on such personal care, just as much as historical expertise, that success in interviewing depends.

Up to this point we have been primarily concerned with your impact on the interviewee, but the impact of the interview on you is also important to consider. The concentration needed to listen acutely and remember what has been said can be very tiring. For yourself as well as the interviewee, it is wise to have regular breaks. And while successful interviewing can be intellectually exhilarating, and the empathy generated powerful enough to sometimes launch friendships, the after-effects are not always so positive. It can be emotionally painful and exhausting listening to traumatic interviews. Another potentially unsettling possibility can be when a confident older interviewee, out of goodwill, treats a younger interviewer like a son or daughter or pupil. Michael Roper vividly describes how this happened to him when interviewing older British industrialists.<sup>39</sup>

It can be particularly uncomfortable to hold back one's own views when listening at length to a hostile bigot. Les Back writes in revealing detail of his experiences interviewing English white racists, and the uncomfortable ordinary life 'congruences' which he discovered he shared with them. Similarly Kathleen Blee was very surprised to find herself sharing opinions on many issues with women of the Ku Klux Klan, whom she had expected to 'hate and fear'. Duncombe and Jessop suggest that the very success of interviewing skills in drawing out reticent interviewees through 'faking friendship' may lead to ethically ambiguous situations—although it should be said that hiding antagonistic feelings is a necessary element in all normal social relationships. On the other hand, if you start to develop an interpretation during an interview which you feel is based on a good relationship, it is unsettling if the interviewee—sometimes with distress—rejects this perspective.<sup>40</sup>

Michael Roper describes an encounter which was awkward right from the start, when he set about interviewing 'B', a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, who was presumably himself a very practised interviewer. B 'refused the positive empathy one normally expects', deliberately avoiding any eye contact. In such a context Roper is against muffling mutual discomfort with 'lop-sided empathy'. Instead we need to sharpen our skills, and 'cultivate sensibility' so as to understand the processes of transference, and how an interviewee's earlier lives still underlie their present feelings and attitudes.<sup>41</sup> Understanding the intergenerational transmission of attitudes and feelings would certainly be valuable, but might be easier to explore with a more co-operative interviewee. Perhaps we simply have to accept that not all interviews will leave a good feeling.<sup>42</sup>

More fundamentally, you may find, especially through your early interviews, that oral history is changing who you feel you are yourself. I certainly believe

that it helped me to become a more open and egalitarian person than I was before, more confident in mixing outside my own original circle, more ready to listen to anyone's story. As an instance of this, let us conclude with the story of Elena Poniatowska, who is probably the best-known oral historian in the Spanish-speaking world today: the Studs Terkel of Latin America.<sup>43</sup> She has published some thirty books, most based on interviews. Elena's mother was Mexican, but her father was Polish, so that she was born in Poland in 1932 and grew up speaking no Spanish. The family made a lucky escape from the Nazis, migrating back to Mexico in 1939, where Elena lived in a cultured upper-class social circle. She married an astrophysicist, and began working for a fashion magazine, *Excelsior*, interviewing artists and writers.

From the start Elena championed the role of women, and wrote in a warm, often humorous way. But her sense of calling and identity began to change radically once she had moved to the magazine's rival, *Novedades*, where she was editor-in-chief for some four decades. While continuing to interview leading cultural figures (from literature, films, painting, politics), she moved more strongly towards championing the Mexican working class and poor. She made an ethnographic book on working-class customs, and began interviews with railway workers. In the 1960s she met Oscar Lewis, who wanted her to work with him, and she did interview prisoners for the filmmaker Luis Buñuel.

The crucial turning point was, however, working on what proved to be her most famous testimonial novel, *Hasta no verte Jesús mio* (1969; *Here's to You Jesusa*, 2001). It was based on many interviews with a Mexico City laundress, Josefina Borquez. Josefina had an extraordinary story, including fighting horse-back battles for the revolution, and she also had a striking, sharp turn of speech. In a powerful section of the biography Elena describes how she persuaded the reluctant Josefina to be interviewed regularly over a period of months. The interviews were crucial for Elena's sense of self, for it enabled her to feel for the first time an identification with how it was to be an ordinary Mexican. Essentially Elena took Josefina's fire into her soul.

From the late 1960s onwards, Elena has poured out a stream of oral histories championing the disadvantaged in Mexican society: the Zapatistas, the homeless in Morelos, urban guerrillas, and especially strikingly, the victims of the Mexico City earthquake: *Nasda, Nadie: Las voces del Tremblor* (1988; *Nothing, Nobody: the Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake*, 1995). The best-known of her books was about the Mexican government's brutal suppression of the 1968 student rebellion, with hundreds killed by the military. Her book on this deathly collision, *La noche de Tlatelco* (1971; *Massacre in Mexico* [New York: Viking, 1975]) sold over 600,000 copies worldwide. Her criticisms of the government over the decades resulted in sustained threats and anonymous phone calls against her, and for a period she was in prison.

So how did the cultured Polish aristocrat become transformed into a radical Mexican campaigner? It was interviewing ordinary Mexicans that changed her.

# 11

## After the Interview

The recording has been completed: but how then should it be kept? And how can it be used to understand social change and history? The creativity of interpretation needs to be firmly grounded through practical steps. So what are the main principles in archiving and organising interviews, and the legal and ethical issues in using and sharing your recordings? Many of these questions are considered in more detail in the websites of the Oral History Society and Oral History Association, and in the excellent recent handbook by Louise Corti et al., *Managing and Sharing Research Data*.<sup>1</sup>

### Archiving

Since the 1980s there has been a series of radical shifts in recording technology. It is important not to forget that even so, no storage system is permanent—in that sense the situation remains little changed. For this reason, the safest place for your recordings if you want a permanent home for them is a professional archive, which will develop strategies to deal with long-term changes. But for this stage of your project, the new developments make your task much easier. Storing and archiving new digital recordings is essentially straightforward, although it may differ slightly depending on the make of recorder. The key point is to ensure that you make recordings to the best possible professional standards and download your audio recordings not only onto your computer, but also separately onto one, or for better security, two external hard drives. It is also possible to store copies on a CD or DVD, but this is not necessary, and sometimes CDs may degrade after only a few years. If you keep only one copy of your recording on your computer, you can lose it through accidentally deleting it or through a breakdown of your computer. Hence it is crucial to make back-up copies in order to protect you from losses. It is safer if you keep your copies in more than one location as a protection against fire, flood, or theft, and ideally in more than one format or on more than one brand of hard drive. If you have older recordings still on tapes, or on minidisks, you should as soon as practicable ensure that they are digitised and archived in the same way.

You should file with each interview the 'metadata' or key information relating to it: its date and place, the interviewer, type of recording equipment, format,



file size, and information on consent, rights, and any restrictions on use. Each recording should be given a separate number. This will be the basis of your project index. It can start as a simple Word document, but as the collection grows, and especially as more people contribute to making and using it, it will become increasingly important to use a spreadsheet or other database system for the index on your computer and to add more information in a systematic form. This document, like all the other files, needs to be backed up.

You can consider adding to this basic information some of the basic background details about the interviewee that are essential for evaluating the interview and should thus be found within it. These personal details will of course vary to some extent, depending on the focus of the project. Thus the Imperial War Museum lists details such as 'service', 'arm of service', 'rank', 'decorations and awards', which would be inappropriate in a different context. But most other researchers need at least to know when an informant was born, his or her parents' occupations, where they lived, whether or not there were brothers and sisters, the informant's own education, occupational career, religious and political affiliation if any, whether he or she married, and if so, when, to whom, and whether they had children.

#### NOTING BASIC INTERVIEW INFORMATION ON THE INTERVIEWEE

160 JOSEPH WILLIAM PARKIN LIGHTFOOT b. Bolton Low Houses 13th December 1908 *br.* Two *s.* Two *pl.* Fletchertown 1938, Kirkland 1942, Wigton 1954 *ff.* Coalminer *oj.* Retired, previously coalminer 1922, farm labourer 1924, labourer on pipe-tracks, part-time gardener 1930s, driver Cumberland Motor Services 1942–68, own shop in 1950s *e.* Bolton Low Houses until 14 *r.* Methodist *p.* Labour *m.* Married *ch.* Two.

Abbreviations: *br* brothers; *s* sisters; *pl* places lived in; *ff* father's job; *oj* own job; *e* education; *r* religion; *p* politics; *m* marital status; *ch* number of children.

Melvyn Bragg, 'The People', in *Speak for England* (London: Coronet, 1976): 491.

A third possibility is to create summaries of interview contents. For some projects, which are organised to follow a definite interview schedule, this may be superfluous; all the necessary clues will be in the basic background of the interviewee. But the larger and more diverse a collection, the more summaries become an essential part of the catalogue. This is of course much easier if you already have a full transcript. But if you do not have support for transcribing, making summaries from the audio recording will take you much less time. A typical summary is very roughly around one page for every ten in the transcript. Once you have made

these, you can use your computer's 'find' function to search the summaries for names of people and places, types of interviewee, occupations, themes, etc. Since the summary is more likely than the full transcript to refer directly to the theme that interests you, and to use key words you have chosen yourself, it is usually quickest to search through the summaries, especially for themes.

## AN INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Michael Mason

1 November 2006 at Feldhams Close, Wivenhoe

interviewer Paul Thompson

### Tape 1 Side A

Born Wivenhoe 1937. Father before marriage was army farrier in India. Mother Carola Parker. Maternal grandparents had Park Hotel, which parents took over 1938. Father then in army for war, so mother ran it with her sister until 1948: playing in pub and cart sheds. In 1946 returned to Bellevue Rd, where grandfather had a big plot where kept pigs and chickens, and built two houses there for his daughters. Mother's family came from Waldegrave's Farm in West Mersea.

Mother died early, aged forty-nine. Father later worked for Paxmans, and like Mike was warrener to North East Essex Rabbit Clearance Society. Father not interested in nature, but was in sailing: grandfather W. Mason had been a yacht captain. As a child main interest collecting stuffed birds which people were then throwing out—filled three bedrooms with them at Park Hotel. Has only one buzzard left now.

In teens took up breeding and exhibiting rabbits, later poultry, and much later dogs. Sent rabbits etc to shows all over England by train, they were sent back to Wivenhoe station and labelled with prizes. With poultry, started with Old English Game; by late '60s had best Black Silkies in England. Breed clubs; committee member. Went into dogs because father a warrener, bought first beagle for this, started breeding. Bred a champion, became a judge, active in beagle associations.

Always interested in nature, as a child explored woods, watching birds, on his own. Mother never knew when coming home. Walking up river to Hythe, made huts with other boys like Raymond Peck, camping out.

School at Rowhedge by ferry boat, then Wivenhoe, later Great Bromley staying with teacher grandmother, then Brightlingsea, leaving at fifteen.

Apprentice shipwright at Wivenhoe 1952, building wooden boats: learnt by watching and practice. Then underkeeper at Alresford Hall but

didn't like killing of owls, etc. Next worked with father clearing rabbits, and then seven years at Cooks.

Went to work at University in October 1966. Wanted open air work, so transferred to grounds staff. Head gardener Clive Popham, trained at Kew, liked staff to know the Latin names of trees. Last eighteen years maintaining cricket squares. Took early retirement in 1991. When he started, the grounds were a wilderness of bracken and brambles, wartime concrete bases to break up, very muddy. Marking out pitches and running track. Cricket pitches, continual cleaning and rolling. Dragging out the lakes. Worked on VC's garden and drive. Bill Moles, forester, did most of the tree work. Many owls in hollow trees, loss of nesting sites when trees trimmed.

Took early retirement in early '50s, then going twice weekly to dog shows, sailing from Lowestoft, getting fish for Ken Green. Thought being a bachelor would get out to do what he wanted while he was fit.

If there's nothing on TV, Mike will go through his fence into the wood, listening to owls, or in the spring, to nightingales. Best at 5:00 a.m. Walks at night up to Hythe, knows his way through the woods in the dark.

The same issues apply to a larger archive, where again the quality of the summaries is the key element in access to the material. You do not, of course, have to deposit your interviews in an archive, but it is important to keep this possibility in mind. From the 1990s there was a big shift in attitudes, so that all the major British research councils now expect data from research which they have funded to be offered for archiving. This allows the scrutiny of the basis for research conclusions, and also the sharing of data in future research. For British oral historians a key moment was the setting up of Qualidata in 1995—now part of the UK Data Archive. Subsequently in 2007 the OECD backed the principle of open public access in its *Principles and Guidelines for Access to Research Data from Public Funding*.

Archiving does imply that you keep your material in a systematic way, and this means much more effort at the end of a project if you have failed to do so earlier. In addition to a basic catalogue of the interviews, transcripts, and summaries, you will need a brief description of the project, its origins, and the researchers involved, consent forms from the interviewees, information about funding sources, and details of publications and other outputs. If you have kept a research diary, this will also be a key document to archive.

A more serious difficulty is that sometimes there are parts of interviews that could cause distress to others. This is especially true of intergenerational projects, for many people will say things about other family members to an interviewer that they would never utter face to face. If this looks quite a likely possibility, it is important to ensure that access is controlled, or the interviews are closed for a period of years. This should be agreed with the interviewees and documented in

an agreement or consent form.<sup>2</sup> Much more rarely, there might be a possibility of libel because of damaging but unprovable comments made by the interviewee about others, and the best protection is again to close the interview for a period of years. A last danger, which usually only occurs in projects focused on criminality or violence, is the naming by interviewees of others, who might then be threatened by prosecution. The recent Boston College case about the recordings it holds on the Northern Irish 'Troubles' has shown that archival restrictions are not a sufficient defence against police criminal investigations. Tony Parker, who recorded many criminals in England as well as in Northern Ireland, showed considerable foresight in his practice of destroying his interviews at the end of a project. On the other hand, it does make his own work impossible to re-evaluate. More surprisingly, in a similar spirit M. G. Smith protectively destroyed all the recordings he made for his life story of a Caribbean spiritualist preacher, *Dark Puritan*.<sup>3</sup>

If you want to archive your interviews, you need to think of the long term. For this reason, they should be archived in a current standard international format that is most likely to remain readable in the long term by future formats. This is more difficult with video than with audio, because video files are very large and require a complicated infrastructure to manage; thus archiving a video project will need substantial server space and financial provision for technical support. In general, you should make sure that your chosen archive has a permanent base and adequate equipment and staffing. You are most likely to find this either at the county level or with a major university library or thematic national archive. Many local archives prove short-lived. You can consider depositing digital material simultaneously in more than one archive, thus making it available to different types of audience. However, this is likely to be seen by archivists as a waste of staff resources, given that you can achieve the same through internet links.

### Legal and ethical issues

Before a recording enters a public archive, or indeed before anyone attempts to use it in some form of publication, a key point needs to be clarified: that of control of the right to access and use. This is not, however, a simple issue, partly because the law of copyright varies between different countries, yet as regards oral history has never been tested in the courts in most of them. But equally significantly, copyright raises wider ethical questions of responsibility towards informants.

The general legal principle is that there are two copyrights in a recording. The copyright in the recording as a recording—in its sound—is normally the property of the interviewer or of the institution or person who commissioned the interview. The copyright in the information in the recording—the informant's actual words—is the property of the interviewee. These copyrights can only be transferred in writing, or through a recorded oral agreement. However, under 'fair dealing', short extracts may be used for reviews or research, including theses. Moreover—though relying on this is not regarded as good professional practice—provided there is contextual evidence, such as a letter requesting the interview, a licence to quote the informant is implied through his or her subsequent consent

to be interviewed. Thus a man who, knowing that a researcher is collecting material for a research study, agreed to be interviewed, would appear to have little legal ground for complaint if he found himself quoted in print. And in practice he would be very unlikely to attempt to prevent, or to seek compensation for, the publication of any quotation unless he considered it substantially damaging.

A bona fide scholar is unlikely to have committed an actionable libel through the interpretation of interviews, but it is important to remember that reproducing defamatory statements made in an interview does open the possibility of a court action. In English law, in order for statements to be actionable, they must be false and the plaintiff's reputation must have been damaged in the eyes of reasonable people. The dead cannot be libeled. But short of this it would be foolish anyway to provoke a publicised complaint. It is always important to consider carefully whether the publication of identifiable confidences could cause distress or scandal.

You also have a legal 'duty of confidentiality' to respect any assurance you may have given that the information will be 'confidential'. If you want to offer confidentiality to interviewees, the most straightforward means is to use a pseudonym both for archiving the interview and in any publications. Sometimes it is wise to use more than one pseudonym for the same interviewee, to make identification less likely. This is common practice in the sociological community, partly because the archiving of interviews was developed with large-scale surveys, including the census, in which it was believed that anonymity was essential to get high response rates.

Oral historians, on the other hand, like many other qualitative social researchers, are very doubtful of the appropriateness of this approach, for two reasons. Firstly, it cuts off the interviewee and his or her family and friends from their personal fascination with the interview and pride in it. Secondly, full anonymisation, for example by changing family details or place names, can seriously distort the information, and undermine its social and historical value. If you are tempted by the need for security to do this, a far better choice would be to restrict access.

Furthermore, an interviewee, if their life story proved the making of a best-seller, could claim a right to share of the earnings, provided they had retained their copyright. If the publication is the story of a single interviewee, the authorship of the book, and the names on the cover, certainly ought to be decided jointly. Pat Caplan's *African Voices* provides an example of such an agreement, included in the book itself.<sup>4</sup>

There is much to be said for this balance of rights. At the very least, however, it is crucial that before or at the end of the interview, a consent form be given to the interviewee, re-explaining the project and making clear not only its immediate object, but also the potential value of their information to wider historical research by others. The consent form should request permission for use of the material in publication, broadcasting, and on the internet. This means that the licence to use the interview becomes general, rather than confined to the first

researcher. In both Britain and the United States, informed consent is a legally mandatory element in collecting and using personal data. Hence it has become a centrepiece in the growing ethical regulation of research, a change which has not been without strong criticism from some leading researchers.<sup>5</sup>

British copyright law, currently part of EU law, has become more restrictive than it was up until 1989. Before this, informal understandings were typical for the writing of innumerable sociological studies, as well as most of the early oral history publications which we have discussed. Similarly, access by researchers to earlier unpublished manuscript material held in local and national record offices was usually handled informally, except when it concerned well-known people. Nowadays, that is no longer acceptable practice, and it is essential to ensure a clear legal situation, either through a transfer of copyright to the archive, or through a license which allows broad public use of the material, but leaves copyright with the interviewee.

**LICENCE AGREEMENT: COLNE MARITIME PROJECT**

The Colne Oral History is a joint project between Remembering Wivenhoe, Brightlingsea Museum and Rowhedge Heritage. Brightlingsea has a fascinating history of its own and shares with Rowhedge and Wivenhoe a common history along the Colne estuary of boatyards and shipbuilding, fishing, big yachts and dinghy sailing. The Colne Oral History project aims to record fifty life story interviews about this riverside history with local residents, which will be archived as a research and publication resource for the future, and used for local oral history books. A DVD oral history of life on the Colne is also intended. With the disappearance of the shipyards and its growing population, the area has been changing. Yet until now the spoken history of the Colne riverside communities has never been recorded in any depth. We thank you for making your contribution through recording this interview.

I agree that my interview recorded by .....  
on (dates).....  
may be archived as part of the Colne oral history project collection to be available for future writing, research and radio, including the project books.  
Date.....  
I am/am not willing for parts of my interview to be included in a future internet website.  
Signed.....  
Name.....  
Address.....  
.....  
.....

There are, nevertheless, good reasons why formal copyright transfer agreements have increasingly become the standard practice, especially where interviews are to be archived and made accessible to other researchers. This was early the case in broadcasting, where observation of copyright has to be particularly careful because of the frequent involvement of public figures, and also due to the influence of the financial complexities of musical copyright. The Oral History Association of the United States has advocated this practice for many years. In the United States, standards were originally set for the recording of eminent public figures and a precise agreement was therefore necessary, not only as to copyright, but also as to whether particular pages of the transcript should be closed until a certain date, or accessible only by specific permission. In Britain the Imperial War Museum obtains a precise written agreement from its informants, who are often not only eminent public figures, but especially security-conscious.

The 'Recording Agreement' used by the British Library is brief, asking for the full transfer of copyright from the interviewee 'for use in all and in any media', stating that the material will be preserved 'as a permanent public reference resource for use in research, publication, education, lectures and broadcasting and the internet', but also offering options not to transfer copyright, and to restrict access.

More elaborate agreements are now the standard practice in the United States. Thus the University of California at Los Angeles uses an Interview Agreement, signed by both parties before the interview, covering both recordings and transcripts, by which the interviewee, in return for 'no remuneration or compensation', 'irrevocably assigns' copyright to the interviewer, conveying 'the right to use the interview for research, educational, and other purposes, including publication', and also to 'donate any and all materials' elsewhere at the end of the research. Here again an option to restrict use is included. By contrast, until recently the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley simply used a one-sentence transfer of all rights from the interviewee to the library:

I, ———, do hereby give to The Regents of the University of California for such scholarly and educational uses as the Director of the Bancroft Library shall determine the following tape-recorded interview(s) recorded beginning on ——— as an unrestricted gift and transfer to the Regents of the University of California legal title and all literary property rights including copyright. This gift does not preclude any use which I may want to make of the information in the recordings ourselves.

Their current legal release is slightly more complex, giving the interviewee the right to review the transcript and to personal use of the material, but still takes unrestricted copyright and gives 'the right to use the Work for all purposes that the University may deem appropriate'.



## BRITISH LIBRARY RECORDING AGREEMENT

### National Life Stories

National Life Stories  
The British Library  
Euston Road  
London NW1 2DB

### ORAL HISTORY RECORDING AGREEMENT

Recordings of oral histories are integral to the British Library's intention to preserve the nation's memory. Your recorded interview will become part of the national collection cared for by the British Library, where it will be preserved as a permanent public reference resource for use in research, publication, education, lectures, broadcasting and the internet. The purpose of this Agreement is to ensure that your contribution is added to the collections of the British Library in strict accordance with your wishes.

This Agreement is made between **The British Library Board, 96 Euston Road, London, NW1 2DB** ("the Library") and you ("the Interviewee", "I"):

*Your name:*.....

*Your address:*.....

in regard to the recorded interview/s which took place on:

*Date/s:* .....

**Declaration:** I, the Interviewee confirm that I consented to take part in the recording and hereby assign to the Library all copyright in my contribution for use in all and any media. I understand that this will not affect my moral right to be identified as the 'performer' in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

*If you do not wish to assign your copyright to the Library, or you wish to limit public access to your contribution for a period of years, please state these conditions here:*

This Agreement will be governed by and construed in accordance with English law and the jurisdiction of the English courts.

.....  
.....

Both parties shall, by signing below, indicate acceptance of the Agreement.

By or on behalf of the Interviewee:

**Signed:** .....

Name in block capitals: .....Date: .....

On behalf of The British Library Board:

**Signed:** .....

Name in block capitals: .....Date: .....

Whether or not such a formal agreement is reached, there remains an ethical responsibility towards the informant that is probably more important. First of all, before any recording, you have an ethical obligation to obtain 'informed consent' to the interview. This implies a responsibility to explain clearly and meaningfully what your research is about, the various forms in which it might be published, whether any royalties might come to the interviewee, and whether the interview might be made available to other researchers. Informants should understand the potential uses to which the material might be put, and the extent to which confidentiality will be maintained. They need to know who might hear the interview, whether their name will be used in public, and whether there are special details which need to be kept secret. It is of course easier if there are no restrictions on the use of the interview, but if such confidentiality has been agreed or even implied, that must be respected. Any quotation from it that might embarrass the interviewee must be made either anonymously or with subsequent permission.

A difficult but fortunately rare problem is when an interviewee has made unfavourable (but not libellous) remarks about someone else who is strongly offended by hearing or reading them. This most often concerns careless comments by some parents about their children. If you are aware of this danger before the interview is archived, then as interviewer you should choose between closing the whole interview or withholding the potentially offensive part of it. If the interview has already been archived, the archivist has to weather the storm.

Occasionally you may record people whose views you strongly oppose, but you can still follow the same basic principles in explaining the research and in quoting them. Your work will be more powerful if you set out their views straightforwardly, rather than antagonistically. You may also discover a more positive side in such informants, which can provide important clues to understanding the appeal of their views. Thus, before interviewing women who had been activists in the Ku Klux Klan, Kathleen Blee 'was prepared to hate and fear my informants. My own commitment to progressive politics prepared me to find these people strange, even repellent . . . What I found was more disturbing. Many of the people I interviewed were interesting, intelligent, and well informed . . . Many were sympathetic persons'. It was this surprising normality which became the basis for her new interpretation of the movement.<sup>6</sup>

With any informant, permission should always be sought for the use of material in a different manner from that originally understood: for example, instead of a history book, for a biographical collection or a radio broadcast. There may be some who—unlike others—are reluctant for their interviews to be used online, and their hesitation needs to be respected. Moreover, when informants have a right to a royalty fee, as for a broadcast or a biographical collection, this should be secured for them. They should be warned of the broadcast time well

enough in advance for them to tell friends. And if they are quoted at length in a book, try to ensure that they receive their own free copy.

As far as possible—and admittedly there are some turgid forms of scholarly publication for which this might be counter-productive—informants' attention should be drawn to the use made of their material. Indeed, an oral historian who does not wish to share with informants the pleasure and pride in a published work ought to consider very seriously why this is so, and whether it is socially justifiable. There may perhaps be a case for publishing the material collected in a more popular form, such as a local pamphlet, as well as in some academic mode. One accepts that only the outstanding oral historian can reach the range of readership of a Studs Terkel with a single book. But it remains an overriding ethical responsibility of the historian who uses oral evidence to ensure that history is given back to the people whose words helped to shape it.

It should be added that the depositing and preservation of recordings needs to be seen in the same light. They can be of interest and use to far more people than the historian who made the recording. All too many oral history tapes from earlier years remain with the secretary of a local society, or in an academic's private study, effectively inaccessible to a wider public—and eventually too easily thrown out. When in the mid-1990s Qualidata surveyed the fate of the interviews from major post-war projects, some shocking losses were revealed: nothing remained, for example, of all the family interviews of John and Elizabeth Newsom, or from the classic Banbury community study, or perhaps worst of all, not a trace from any of the early studies of migrant ethnic minorities in Britain.

## Transcribing

There is a strong argument, whatever the immediate use envisaged for them, for the full transcription of recordings as the first stage in the writing and presentation of history—both by the original researcher and by others who might follow. Transcribing is undoubtedly very time-consuming, as well as being a highly skilled task. It takes at least five hours, and for a recording with difficult speech or dialect up to twice as long, for each hour recorded. Voice recognition software does now offer a quicker alternative, but it works well only with standard accents, and usually requires much time in listening to the recording for correction. Either way, unless the recording is fully transcribed, anybody but the person who made it—and thus has quite a clear idea of what it contains—will be severely hampered in using it.

Although it can be very helpful if time codes are included, a summary is at best only a rough guide for the visiting researcher: Listening to more than a few interviews takes several hours, where skimming through transcripts either online or in hard copy might take minutes. But the person who makes the recording is also best able to ensure that transcription is accurate. Indeed, at an early stage of a project it can also be a very revealing experience for the researcher to transcribe

some of his or her interviews in full. There is no better way of grasping how audio conveys meaning, sometimes without words, and how words and sentences spoken can never be exactly conveyed in written language, but remain distinctive modes of expression.

Nevertheless, because the task of transcribing is so lengthy, and, apart from other claims on time, new recording always seems more urgent, transcribing nearly always falls behind. In a research project supported by a grant, this can be avoided only by making a full estimate of the transcribing time and equipment needed at the start.

It is equally important to recognise that transcribing work can be carried out only by a person with particular skills, working on a regular basis, and formally recognising the confidential element in the work. Part-time agency audio-typing will be either incomprehensible or prohibitive in cost. A transcriber needs to be interested in the tapes, intelligent in making sense of them, especially in the key art of turning verbal pauses into written punctuation, and a good speller with an unusually quick ear. It is also isolated work. These are not necessarily the qualities that make a successful secretary. The only way to know whether somebody can transcribe well is to give them a recording and let them try.

Most oral history projects will not have the resources to pay for a transcriber, and will need to carry out the work themselves. For a very small group, or for a researcher's own tapes, the process can, however, be quite markedly shortened, even if at the expense of long-term satisfaction. The best 'shortened transcript' lies between a summary and a complete transcription. For the most part, the content is summarised in detail, but actual quotations are only used when the words are so well or vividly put that they are worth considering for extracts or quotations in the finished presentation.

Ultimately, however, there can be no substitute for a full transcript. Even the best shortened version is like an intelligent historian's notes from an archive rather than the original documents. Nor can the historian today know what questions will be asked by historians in the future, so that any selection will result in the loss of details which might later prove significant. The full transcript should therefore include everything, with the possible exception of diversions for checking that the recorder is on, having a cup of tea, or present-day chatting about the weather. All questions should go in. Fumbling for a word may be left out, but other hesitations, and stop-gaps like 'you know' or 'see', should be included at this stage. The grammar and word order must be left as spoken. If a word or phrase cannot be caught, there should be a note in the transcript to indicate this. These are all quite straightforward guidelines. But the real art of the transcriber is in using punctuation and occasional phonetic spelling to convey the character of speech.

It is important to recognise that transcripts cannot aspire to being precisely 'correct'. Indeed, the same is true of audio extracts or collages from digital recordings, which are as 'cooked' as transcripts. We should see text and audio

as different forms conveying parallel meanings—it is a mistake to present the text of a transcript extract as a word-for-word replication of the sound. To start with, the punctuation has to be different to make any sense of spoken language, with commas for pauses placed differently. Rather than being an exact copy in text of the audio original, the edited text extract should be seen as a different form—just like the short text versions of the words projected during opera performances—judged according to its effectiveness in conveying the speaker's meaning.

Thus even a complete transcript is an interpretation of the recording, and the version suggested here is best seen as a practical compromise between two other possibilities. The first is the much neater, condensed transcript, cutting out pauses and distracting hesitations or false starts in the interests of readability, which is the most likely form to be used for publication. The second is the more complicated attempt to convey the complexity of speech on paper through elaborate systems of notations indicating intonation, emphasis, pauses, laughter, overlapping speech, and so on, which has principally grown from linguistic studies or from anthropological approaches to oral history, such as the 'ethnopoetics' of Dennis Tedlock.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately this second approach not only arises from, but also fails to solve, the basic problem that orality can never be adequately conveyed in print. The very elaborateness of the notation systems used brings this home by creating texts which are exceptionally hard to read. As Michael Frisch comments, 'The more completely we strive to make the voice audible on the page, the more we risk making it illegible'. A still more elaborate approach for video interviews is to include notations of 'embodied communication'—smiles, hand gestures, body movements, and so on. Nevertheless, there are some forms of linguistic narrative and conversation analysis for which this more detailed form of transcription is essential. For filmed oral performances, such as with African oral poetry or traditions, the task will be still more complex, encompassing also the gestures of the teller and audience reactions.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever approach is chosen, the transcript is inevitably a literary form and the problems which it raises are inseparable from those of subsequent quotation.<sup>9</sup> The spoken word can very easily be mutilated in being taken down on paper and then transferred to the printed page. There is already an inevitable loss not only of the unique expressive qualities of the voice itself, but also of gesture, tone, and timing. Much more serious is the distortion when the spoken word is drilled into the orders of written prose, through imposing standard grammatical forms and a logical sequence of punctuation. The rhythms and tones of speech are quite distinct from those of prose. Equally important, lively speech will meander, dive into irrelevancies, and return to the point after unfinished sentences. Effective prose is by contrast systematic, relevant, spare. It is therefore very tempting for the writer, wishing to make a point effectively, to strip a spoken quotation, re-order it, and then, in order to make it continuous,

slip in some connecting words which were never in the original. The point can be reached when the character of the original speech becomes unrecognisable. This is an extreme, but any writer, unless continually aware of this danger, may at times reach such a level of decadence in transcription.

The difficulties may be illustrated by taking as an example one of the first passages in Ronald Blythe's classic book *Akenfield*, an old farm worker's account of a domestic economy in the years before 1914. The picture he gives is very bare, highly effective—but so terse in detail that one wonders how far the original interview has been tidied up:

There were seven children at home and father's wages had been reduced to 10s. a week. Our cottage was nearly empty—except for people. There was a scrubbed brick floor and just one rug made of scraps of old clothes pegged into a sack. The cottage had a living-room, a larder, and two bedrooms. Six of us boys and girls slept in one bedroom and our parents and the baby slept in the other. There was no newspaper and nothing to read except the Bible. All the village houses were like this. Our food was apples, potatoes, swedes and bread, and we drank our tea without milk or sugar. Skim milk could be bought from the farm but it was thought a luxury. Nobody could get enough to eat no matter how they tried. Two of my brothers were out to work. One was eight years old and he got 3s. a week, the other got about 7s.<sup>10</sup>

There is in these lines an unremitting logical drive. Every word stands with evident purpose in its proper place. Every phrase is correctly punctuated. There are no ragged ends, no diversions to convey the speaker's own sense of a childhood home, or the bitterness or humour felt in poverty. Some phrases read like the author's own comments: 'skim milk . . . was thought a luxury'. There are no dialect words, no grammatical irregularities, no sparks of personal idiosyncrasy. The passage may convince, but, unlike many others in the same book, it does not come alive. One wishes to know, but is provided with no indication of, where the interview has been cut, and what has been put in to sew it up again.

We can turn for a contrast to George Ewart Evans' *Where Beards Wag All*, also about Suffolk villagers, some of them from the same community. This is a book with more direct argument than *Akenfield*, but supported by substantial quotations in which we seem to hear the people themselves talking, even thinking aloud, in their own, very different style, as this man:

It's like this: those young 'uns years ago, I said, well—it's like digging a hole, *I said*, and putting in clay and then putting in a tater on top o' thet. Well, you won't expect much will you? But now with the young 'uns today, it's like digging a hole and putting some manure in afore you plant: you're bound to get some growth ain't you? It will grow won't it? The plant will

grow right well. What I say is the young 'uns today have breakfast afore they set off—a lot of 'em didn't used to have that years ago, and they hev a hot dinner at school and when they come home most of 'em have a fair tea, don't they? *I said*. These young 'uns kinda got the frame. Well, that's it! If you live tidily that'll make the marrow and the marrow makes the boon [bone] and the boon makes the frame.<sup>11</sup>

We have to pause here to listen, accept the difficult rhythm and syntax of his speech, ruminating, working round to the parable image which he has held all the time in store. This quotation certainly requires more adaptation by the reader. But that may be needed, and if so will become generally learnt, as the qualities of speech become more understood.

George Ewart Evans is using artistry in his quotation as much as Ronald Blythe. Probably some hesitations, pauses, or repetitions have been eliminated from the recorded speech, and he has put in punctuation. But he has done this in a way which preserves the texture of the speech. He uses italics to indicate unexpected emphasis, and punctuation to bring the phrases together rather than to separate them. The syntax is accepted, the breaks in the passage left. And occasionally a word is spelt phonetically to suggest the sound of the dialect. Too much phonetic spelling quickly reduces a quotation (from whatever social class) to absurdity, but the odd word to convey a personal idiosyncrasy, or a key tone in a local accent like the Suffolk 'hev' and 'thet' used here, help to make a passage readable as speech without losing any of the force of its meaning.

The need for this kind of care in conveying not only the content of interviews but also the style and words with which they were spoken is essential if the full power of oral history is to be conveyed. Take three examples from American black history. Hortense Powdermaker's important study of the culture of racial segregation in Mississippi was based on exceptionally in-depth interviews, but she did not record them, instead making summary notes after each interview session. Thus for example she contrasted two origin stories from different families. On is an elaborated story from a mixed-race family:

A fifty-year-old woman of the [black] upper middle class shows clearly the marks of refinement often evident in descendants of house slaves. She is a small woman, with light brown skin and long kinky gray hair, who remarks with a laugh that she has such a mixture in her she sometimes doesn't know what she is. Her mother was an octoroon [one eighth white], whose own mother was part Indian and whose father was her white master, of Scotch-Irish blood. The mother was given her freedom by her white father, and taken into his house, where she was brought up with his white daughter. [She] first married an octoroon from a neighbouring plantation and had by him two very light children, with light hair. But he was a slave and was sold away. Later, she married a Negro who had Indian blood, and



the informant is a product of this marriage. Her father was a renter [a bartender] and died when she was three or four years old. The mother then married a carpenter, also a Negro with Indian blood. He too died after time, and the mother supported herself taking in extra-fine washing, such delicate dresses and laces as people would not trust to a regular laundress. The informant herself has never done farm work or cooking. She learned to sew and manicure, and supported herself by this.

By contrast the story of a black family of lost origins is terse and brief:

A black-skinned woman of forty who takes in washing says she was born in Alabama and has no family traditions except hard work in the cotton fields. She was one of nineteen children. When she was three years old, her mother died and her father went away to work. She never saw him after that. Her mother's sisters divided up the children and she was brought up by an aunt. She worked very hard in the fields, never went to school, and cannot write at all.<sup>12</sup>

In short, her failure to record the real words of her interviewees has reduced their fascinating stories about black family ancestors and racial mixing to very drab summaries.

In her time, recording was of course technically more difficult, but nevertheless some major recent studies still take the same approach. Thus the black newspaper reporter Isabel Wilkerson has spent many years collecting the stories of black migrants from the South in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other American cities. Out of 1,200 interviews she finally chose three as the main focus of her book. But also she has semi-fictionalised them, writing their stories in her journalist's style, so that it is not even clear when she quotes them whether they really used these words to her, or she is imagining what they may have said in the past.

Both these studies are based on impressive fieldwork, but they present their characters as lifeless as dolls. Compare this with the vividness with which Beulah Nelson tells Elizabeth Clark-Lewis of one incident, a conflict with an employer before she migrated from the South:

A lady, who was named Miss Addie, and a member of my mother's church—my people all were sanctified—stayed home to have a baby. My mama let me go there and I heard her say, 'Just three days'. . . . And I worked them three days. Why? Mama sent me, and they was paying a quarter [25 cents] a week!

Now, you had to cook the breakfast, you wait on all of them, all the children, and get them ready for school if they had to go to school. Then you wash up all the dishes. Then you had to go and make up all the beds

and pick up all the things behind all the children, and then after that you had to go out behind the house, honey, and pick the garden. And pick what kind of vegetables you got to have. You got to wash them and cook them. And they had three meals a day. They would eat they breakfast, and then twelve o'clock they had to have a big dinner. And then they had supper in the evening.

So she has vividly set the context: now follows the drama:

But they didn't want no nigger to put they hand on their bread. Understand me good now. I set the table up and put the food on the table. But the bread be the last thing. Never bring the bread in until after they say the grace, so the bread would be seeping hot. I wait just as good until they said the grace, and I wouldn't move. Because I would have had to pick up the bread out of the pan . . . and I know she didn't want me to touch it. Right? Well, if she didn't want me to touch it . . . She said to me, 'How long are you going to wait before you bring the bread in here?' I said, 'I'm not even going to bring it in there.' I said, 'You put it in there. You cook it . . . If you don't want me to touch it, you don't need me to bring it in there.' And I didn't bring it in there.

And that's when she got mad . . . She jumped up from the table and she said to me, 'Beulah, you fired! But she didn't fire me—I fired myself . . . I said, 'These two days I been in your house . . . you could be done ate a lot of my spit. I could have done did anything I want to do it, and you wouldn't have never known nothing about it. But just because you could see me if I touch it', I said, 'No, if that's the way it's to be—not me!'<sup>13</sup>

Here the real words not only give us facts, but take us straight to feeling the overpowering, tense atmosphere of race relations in the South.

In transferring speech into print, historians thus need to develop a new kind of literary skill: a skill which allows writing to remain as faithful as possible to both the character and meaning of the original speech. This is not an art normally needed in archival work. But the analogy with documentary quotation in other ways sets a useful standard. It is unfortunately not the usual practice in sociological studies quoting interviews to indicate cuts and other alterations. Historians can, however, insist on the care normal in their own discipline, showing excisions by a dotted line, interpolations by brackets, and so on. A reordering cannot be acceptable if it results in a new meaning, unintended by the speaker. And the creation of semi-fictional informants, by exchanging quotations between them, or dividing two from one, or creating one out of two, must always be, by the standards of scholarship, indefensible. An oral documentary which does this may gain in effect, but it becomes imaginative literature, a different kind of historical evidence.

Finally, especially in the United States, oral historians have an additional standard in their practice. After transcription, typescripts are sent to the informant for correction. This clearly has advantages in picking up simple errors and misspellings of names. It can also result in stimulating new information, and political historians who use the interview method often send transcripts for this purpose. But it has drawbacks, too. Many interviewees find it impossible to resist re-writing the original conversational speech into a conventional prose form. They also may delete sentences and rephrase others to change the impression given from some particular memory. Since American oral historians have tended to regard the transcript rather than the audio recording as the authoritative oral testimony, the process of correction can weaken the authenticity of the oral evidence. For most projects, by contrast, many interviewees would see correcting their transcripts as a worrying imposition. Moreover, when they do see raw uncorrected transcripts, they can be shocked and upset by how they appear to have spoken. Hence for most interviewees it is therefore usually better to write asking only for a few clarifications of confusions, uncertain names, or vital details missing—which will usually be gladly supplied.

## Sorting

Meanwhile, simultaneously with transcription, the sorting of the material for use should be begun. With a large set of interviews—say, over forty—it is advisable to use a computer-assisted programme designed for this, and it is essential if you are working as a team.<sup>14</sup> Some forms of computer analysis, such as counting the frequency of key words, were first used in the 1960s, but many more sophisticated possibilities appeared with the development of special word processing programmes from the 1980s. Nevertheless, the most common use for computer analysis of interviews is still for re-sorting their content. In this respect digitisation has not changed the thematic principles, but made the processes much easier, especially with enhanced finding systems and in the linking of text with audio.

You need to sort the material in at least three different forms. The first should be the transcript as a complete interview as recorded, a series parallel to the audio recordings. Provided you have indexed for this, these whole interviews can then be regrouped as you choose: for example, by place, by social group, or by occupation.

The second form is the interview re-sorted, and divided up between different subject or thematic folders, depending on what use is in mind. If you have stuck fairly consistently to your original research plan, these computer folders may well follow the sequence of the original schedule of questions. Alternatively, especially if your ideas have been changing, it is better to sort according to the sections you intend for writing up your findings. Either way, if a question has been asked, for example, about church attendance, or how people met their husbands or wives, and these are themes which concern you, you can ensure that all

the relevant material is put in the same folder, so that when you come to write it can be quickly found together. This stage in sorting your material is especially crucial in helping to develop your ideas for its interpretation. As Robert Miller remarks, 'the possibilities opened up by the re-sorting mean that the first real *concept work* may take place'.<sup>15</sup>

Lastly, as you listen to the recording or read the transcript, you should look for highlights: passages that convey a vivid experience, or make a key point well, or are strange or funny. It is worth buying a good audio editing programme, so that you can learn this art and create your own highlights in sound. If you are constructing a website, these will be its jewels. They will be equally crucial in print for bringing the message of the material alive. And these highlights can provide one of the key paths to the interpretation of oral history and life story interviews.

# 12

## Interpretation

The evidence has now been collected, sorted, and worked into an accessible form: the sources are at our disposal. But how do we put them together? How do we use them to interpret social and cultural change? How do we make history from them? It would of course have been very unfortunate if we had not thought about these questions earlier. The process of interpretation should be part of thinking on a project right from its conception. Moreover, this initial thinking needs to be both practical and theoretical. It will be particularly necessary to identify the issues on which you want to focus, and explain your practical strategy, if you have to secure funding for your project.

First there are questions such as choice of theme, or of locality, or of a particular person as the focus. Second, from early on we need to be considering the varying theoretical approaches which might be used in your interpretation, such as social theories of class, gender, or ethnic difference; psychological or psychoanalytic interpretations of individual personality; or forms of narrative analysis of memory and identity. Third, from the early interviews onwards you need to be reflecting on what you have been hearing, and how this might lead towards modifying your initial hunches. And unless you have a fixed sample, and especially if your strategy is based on grounded theory, the earlier interviews may result in rethinking the choices you will make for future interviewees.

You will need to make some basic choices, whatever kinds of interpretation you use, about authorship and about the manner and shape of presentation to be used. These should be considered from the beginning, although they can often evolve during a project. Then comes the heart of the matter, interpretation: how do we relate the evidence we have found to wider social patterns and theories of history? How do we construct meaning from life stories and oral history interviews? How might we encourage others in future to interpret our material?

The interpretation of societies, cultures, and histories with oral evidence opens many new possibilities. In the broadest sense, all testimonies normally carry within them a triple potential: to explore and develop new interpretations, to establish or confirm an interpretation of past patterns or change, and to express what it felt like. As a whole, most of the essential skills in judging evidence,

in choosing the telling extract, or in shaping an argument, are much the same as when writing from paper documents. So are many of the choices: between, for example, audiences of other social researchers and historians, or of school-children, an old people's club, local newspaper readers, or television viewers nationally. Oral history does, however, highlight the need for some of these choices, simply because it can be effective in so many different contexts. There are, however, always three basic issues which need to be decided. These are: who is the author or editor, what is the medium to be used, and what form of interpretation or analysis is intended.

### **Interpreting interviews: your own or others**

The question of authorship is two-sided. We strongly believe that carrying out your own interviews, especially at the start, gives you experience which can be crucial in developing your ability to understand more generally how interviews are shaped, and how to interpret them. But time alone constrains the number of interviews you can carry out yourself. Hence it is very common in large projects for the interviewing to be shared. Also, later on you might want to re-use your own interviews from another perspective, or alternatively to encourage another researcher to re-examine your material or make it the basis for an updated re-study. Another possibility is that you find you have developed interpretations which are hard to support from your limited number of interviews. So if another researcher has recorded interviews which cover a good deal of your topic, and would give you a wider base for your own interpretations, why not use them too?<sup>1</sup>

There are now thousands of oral history and life story interviews available, a growing proportion online, so that it is increasingly possible for writers and researchers to use this material for their own independent purposes, with quite different intentions and purposes from those who created it. Social researchers call this 'secondary analysis'. Before the 1960s there was no systematic archiving of such material, which resulted in many serious losses: for example, only a few scraps survive from the outstanding early studies of London's migrant ethnic minority communities. However, American oral history took archiving seriously from the start. Then our own *Edwardians* interviews were archived in the 1970s in a university store room, which drew very many researchers, and resulted in a long list of books and articles—a far larger outcome than we could have ever achieved on our own. This in turn inspired the setting up of National Life Stories at the British Library, which now has the largest oral history archive in Europe. And in 1994 Qualidata (now part of the UK Data Archive) was set up to encourage social researchers to deposit their own fieldwork interviews, along with vital information about the project's context.

How have these developments, along with the sheer mass of material now available, changed attitudes? For historians 'secondary analysis' has always been basic to their craft. They were and still are essentially jackdaws, scavengers,

puzzling over other people's detritus. They are not bothered by ethical issues in re-interpreting archived interviews because this has long been their standard practice—for example with personal letters or diaries—although certainly much more care, and often anonymisation, is needed when they concern living people. It is also obvious that those oral historians who hope to develop a joint interpretation of a life story with the interviewee cannot do this without live direct collaboration with the interviewee, rather than simply through interpreting an archived source.

Many anthropologists and qualitative sociologists, however, seem almost instinctively bonded to their own ethnographic fieldwork notebooks and interviews, feeling that nobody else could interpret them sufficiently well or share the intimate understandings that they have of their informants. Hence they have seen confidentiality as a crucial barrier to archiving. There are of course many exceptions, and a significant number of anthropologists have published edited versions of their field notes. But there was a sharp warning of the potential dangers of publication through the damage done to Bronislaw Malinowski's reputation through the publication of his fieldwork diary with his hostile racist comments on the people he was studying. Jean Jackson recorded sixty-three American anthropologists in the 1980s and concluded that there was a repeated theme in their life stories of lost field notes, which Jackson saw as a form of professional folklore, suggesting that perhaps 'people who lost their notes are better off'. For without your notes you have 'more chance to schematise, to order conceptually . . . free of niggling exceptions, grayish half-truths you may find in your own data'.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately such doubts have not prevented a growing educational and research use of archived interviews, and particularly of large and well-documented collections. Thus the interviews for *The Edwardians* have provided rich sources for many publications, from John Gillis on courting and marriage practices in *For Better, For Worse* (1985) to Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001). Mike Savage's very thoughtful account of *Identities and Social Change in Britain*, and how this has related to social research, is anchored in his reading of the UK Data Archive collections.

The practice has also been taken up by younger researchers. Two have described their experience of 'secondary analysis' in detail. Rosemary Elliot used our transgenerational 'Hundred Families' project for health research, exploring the attitudes to smoking of the generations who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s, and how far they were then aware of the health risks. Interestingly she sees it as an advantage that comments on smoking and descriptions of its social context came spontaneously, rather than as answers to direct questions. April Gallwey wrote a successful PhD thesis on single motherhood which was entirely based on the six thousand interviews of the Millennium Memory Bank. She searched the whole set and found fifty, which she transcribed—which with some of the interviews proved for her a very emotional experience. As these two



accounts both demonstrate, there is always more we might know about the earlier research, but provided that we look at the material in its social and historical context, there is much to be gained through using earlier oral history and life story archived interviews.<sup>3</sup>

### Shared authority

A further issue concerning authorship is the extent to which interviewees might play a part in interpreting their own contributions. We have earlier discussed general legal and ethical issues concerning our obligations to interviewees. With larger projects it is possible to identify some of the most interested interviewees and to discuss some of the emerging interpretations with them, either as a group or individually. With a smaller number or a single life story co-operation between researcher and interviewee can be taken much further towards joint authorship.

It is anthropologists who have taken the lead in this approach, to the extent that it has sometimes been a tacit practice: you would not immediately realise that *I, Rigoberta Menchu* started with an anthropologist's life story recording in Paris. But a much more open account of such co-operation has been given by Pat Caplan. Her book *African Voices, African Lives* tells the story of a Tanzanian islander, Mohammed, her close friend, whom she had known for thirty years. She uses the diaries he kept for her earlier on, his letters to her, and the life story interview which she recently recorded with him. All these are set out separately, along with her questions, and also her comments for the book itself. But particularly strikingly, she also includes at the start a recording of their discussion about the purpose of the book and how they intend to share the royalties, followed by his prayer for her; while at the end there is no conclusion—'a tidy ending would be spurious'—but instead, another prayer from Mohammed. While perhaps over-inhibiting the interpretative voice of the anthropologist, Caplan's approach certainly reveals the interaction between researcher and narrator exceptionally fully.<sup>4</sup>

Michael Frisch has led a parallel search among oral historians for—as he entitled his first book on the theme—*A Shared Authority*. He argues that 'authority is shared, it's a fact, not a choice', and discusses this in a range of contexts, including television, digital media, and preparing transcripts for publication. He shows, in fact, how difficult it is to give interviewees the space to express what they feel and mean. A good example, a difficulty with which many oral historians will be familiar, is how far to cut out filler phrases and regularise or correct the language of transcripts: 'To encounter the narratives of common people or the working class only in the somewhat tortuous prose of "faithful" transcription ("So I wuz jes', uh, y'know, talkin' t'the foreman, uh, when, y'know . . .") is to magnify precisely the class distance it is one of the promises of oral history to narrow'.<sup>5</sup>

A stimulating account of both the rewards and trials of shared authority in a community study is Stacey Zembrzycki's *According to Baba: A Collaborative Oral*

*History of Sudbury's Ukrainian Community* (2014). After experiencing difficulties in finding willing interviewees, Stacey decided to enlist the help of her own grandmother, Baba, who threw herself into the project with great enthusiasm, using her well-established contacts to arrange over seventy interviews, many of which they conducted jointly. Baba's contribution provided the 'historical backbone' of the study. Stacey writes that 'our work together was deeply collaborative, filled with trials and rewards'. The trials arose from Baba's wish to impose her own view of the history of the Ukrainian community, choosing interviewees who shared her perspective, and greatly annoying Stacey by constant interruptions during interviews and blocking when the interviewee wanted to talk about a theme which to Baba did not seem relevant. For example, Baba wanted to hear about the solidarities in the community rather than the divisions, but Stacey remembered from her own childhood how there had been ethnic taunting and conflicts between the Ukrainian churches and secular trade unions. This is a witty and telling exploration of both the rewards and the difficulties of shared authority.<sup>6</sup>

More recently some sociologists have proposed other approaches, more theoretical and psychologised, for such co-operative co-authorship. Thus Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson advise researchers when analysing interviews to draw on their own experiences, and to bring in perspectives from clinical psychoanalysis. Similarly Robert Atkinson advises that both researcher and interviewee should be reflecting on the life story recorded. The researcher should help the interviewee 'to pull out its inherent meaning', asking questions such as 'What does your story mean to you?' or suggesting possible links with classic world myths. The researcher also needs to work on 'making meaning from the narrative', drawing on his or her own personal consciousness and experience. 'Approaching another's life story is a bit like entering into a mentoring relationship. You might ask yourself, . . . "What does *this* life story mean to me from the perspective of my own life experience?"' He observes that such a 'complicated transference-countertransference type of connection . . . could subtly or directly affect the interpretation of the story'. Which does seem a fair warning of the dangers of a professional emotional over-involvement in another person's life story.<sup>7</sup>

Because the oral historian or social researcher usually has more intellectually invested in the outcome, and has professional authority as support, in most instances it is hard to imagine a truly balanced shared authority. Several oral historians have written detailed descriptions of the process by which they reached mutually acceptable ways of presenting the lives of interviewees. In most cases this required several exchanges of drafts until the interviewee felt 'composure' had been achieved, an account with which they felt comfortable. Thus Alastair Thomson followed his overview book on migration to Australia with *Moving Stories*, a more intimate study for which he chose four women migrants. The women corrected many of the facts, but as far as the overall interpretation went,

this came from him, and 'they have rarely challenged my interpretation of their lives'.<sup>8</sup>

Lorraine Sitzia had more difficulties in editing the life story of Arthur Thickett, a soldier who had later become a Communist activist and pacifist. One fundamental problem was to create a coherent story from the different phases of Arthur's life. She describes how the story evolved in a process which at times was 'difficult and frustrating', and took six years between the interview and publication. Lastly, Wendy Rickard has worked jointly with sex workers in correcting and editing their interviews and deciding whether they should be closed or open. She points out that with these particular interviewees, efforts to share authority posed risks for both narrators and herself of arrest and prosecution.<sup>9</sup> Less dramatically, we can say that the question of authorship or editorship arises naturally from the origin of oral evidence in the co-operation of an interview—and sometimes also can be recognised in the carrying out of fieldwork by a group. For a school project, or a community oral history, the collective work in putting together oral material may be as valuable an experience as the recording itself. In a community project, a group of old people may record each other's reminiscences, discuss them together, decide what to choose for publication, correct and elaborate the scripts, and so on. In a school project, the co-operation will be more likely over production: choice of the best extracts, design, and printing. The recognition of all those who contributed through joint editorship will be an important form of symbolic validation.

### **The medium and the audience**

The second fundamental and linked choice is of the medium and the audience. To some extent, the techniques and conventions of particular media may shape and limit the message which can be conveyed. This is usually least problematic with text forms—books or booklets, newspaper or journal articles—which can be made to appeal to a great variety of audiences, ranging from local people in a community to university researchers or students, or the general public. Books have special advantages. They are tangible and easy to handle, and they are kept permanently in national libraries, in contrast to the shifting impermanence of digital media. Community oral history books often sell out rapidly and become treasured by locals. In one small village of around a thousand houses where I worked recently, the oral history booklet we published had sold six hundred copies within two months—much more than the DVD from the same project. Community books and oral histories aimed at the general public are usually basically collections of testimonies with very little comment from the oral historian. But with careful editing and sequencing it is still possible to tell a strong story using primarily testimonies—as Studs Terkel's masterly books show so well.

For researchers, on the other hand, books offer the space to develop sustained arguments backed by evidence. This has been crucial to the development of

major re-interpretations of history. But sadly, as Linda Shopes has commented in a salutary warning, there are too many instances in which researchers give little space to quotations from their interviews, and use over-elaborate theories and jargonistic language, so that they smother the oral histories which are 'the heart of our work'. 'When theory overtakes rather than informs these stories, when we subject them to the scholar's overriding inclination to "tell" more than "show", we're missing opportunities to join the power of narrators' stories to a broader social purpose'.<sup>10</sup>

With the development of multi-media and digitisation from the 1990s onwards, challenging new opportunities have opened up for oral historians. As Douglas Boyd and Mary Larson put it in their valuable account *Oral History and Digital Memories* (2014), 'digital technologies now offer enormous opportunities for collecting, curating and disseminating interviews and projects'. There have been two key changes. Firstly, digitisation has broken the barrier between audio and text, so that both can be used at the same time within the same system. Secondly, the internet now offers a vast new space for storing and presenting interviews, whether through channels such as YouTube or SoundCloud, or as independent websites. Your interviews can be transmitted in whole or in extract, with or without photos and text. Steven High argues that 'oral historians have been so focused on the making of the interview that they have spent remarkably little time thinking about what to do with the audio or video recordings once they are made. There are hundreds of thousands of recorded interviews sitting in archival drawers, on computer hard-drives or on library bookshelves that have never been listened to'. So High put digitisation at the centre of his outstanding Montreal Life Stories project, not only creating new software for their Stories Matter website, 'a more humanistic database that retains the life story context', but also giving a central role to digital storytelling as an outcome. He argues that 'what bound the project together was our shared oral history and digital storytelling methodology'.<sup>11</sup>

Oral historians long had a special power at their elbows which too often they forget. 'The voice is one of our most powerful instruments, lying at the heart of the communication process. It belongs to both the body and the mind', Ann Karpf writes. 'It's a superb guide to fear and power, anxiety and subservience, to another person's vitality and authenticity as well as our own . . . Throughout our lives we make decisions, often unwittingly, on the basis of the sound of a person's voice: lovers as well as political candidates get selected for vocal reasons . . . We use our voice to repel and attract, encourage or undermine. As animals with smell, so are humans with voices'.<sup>12</sup>

As an oral historian, you can respond to this challenge. Your interviews might be openly available online if you deposit them with an archive with an open door policy. Or extracts from them may be used in radio programmes which are similarly available on the internet. Boyd, a Kentucky folklorist and archivist, observes the increased demand for archived radio—'I just want to click and

listen'. For him digitisation has offered a way out of the crisis of analogue oral history, which by the 1990s had built up collections with thousands of archived interviews which were untranscribed and impractical to access. His solution is unedited open online access to interviews, helped only by a synopsis and keywords—he sees the creation of audio extracts or tagging to pinpoint themes as a 'boutique approach' too expensive for standard archiving.<sup>13</sup>

In other ways, too, digitisation can help you to fulfil long-standing aims. Thus, in direct contrast to working with texts, you can build your presentations around the voices of your interviewees. You can give talks which illustrate your arguments through audio extracts which you have edited from your interviews. But always, if possible, check well before the talk that the audio system in the venue is functioning satisfactorily. Typically it is best to keep the extracts within one to four minutes in length, and to provide transcripts for the audience, projected while the voices are speaking. This can be done either through two parallel CDs/USBs (which is safer in an untried venue where the audio system may be elementary), or alternatively through a linked PowerPoint. Talks of this kind can be highly successful, appealing to a whole range of audiences.

In principle it is possible to publish a CD along with a book, although this has been a surprisingly rare practice. Indeed, it is becoming still rarer, because librarians dislike mixed media, and publishers find it a practical nuisance. But another use of oral history which is designed for the general public, and has become increasingly popular, is for audio guides and audio tours of buildings, exhibitions, or local environments. Thus in a country house you may be able to hear the voices of the former landowning family or retired servants; while at the Lucien Freud exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery you could listen to the memories of some of his friends and family who sat for him as nudes.

A much more complex possibility for using recordings is the radio broadcast. There is a whole range of possibilities here, from the raw material itself in an autobiographical interview to the illustrated academic talk. Some of these forms can also be very effectively used for websites, either through the original programme, or developed independently. For example, one of the powerful uses for the brief interview material collected through digital storytelling is a collage of extracts on a website.

Broadcasting has also led the development of a very special art of conveying scenes and messages in sound. Original recordings can be not merely clarified by cutting out hesitations and pauses, but heightened by rearrangements of words. Some of this amounts to a tampering with evidence which a historian ought not to accept, but the fine editing which becomes possible with digital resources can certainly make quotation briefer and more effective. The sound can be varied by adding background sounds or music. A programme also has to be built around a strong narrative, but at the same time the pace will fluctuate between, at one extreme, the long anecdote, and at the other, the brief conclusive one-line quip. Sound can also make some clues superfluous, so that a series of extracts

in different regional or class accents can be directly juxtaposed. Indeed, a whole programme can be designed as a collage of sound, with very little or no connecting narrative at all. In this way a historical picture of a community can be built up, such as a fishing town, interweaving the sounds of the herring gulls and the auctioneers at the quay with old people's accounts of how the men caught fish, how the women gutted it and mended nets, stories, the singing in the pubs, hymns, and preaching in church. Programmes can be built around a very few people, or many; and all sorts of themes are possible—for example, a disappearing world like the pre-electronic steelmakers, the hopes and dreams and myths of an Andean Indian mountain community, the sounds of a market, the story of a scientific discovery, or how we got it wrong in idealising past village life.

When pictures are added to sound, as with film, video, or television, there is a radical shift not in potential themes but in how they can be conveyed. With television, there is much more competition for time than with radio, and also we speak much more slowly than we read, so that typically messages have to be compressed and radically simplified. Oral historians have been slow to incorporate the visual, partly because it makes much higher technical demands to be at all successful, and therefore too often leaves them feeling at the mercy of professionals who insist on subtly changing their message. Another problem may be that the range of possible informants shifts: the articulate witness whose body language jars may have to be dropped for another, who says much less, but with a fascinating expression. Because the visual effects tend to dominate, the ideal solution is to film the whole theme professionally on location, so that the backgrounds and the angles on the speakers become much more varied.

Most oral history programmes, however, are made of 'talking heads', varied only by close-ups. Furthermore, fine cutting is not possible in an interview unless a separate visual sequence, such as an extract from old film, is introduced, because otherwise there is likely to be a disconcerting jump in the interviewee's physical position at each cut. But a separate visual sequence is distracting, conveying its own meanings. These technical issues make it harder for television to sustain a sharp argument: thus Michael Frisch criticised the major American series *Vietnam: A Television History* for its 'tendency to defuse specific political analysis in favor of a more general, vaguely tragic view of the war'.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, film and television are extremely powerful forms of historical presentation, drawing mass audiences. Oral historians are slowly coming to terms with potential they are still mostly missing through concentrating too much on pure sound and text. There is undoubtedly a growing role for local video and DVDs, whether filmed by the original project workers or—as will usually produce higher-quality results—filmed by professionals brought in at the last stage of the project, re-filming some of the most interesting and articulate project interviewees in their homes, and also characteristic local scenes—streets, shops, boats, and so on. There is no doubt that seeing the informants themselves, their expressions and gestures and body postures, along with old

photographs of their families, homes, and workplaces, does bring a significant added dimension of historical immediacy.

The digital revolution has brought together many new mixed forms of communication on the internet, which allows us to combine audio interviews—in full or through extracts, photos, video extracts, and textual project descriptions—with background information and transcripts. Cumulatively, this means that oral history interviews are becoming easily accessible on a vast scale. But this is not a shortcut to easy interpretation. As Michael Frisch has asked, ‘If we are not sure how to meaningfully explore the content of ten interviews, or fifty, how meaningful can it be to make 150,000 accessible?’ Websites typically present resources, rather than arguments for particular interpretations.<sup>15</sup>

For oral history projects, the most attractive of these possibilities is to create a website as the project’s archive and information home page. This can be either static, created simply to provide information about the project and access to its interviews, or interactive, allowing users to comment and add material. For most projects websites are not suitable as long-term archives, because they need sustained maintenance and adaptation to the digital technology of the future. Also, a minority of interviewees—or their families—may be distressed by having their personal stories available on the worldwide web, particularly if they have talked frankly about other close relatives or about their own intimate sexuality. Sherna Berger Gluck has also encountered problems with people who have radically changed their political views. Nevertheless, websites can be very attractive ways of publicising a project’s activities.<sup>16</sup>

Especially for smaller projects, rather than creating your own website, it is worth looking for an existing website, which might give you a section of space. And probably the easiest way to establish an internet presence is through setting up a network with Facebook. You can also create interest through posting short interview extracts on YouTube. But Facebook and YouTube are not suitable media for long-term preservation.

### **Interpreting single life stories or groups**

There is one last consideration before we discuss interpretation itself. This is whether to analyse and interpret a whole set of interviews, or a group of them, or to focus on a single life story. The choice here is whether to think initially in terms of social or biographical forms of interpretation. Oral evidence, because it takes the form of life stories, brings to the surface a dilemma which underlies any social or historical interpretation. The individual life is the actual vehicle of experience. Moreover, the evidence in each life story can only be fully understood as part of the whole life. But to make generalisation possible, we must wrench the evidence on each issue from a whole series of interviews, re-assembling it to view it from a new angle, as if horizontally rather than vertically; and in doing so, place a new meaning on it. We are thus faced with an essential but painful choice.



There are broadly five ways in which oral history can be put together. The first is the single life story narrative. For an informant with a rich memory it may well seem that no other choice can do the material full justice. Nor need a single life narrative present just one individual biography. Indeed most interviews are not just about the informant: 'far from dealing only with ourselves when we tell about the past, we incorporate the experiences of a multitude of others'.<sup>17</sup> And in outstanding cases a single interview can be used to convey the history of a whole class or community, or become a thread around which to reconstruct a highly complex series of events. Thus the autobiography of Nate Shaw in *All God's Dangers* is powerful just because it stands for the wider experience of the black people of the southern United States. Similarly, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* speaks for the persecuted peasantry of Guatemala. A story of such power asks for no more than a brief explanation of its context. Others, especially if intended to be read as in some sense typical, will require a much fuller introductory discussion and interpretation if they are to reach beyond the anecdotal. An outstanding recent example is Daniel James' *Doña María's Story* about an Argentinian woman who was a factory worker and Peronist political activist.

It is also possible to apply this approach to a very small group of life stories around a common theme, as Alistair Thomson has done with four women migrants to Australia (taken from his larger study) in *Moving Stories*. Mary Chamberlain has used contrasted families or pairs of individuals in her imaginative writing on Caribbean culture, as in *Family Life in the Diaspora*. But while case studies can be effectively used to develop new interpretations, they may turn out to be misleading when they are not grounded in wider evidence. Some life story sociologists have advocated a cautious building-up of the interpretation through a series of cases, each explored 'in great detail' and in their broader context.<sup>18</sup>

The second form is a collection of stories. Since none of these need be separately as rich or complete as a single narrative, this is a better way of presenting more typical life history material. It also allows the stories to be used much more easily in constructing a broader historical interpretation, by grouping them—as a whole or fragmented—around common themes. Thus Oscar Lewis explores the family life of the Mexican city poor in *The Children of Sanchez*, by taking for one family the different accounts of parents and children and bringing them together into a single multidimensional picture. In *Wild Swans* Jung Chang traces the political and social experiences of her family in China, including the pain and humiliations of the Cultural Revolution, over three generations.

On a larger scale, a group of lives may be used to portray a whole community: a village, as in *Akenfield*, or a town, as in *Speak for England*. Or the collection may focus upon a single social group or theme, like *Fenwomen*, or *Working*, or *Blood of Spain* on the Spanish Civil War. Potential themes are almost infinite, national or local, from nuns to trade unionists to fishermen to musicians. The project can be organised as a collection of whole lives, or stories about

incidents, or as a thematic montage of extracts: *Blood of Spain* interweaves all three. And here again the character of the introduction will also help to shape the impact of the stories.

The third form is narrative analysis. This is most characteristically of a single interview, but may also be carried out with a group of interviews. *Doña María's Story* is partly presented in this form. Otherwise, although widely used by researchers in one form or another, and influential, this form has not so far produced any classic oral history life stories. This is partly because many of the forms are very technical and most likely to appeal to specialists. The focus of this approach is on the interview itself as an oral text, and what can be learnt from its language, its themes and repetitions, and its silences. It is above all concerned with how the narrator experienced, remembered, and retold his or her life story, and what light this may throw on the consciousness of the wider society. It does not normally aim to evaluate the typicality of the narrator or his or her experiences.

The fourth form is that of the reconstructive cross-analysis: the oral evidence is treated as a quarry from which to construct an argument about patterns of behaviour or events in the past. It is of course possible within one book to combine analysis with the presentation of fuller life stories. In my own *The Edwardians*, a series of family portraits, chosen to represent the varied social classes and regions of Britain, is interwoven between the more directly analytical chapters. But wherever the prime aim becomes analysis, the overall shape can no longer be governed by the life story form of the evidence, but must emerge from the inner logic of the argument. This will normally require much briefer quotations, with evidence from one interview compared with that from another, and combined with evidence from other types of source material. While with the first three forms the difficulty is to make any general argument, with cross-analysis the danger is to lose the voices of the interviewees, leaving them relegated to mere footnotes. Some historians using multiple sources scarcely offer any direct quotations at all. Argument and cross-analysis are clearly essential for any systematic development of the interpretation of history. On the other hand, the loss in this form of presentation is equally clear. Because of this, these basic forms are not so much exclusive alternatives as complementary, and in many cases the same project needs to be brought out in more than one of them: in different types of publication, or in different media.

There is a final form, compellingly described by Portelli, which is based on 'an intense use of montage and bricolage'. He sees this as a form of 'polyphony and dialogue. The historian ostensibly speaks as little as possible—providing connections, briefly suggesting ways of reading—yet is very much in control', organising fragmented extracts from the voices to create a new overall pattern around the theme. He views this model as inspired primarily by cinema and literature—and capable of appealing to wide audiences.<sup>19</sup>

In any of these forms, writing a book which uses oral evidence, either alone or with other sources, does not in principle demand many particular skills beyond those needed for any other social or historical writing. You will need to create a system for citing your interviews. You also need to check that you have got your quotations correct, as you would citations from written sources. Oral evidence can also be evaluated, counted, compared, and cited along with the other material. It is no more difficult, and no easier. But in some ways it is a different kind of experience. As you write, you are aware of the people with whom you talked; you hesitate to give meanings to their words which they would wish to reject. Humanly and socially, this is a proper caution. In writing, too, you strongly wish to share with others the insights and vividness of the life stories which have held your own imagination. Moreover, this is material which you have not just discovered, but in one sense helped to create, and is thus quite different from another document.

This is why an oral historian will always feel a specially strong tension between biography and cross-analysis. But this is a tension which rests on the strength of oral history. The elegance of historical generalisation, of sociological theory, flies high above the ordinary life experience in which oral history is rooted. The tension which the oral historian feels is that of the mainspring: between history and social science and real life.

## Evaluation

Whatever form you have chosen, you will need to evaluate your interviews in three ways: as texts, as types of content, and as evidence. Every interview needs to be read through as a text, so that you can listen to what it says, pick up its overall meanings, its repeating comments and images, and so that you can watch for and note the well-told story or telling phrase. Secondly, for any purpose, you will need to disentangle different types of content in the interview, contrasting the parts which are more 'objective' with those which are primarily 'subjective': in particular, to distinguish information about the biographical life path (birth, education, marriage, work, and so on), from expressions of how that life experience felt, and also from more general comments on personal life and social change. Thirdly, you also need to evaluate your interview as source material in terms of reliability. This matters even if you are only concerned with how people remember rather than how the past was, because you will need to know to what extent their memories are censored or mythologised.

In this evaluation of reliability, first, each interview needs to be assessed for internal consistency. It must be read as a whole. If an informant has a tendency to mythologise or to produce stereotyped generalisations, this will recur throughout an interview. The stories in it may then be taken as symbolic evidence of attitudes, but not as reliable in factual detail as they might be with another informant. Similarly, suppression of information can be revealed by a repeated avoidance of discussion of a particular area (such as the war years), or

through unresolved contradictions of detail (such as the date of marriage, and the birth date and later age of a first child, who was conceived before marriage). Any extensive suppression or invention will produce extremely obvious inconsistencies, contradictions, and anachronisms. On the other hand, some inconsistencies are quite normal. It is very common to find a conflict between the general values which are believed true of the past and the more precise record of day-to-day life; but this contradiction can be in itself highly revealing, for it may represent one of the dynamics of social change.

On many points a cross-check can be made with other sources. This can of course be a cumulative process as material is gathered in: a series of interviews from the same locality will provide numerous factual cross-checks between each other. Details can similarly be compared with manuscript and printed sources. 'Any evidence', as Jan Vansina puts it, 'written or oral, which goes back to one source should be regarded as on probation; corroboration for it must be sought'.<sup>20</sup> This dictum may, however, be of more general relevance to oral tradition handed down over several generations than to direct life story evidence. Where there are discrepancies between written and oral evidence, it does not follow that one account is necessarily more reliable than another.

The interview may reveal the truth behind the official record. This is especially true of evidence about living under Stalinist Communism, or dictatorships, or in very corrupt societies. Or the divergence may represent two perfectly valid accounts from different standpoints, which together provide vital clues towards the true interpretation. Very often, indeed, while oral evidence which can be directly confirmed proves to be of merely illustrative value, it is fresh but unconfirmed evidence which points the way towards a new interpretation. Indeed, much oral evidence, springing from direct personal experience—like an account of domestic life in a particular family—is valuable precisely because it could come from no other source. It is inherently unique. Of course, its authenticity can be weighed. It cannot be confirmed, but it can be assessed.

Lastly, the evidence can be evaluated by placing it in a wider context. Thus a folklorist or literary scholar might be able to pick out stories which are versions of known tales, distinguishing the elements in them which are unaltered and those which are new. Similarly an experienced historian will already have learnt enough from contemporary sources about the time, place, and social class from which an interviewee comes, to know, even if a specific detail is unconfirmable, whether as a whole the words ring true, and the extent to which it may incorporate attitudes and experiences common at the time. General absence of reliable detail, anachronistic attitudes, and incongruous linguistic phrasing will all be obvious enough.

At this point, the forms of analysis begin to divide, depending on whether our approach is based on the narrative or reconstructive mode. Let us consider them in turn.

## Narrative analysis

The narrative mode is in fact a cluster of perspectives, some much more specific than others, and with important differences in assumptions and method, ranging from the broad brush of traditional criticism to the tight disciplines of narrative analysis.

In the most straightforward approach, the historian may seek to understand an interview in the sensitive, humanistic manner of the traditional literary critic who interprets the meanings intended by the author, often in a confused and contradictory text, from all the clues in it which seem helpful. Thus Ron Grele contrasts two interviews, each with a working-class Jewish New Yorker from the tailoring trade. Despite their similar backgrounds, they present history in fundamentally different ways. For Mel Dubin, an immigrant's son born in the city, skilled worker and union organiser, history is an uphill struggle for progress, chronological, and despite its setbacks, logical. In each dimension of his account—his personal story, the neighbourhood, the union, the garment industry—he constructs the same pattern of rise and decline, and gives the same explanation, the disappearance of the skilled immigrant Jewish and Italian tailors of earlier decades: just the skills on which Mel's own life was built. Mel's history, constructed from both direct experience and knowledge of the past, and also with the help of significant omissions and exaggerations, is a historical myth of progress, 'which functions in very particular ways to give a dynamic to the tale, and leads inevitably to certain very real conclusions about the nature of the world of the garment industry today'.

Bella Pincus, on the other hand, also a militant, was herself an immigrant, coming to the city as a teenager from a village in Russian Poland; she worked before marriage as a semi-skilled machine operator, and returned again to work as a widow. Bella does not present history as the logic of change, but as a series of dramatic episodes, all exhibiting the same moral lesson of struggle: 'It's always the same. Ever since the world is it's rich and poor, struggling and well off. That's how it is'. It is indeed closer to her own history. And she tells it with the constant poetic use of paired images. For example, she describes her first impressions of New York in terms of the open-top buses, the flat roofs of the houses, and the washing in the street, in contrast with the closed buses, pitched closed roofs, and hidden washing of her Russian childhood: symbols which also give the sense of openness she felt in her own life when she was a young girl in New York, compared to her life in Russia, and to her life now.

Thus in both of these life stories it is not only through the facts and opinions given, but perhaps still more through the imaginative and narrative skills with which they are put together, that we can perceive the speakers' deeper historical consciousness. This is all the more striking since they had to fight to be heard in the interview, returning 'again and again to the main thrust of his or her story,

despite the sometimes strained efforts of the interviewers to control the situation and to divert them to other questions'. The need to 'listen to their voices', both in the interview and afterwards, is here put conclusively.<sup>21</sup>

This humanistic approach to interpreting life stories has become very widely used since the 1990s. One outstanding example is Daniel James' *Doña María's Life Story*. James presents the interview transcript clearly separated from his interpretations, in which he traces how Doña María, an Argentinian meat factory worker, rebelled against her childhood Catholicism and became a Peronist trade union activist. He situates her memories within both national and local historical contexts. He shows how her testimony breaks chronology, alternating description, argument, and exhortation in a zigzag pattern, and he identifies her key theme as a search for a better life, framed within the social activism of her time rather than individual social mobility.

A key point (which some scholars call 'intertextuality') is to watch for sources for the interviewee's images and attitudes in other social documents of the period, such as in the church or politics or trade unionism. A similar approach has been used by many oral historians with a group of interviewees. The reverse side is to spot what is being missed out. This can be glaringly obvious: for example, a man who talks happily about his childhood and parents, but explicitly refuses to talk about his life with an ex-wife.

More subtly, Leonore Layman observes from her interviews with Australian power workers how they were reluctant to talk about workplace behaviour which conflicted with their desired public memory of their occupation—such as playing games and joking or doing private jobs while at the power station.<sup>22</sup> In *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba*, Carrie Hamilton looks at both the text and what is missing. She picks out a number of her interviewees and examines longish extracts from their transcripts, discussing how they related to her as interviewer, what they say, what they hide, and how this relates to their fuller life stories.

This is an equally good approach for identifying the images in interviews which alert us to the presence of *The Myths We Live By*: the everlastingly long hot summers of a golden childhood, the angelic devotion of a mother, the witch-like evil of a stepmother, the ogish bullying of an employer, and so on. Thus Vieda Skultans finds that elderly Latvians, whose social world was first destroyed by the Soviet invasion of 1940 and then again by the collapse of Communism in 1991, look back on their childhoods as sensually miraculous. One older woman says of herself, 'we lived as if in a fairy tale'. She remembers the market as full of southern fruits: 'there were such beautiful cherries with such a miraculous taste'. The nearby fields were also abundant with 'wonderfully scented' meadow flowers. And above all she recalls the shrub roses in her grandmother's garden as 'heavily scented'. As her mother put it to her, 'You were born in the rose era'. Such images stand out very clearly: to spot them you do not need a special technique, but simply to be on the watch.<sup>23</sup>

Seeking to identify myths and fantasies in personal memories leads us towards psychological and psychoanalytical perspectives on life story narratives. There is a particularly notable ancestry here through the case study approach of Freud himself, as well as the more recent flourishing of illness narratives. Some of the early American anthropological life stories—such as Leo Simmons' *Sun Chief*—included a psychological perspective, focused mainly on sexuality. With oral history, two pioneering examples are Ronald Fraser's *In Search of a Past* and Luisa Passerini's *Autobiography of a Generation*. Both drew on their personal experiences of psychoanalysis, and Passerini includes a whole section taken from her own diary of her sessions with the analyst.

From another perspective, in his *Masculinity and the British Organization Man*, Michael Roper interprets his relationship with older industrialists in psychic terms, suggesting how they instinctively wanted to take on the role of his mentor. But more generally Roper feels there has been too little linking of wider cultures with individual psychology through exploring how the experience of differing family relationships can shape personality development.<sup>24</sup> Certainly this has not been a common mode in recent oral history work. One difficulty has been the focus of much psychoanalysis on infancy, too often beyond later memory: Fraser is unusual in his vivid memories of his potty training. For this reason other psychic approaches (such as the family therapy systems theory) might prove more workable for oral historians. A further drawback is that an in-depth psychic interview may imply a greater degree of intimate exposure than very many oral history interviewees would feel acceptable.

A newer and more technical approach is to evaluate an interview in terms of genre, which can throw light both on how the story is told, and how the form in which it is told may shape its contents. Genre is a long-standing form of literary analysis. From the 1970s it became increasingly used in studies of popular culture, and also by Africanists such as Ruth Finnegan researching on oral literature. But it was the call by Elizabeth Tonkin for us to study Western oral genres—jokes, 'sob-stories', radio announcers, ghost stories, TV comedy, pub stories, the psychoanalytical confession, as well as forms of interview—which generated the recent volume on *Narrative and Genre*. As the contributors there show, it is clear that oral interviews may incorporate other genres, most notably proverbs, jokes and anecdotes, family stories, sexual stories, (mainly men's) war stories, or (mainly women's) hospital stories. These genres within oral interviews need to be identified and much more closely studied. It is also possible for written forms to draw on oral genres; and in terms of content the differences between the oral and the written may also reflect not only the form but also the degree of confidence established in a particular interview. Beyond this, as Alessandro Portelli observes, oral interviews not only may contain other genres, they are a special genre which it is our task to understand: 'The life story as a full, coherent oral narrative does not exist in nature; it is a synthetic product of social science—but no less precious for that'.<sup>25</sup>



There are now some suggestive studies of the oral telling of war stories, sexual stories, and medical stories.<sup>26</sup> There is still, however, nothing in English to emulate the sustained work of Philippe Lejeune on forms of autobiography in France. He has evaluated and compared a whole series of different genres including the autobiography in the third person, the radio interview, the '*document vécu*', and the oral history interview. He is particularly illuminating in his discussion of the modern '*document vécu*': the candid autobiography 'from the horse's mouth', which reveals the hidden story of a prison or hospital, a murder or a sexual scandal, war or resistance, or simply the unknown lives of ordinary people like peasants or fishermen, which French publishers have brought out in series with titles such as '*Témoignages*', '*Elles-mêmes*', or '*En direct*'. He shows how these are shaped partly by opposition to other forms: the nurse's own experience, for example, is an answer to romantic hospital novels with doctors as the heroes—the men in white—and also to the official literature of her own profession. More generally, they are assumed to contrast with the self-conscious literary autobiography, and presented as direct, readable, even artless: but in practice they repeatedly use the same devices, such as the present tense, the diary form, and direct dialogue, and are organised dramatically as a clear story told through a series of scenes. Tantalisingly, Lejeune fails to follow this through with an equivalent analysis of the forms and devices found in oral history interviews, a challenge that therefore remains open.<sup>27</sup>

A fundamental issue which needs to be much more explored is the extent to which genre shapes what can be told. Luisa Passerini found among the Turinese workers whom she interviewed that the majority spoke of themselves as fated: 'born socialists', born rebels, born to poverty, and so on. She sees these messages, however, as often not consciously intended, but reflections of the ideas in an earlier, archaic popular culture surviving in spoken language: as for instance with the woman who explains her childhood pranks, her marriage without the permission of her parents, and her insistence on being a working wife, by saying 'I had the devil in me'. Passerini contrasts such interviews with a minority—mostly men—who portrayed their lives in terms of choice, decision, acquiring skills, searching, and sacrifice. Interestingly, however, these too drew on a historical genre. Paradoxically she found that not only some active Catholics but also socialist militants adopted a traditional form of life story similar to that used for saints, with a stage of 'seeing the light', and some of them even referred to this 'self-hagiography' as 'my confession'.<sup>28</sup>

The influence of genre is especially suggested by a comparison made by Stefan Bohman of diaries, written memoirs, and interviews from the same Swedish working men. He found the diaries, small printed pocket-books crammed with tiny writing, still traditional journals of events, mainly about the weather and work: none took up the form of the private reflective diary. Memoirs and interviews were more alike, using the same stories and even phrases, but with important differences too. The written memoirs focused on early life, and they

used a more public, abstract language. Thus one man writes: 'My father died in Stockholm on 2nd August 1933. He died in extreme poverty after a long illness, patiently borne. What can I have done to deserve such suffering he said—and poor Mother'. He even uses the stock phrase of public memorial announcements, 'after a long illness patiently borne'. His account in the interview is much more personal and detailed—and as a result, significantly different in what it conveys:

Yes, he died at home. I came home one day the last year, I came home when I was out of work. He was lying there on an iron bedstead. We were incredibly poor. It was in the afternoon, three or four o'clock. I saw there was blood and a bloodstained handkerchief on a chair by the bed . . . He'd taken a razorblade and cut both his wrists, hacked at them. But he hardly bled at all, he was so thin. He thought he was a burden on the family.

'What have I done to deserve to suffer like this?' he said.

What he really wants to convey is trapped in writing in the conventions of the style which he believes appropriate for a public memoir. The interview gives the same information in quite a different manner, with much more personal feeling.<sup>29</sup>

A parallel approach is to look for the often half-conscious meanings which can be discerned in the formal qualities of language itself. The general contrasts between oral and written forms are in themselves striking. Written language is grammatically elaborate, linear, spare, objective, and analytical in manner, precise yet abundantly rich in vocabulary. Speech on the other hand is usually grammatically primitive, full of redundancies and back-loops, empathetic and subjective, tentative, repeatedly returning to the same words and catchphrases. There are parallel contrasts between public and private forms of writing and speaking. But these contrasts are not absolute: there are marked differences between individuals in vocabulary and grammar, tone and accent, which reflect regional origin and education, social class and gender.

William Labov's pioneering formal structural analyses of storytelling by urban black Americans first brought out their technical artistic sophistication, and very interesting contrasts have been shown between manners of talking in almost adjacent white and black settlements in the South. Sometimes more informal analyses can spot symbolic implications in such language structures. Thus Stephen High found that Canadians who had formerly worked in a now closed mill in Ontario spoke of the mill itself 'as an actor' which had dominated their lives. Several narrators spoke of the time when 'the mill' called to offer them a job. 'My mother told me, "The mill called"', remembered Raymond Marcoux. Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame first observed in recording migration stories with ordinary French men and women how the men were more likely to use the direct, active, subjective mode, the 'I', asserting themselves as actors, while

the women more often used the indirect, reflective 'we' or 'one'. And choices of particular key words, metaphors and catch-phrases, for instance when conveying moral attitudes, will again vary, both between speakers and with the same speaker in different contexts, and can be equally telling of assumptions, often unspoken, and sometimes deeply buried.<sup>30</sup>

Reading interviews for their images, identifying their genres, and examining their linguistic structures are all ways of taking them apart, but there are other forms of narrative analysis which examine them as a whole. One approach is to look at the interview, not simply as the story of the teller, but as the outcome of the interaction of interviewer and interviewee. This is linked with the issue of co-authorship, which we have discussed earlier. Among oral historians, Ron Grele first suggested looking at the interview as 'a communicative event', and Eva McMahan has examined American elite interviews from this perspective.<sup>31</sup>

An especially strong advocate has been Elliot Mishler, who interprets the interview as a joint product between two people, 'a form of discourse . . . shaped and organised by asking and answering questions'. His own experience comes from medical interviews, where the asymmetry of power between questioner and respondent is especially marked, because it is only the doctor who has favours to offer: the right information from the patient makes a cure more likely. Mishler shows how quickly the patient keys in to the doctor's responses—either meaningful silences or requests for more detail—and cuts out circumstantial comment, often ending up with simple 'yes' and 'no' answers. He alerts us to the need to watch the questions as well as the answers in interpreting an interview. In 'the mainstream tradition' of social science surveys this mutual exchange of meanings is suppressed, both at the interview stage and also later in the process of coding, but with recorded evidence there is the chance to examine the whole dialogue, although few have done so.<sup>32</sup>

A much more formal method of narrative analysis, drawing particularly on Labov, was developed by Catherine Riessman for a study of men's and women's accounts of divorce, in which she had been originally frustrated to discover that many of her informants avoided giving direct answers to her questions, and instead told her stories. But how was she to understand these? She describes the process which she eventually used, beginning with the rough transcript of the interview as a whole. From this she strips out the non-narrative elements—*asides*, interactions with the interviewer, false starts, and so on—seeking to focus on the 'embedded narrative segments within an overarching narrative that includes non-narrative parts'.

Next, following Labov's example, the selected text is divided up into clauses, each given a numbered line. While Labov groups and names the lines according to their function in the narrative (*orientation*, *complication*, *resolution*, etc.), Riessman groups them by content. She also differs in choosing to divide the text into lines according to the speech 'poetics' with which they are enunciated: 'intonation contours, rising and falling pitch, pauses and discourse

markers (“well”, “and”, “so”, non-lexical expressions like “uh”) . . . .’ Once the text is divided in this way, Riessman’s aim is to identify the key features in stories which recur through each interview, and from that to compare these features in different groups of interviews, contrasting, for example, those of different political persuasion or gender.

A sceptic would question whether such an elaborate process is really needed in order to make judgements which could equally be reached more informally. For Riessman the objective of narrative analysis is to ‘interrogate intention and language—*how* and *why* incidents are storied, not simply the content to which the language refers. For whom was *this* story constructed, and for what purpose? Why is the succession of events configured that way? What cultural resources does the story draw on?’ Certainly this method shifts the focus from what is told to how it is told: and thus Riessman’s own *Divorce Talk* is about divorce storytelling rather than the experience of marital break-up. But the most important justification for this approach is that both the multiple stages of analysis and the poetic form in which the transcript is set out allow much deeper concentration on the text itself. The meanings in oral testimonies grow each time they are read or spoken. Setting out parts of a transcript as lines of poetry can be a rewarding way, both for contemplating and also for presenting the testimony: for ‘the poem is a way of walking slowly through the text’.<sup>33</sup>

A final, more sociological, technique of narrative analysis, again markedly formal, can claim comparable strengths. This has been developed in Germany especially by Fritz Schütze and Gabriele Rosenthal, partly as a response to the particular difficulties in interviewing and interpreting ex-Nazis. Typically, in response to an open initial question, the interview begins with a completely free life story, which the interviewer simply encourages without interruption or comment, allowing the narrator to develop his or her own motifs and interpretations and overall theme, ‘the red thread’. When this narration has concluded, amplifying questions may be drawn from it to encourage more stories and details; but only in the third stage may independent questions be introduced about themes not previously mentioned.<sup>34</sup>

The analysis is through a group discussion of the interview transcript, and is ‘reconstructive’, so that hypotheses are generated from the text rather than imposed from without—although of course they do draw on the researchers’ wider knowledge. The first stage is to separate out the basic biographical information, which will also help to identify significant omissions and silences. Then the entire transcript is read as a whole in sequence, distinguishing the key elements of description, narration, and argument, looking for the narrator’s own interpretation of his or her life, and seeking for both open and hidden meanings. Hypotheses are then debated by the group, always in relation to alternative hypotheses. Next, to test the interpretations which have been generated, shorter sections of text—a page, or just a sentence—are analysed in greater detail, again in sequence, and hypotheses and counter-hypotheses are again debated by the

group. Finally the life story is reconstructed in a dual form, on the one hand a year by year biography of what happened, on the other the narrator's personal and subjective interpretation of his or her life experience. Every case, however, is presumed to represent aspects of a wider field. Thus when the project involves a group of interviews it is then possible, on the basis of comparison and contrasting differences, to create a range of types or models of life story. It is, however, even so, difficult to move from the small number of cases to convincing generalisation about the larger society. The approach is also very demanding in terms of time, particularly because the method of analysis requires a group rather than a lone researcher. Nevertheless it has certainly proved a very effective method both in elucidating and in unravelling the often reluctant and highly ambivalent memories of older Germans about the Nazi and war eras. And a British group who led a European project on social exclusion, and who adopted this same method, also concluded that even though very lengthy and somewhat 'ponderous',

the formal analysis was astonishingly rich in generating hypotheses drawn from a single case to the wider social structure. They were convinced that 'only in-depth interrogation brings out the full value of an interview for revealing the intersection between culture, the social structure and the individual'.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the variety of forms of narrative analysis, ranging from the literary to the sociological, from the formal to the poetic, from the inclusion to the exclusion of the interviewer, some possible to combine and others incompatible, they have one crucial quality in common. They force the reader to slow down and look closely at both the whole text and its details, its images, forms of language, themes, its manifest and latent meanings. Ultimately, perhaps the greatest strength of narrative analysis, whatever its precise form, is to encourage an acuter and more sensitive listening.

### **Reconstructive analysis**

Let us now turn to the reconstructive mode of analysis. Despite increasing interest in narrative approaches, this has remained the most characteristic method in published oral history. It is also close to the 'ethnosociological' approach for which Daniel Bertaux argues in his *Les Récits de Vie*. The objective is to use life story interviews to reconstruct in detail how a social context or element works and changes: for example, a work environment, or a particular type of mobility, or a type of social situation such as that of a single mother or divorced father, or a refugee, or a homeless or disabled person. The ethnosociologist seeks to understand these contexts in terms of testimonies of day-to-day practice and knowledge, relationships, values, conflicts, and special language, gathered through reflective accounts of practical lived experience. This clearly echoes the aims of many social historians also using oral evidence. It is therefore not

surprising that there is much in common between such social historical and sociological forms of analysis.

To begin with, interviews, like all testimonies, contain statements which can be weighed. They weave together symbols and myths with information, and they can give us information as valid as that obtainable from any other human source. They can be read as literature, but they can also be counted. To start with, a group of interviews can be tested to see how the basic information they contain measures up against that known from other sources. Thus in his study 'The Family and Community Life of East Anglian Fishermen', Trevor Lummis tabulated some of the information collected from sixty interviews.

Informants were asked the age at which they left school. Their answers fit neatly with known national trends, both with time and across social class.

### Interpretation

| % left school | Born        |         |           | Father |                  |                  |
|---------------|-------------|---------|-----------|--------|------------------|------------------|
|               | Before 1889 | 1890–99 | 1900–1909 | Owner  | Deep-sea skipper | Deep-sea crewman |
| at 11 or 12   | 36          | 15      | 7         | 0      | 16               | 33               |
| at 13         | 53          | 33      | 36        | 22     | 69               | 33               |
| at 14 or 15   | 11          | 52      | 57        | 78     | 15               | 33               |

Information had also been collected on the number of informants' brothers and sisters, and whether any died in childhood. Fishermen are known to have been unusually slow in reducing family size. When tabulated, the figures again prove compatible with national trends towards lower infant mortality and fewer children—as again they are with known differences between social classes. The researcher with such test results at his elbow can move forward with some confidence into less charted terrain. Lummis argued that the much higher death rates of the children of deep sea fishermen, especially crewmen, whose work took

|                                | Born        |         |           | Father |                  |                  |
|--------------------------------|-------------|---------|-----------|--------|------------------|------------------|
|                                | Before 1889 | 1890–99 | 1900–1909 | Owner  | Deep-sea skipper | Deep-sea crewman |
| Number of brothers and sisters | 9.9         | 7.0     | 7.9       | 9.1    | 8.5              | 9.5              |
| % who died as children         | 15          | 14      | 7         | 11     | 15               | 25               |

them away for longer periods from their families, showed that fishermen played an important role in their families as fathers and that their children suffered badly from their absences at work.<sup>36</sup>

At this stage, some will be looking for patterns, clues towards interpretation, in the facts before them. Others will have started from a more definite theoretical standpoint, and probably some more detailed lesser hypotheses, too—hunches which they wish to test. But both will eventually need to look for some form of proof. In general, a historical interpretation or account becomes credible when the pattern of evidence is consistent, and is drawn from more than one viewpoint. Great care needs to be taken with each of these conditions. Thus a single 'case study' is almost inevitably a weaker base for arguing general interpretations than a comparison between two or more groups, each with different characteristics, at the same period.

A comparison between different groups over time is stronger still, although harder to achieve. An outstanding example is the work of Glen Elder and his 'life course' school, combining both qualitative and quantitative analysis in longitudinal studies going back to the 1920s. The more that an argument can be shown to hold under varying conditions, the more convincing the proof. However, since history is made up of a multitude of cases, almost all of which are unique in more than one way, it is in practice often very difficult to make useful comparisons. The proof of the explanation must then be sought from within the single case; the evidence counterchecked as far as possible in detail, and the likelihood of overall bias in it weighed. For example, in a study of Frontier College, the great Canadian experiment in working-class educational self-help, George Cook found himself forced to accept that he was collecting within a single broad perspective:

Generally speaking, we are hearing from those who want to help the college. Although many felt that they had 'failed' as labourer-teachers, they remain convinced that it was a 'noble idea' and reflect favourably on their experiences. They have rose-tinted glasses . . . We have not been able to reach those who have negative views . . . the early employers . . . [or] any of the early union men who worked with the college. Most importantly, we cannot find any of the labourers . . . We shall probably learn little or nothing about what they thought.<sup>37</sup>

In the same way, it would be difficult, in a study of work experience, to obtain a critical view from long-service employees who had given their lives to the enterprise, and only done so because they were prepared to accept its conditions. The upper servants of a country house provide an example. Yet while such employees are relatively easy to locate, the transient workers who may even have outnumbered them are inevitably much harder to trace. Nor, it must be strongly emphasised, will the use of written documents necessarily compensate for such



an imbalance in the oral evidence. John Toland founded his sympathetic portrait of Adolf Hitler as 'a warped archangel', a misunderstood, 'complex and contradictory' character, on interviews with twenty-five survivors of Hitler's own circle.<sup>38</sup> He had no difficulty in buttressing it from the German archives. Oral history of this kind simply parallels the distortions of official history. It would have been a different matter had he chosen to encounter some of Hitler's opponents and victims.

A special caution is also needed if counting is to be used as part of the proof, because of the difficulties in retrospective sampling. Tabulation can be a very valuable way of classifying and disciplining one's impressions of the contents of a number of interviews. A careful scrutiny of interview material with a coding frame in mind can indeed force a much more precise consideration of what one is trying to show and what evidence the interviews can offer. On the other hand, even with interviews collected on a representative sample basis, it is best to stick to the simpler forms of analysis and not venture beyond straightforward percentages and strong correlation patterns. Simple counting and calculating percentages can of course be done by anyone on a computer or pocket calculator. But the really time-consuming stage is to follow—in the critical, detailed reading and categorisation of your material.

Preliminary counting can suggest how an interpretation might be developed. But by raising new questions, it may also point to the need for further fieldwork. We cannot in fact make the neat separation which we have so far assumed. The ideal situation is very different: a continuous development through the to and fro of big theories, small hunches, and the practical strategy of fieldwork—in other words, of drawing on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. What was initially seen as the main problem may turn out to be a misconception, a dead end; so as the fieldwork continues, the emphasis is shifted to another area of questioning, or a different key group of informants is sought out. Alternatively, the original theory does not fit the facts discovered. Can the theory be modified? Or is it better to look at the facts from another quite different perspective? There is, of course, no set procedure by which such a developing search for interpretation can be carried forward. By definition it demands flexibility and imagination. Not all will succeed. Scaling the historical or sociological heights is dangerous. And few really interesting problems are ever finally solved.

Nevertheless, in the imaginative combination of interpretation and fieldwork, the individual researcher does have a particular advantage over the large-scale project. Because the material can be looked at as a whole, and also in depth, from many perspectives, and because the fieldwork is under direct control, interpretive flexibility can be developed in a way which supports the overall objective. Indeed, the whole method is based on a combination of exploration and questioning in the dialogue with the informant: the researcher comes hoping to learn the unexpected as well as the expected. Hence the recognised

effectiveness of life story interviews in generating 'concepts, hunches and ideas, both at the local and situational level and on a historical structural level, and within the same field, and in relationship to other fields'.<sup>39</sup> By contrast it is a well-known defect of large-scale operations that, although they can encompass a much wider range of possible explanations and sources, they cannot be subjected to such subtle control and modification in detail. They set out from an established research design, teamwork is organised on that basis, time is finite, and the fieldwork must be completed well before the first draft of the final report is written. Yet once the analysis of fieldwork is started, it becomes clear that much of the material is of little interest, but if only that particular area had been more deeply explored . . . The individual historian will not be satisfied without that further search.

One can put this in another way, by comparing the historian with a scientist. Scientific research advances through a meandering sequence of general theory, observations and hunches, experiments, working hypotheses tested by further experiments, dead ends, and further hunches and tests, until at last one hypothesis stands up to all conditions, and, if appropriate, a reformulation of theory is then sought. Any historical work suffers the inevitable disadvantage of having to work from the real cases available rather than from specially created experiments. As Edward Thompson has suggested, historians have to test their ideas with a logical process closer to that of proof in law, always vulnerable to the discovery of subsequent evidence.<sup>40</sup> But the big project using a fieldwork survey is doubly handicapped by telescoping into one all the experimental steps of the central stages of research development. It is therefore unable to deal with any discovery important enough to challenge its own pre-set terms. Hence the tendency of purely quantitative survey findings to elaborate the already known. They purchase their greater resources at the expense of inhibiting the zigzag process of reflection and reconsideration which needs to be at the heart of creative advance in social and historical interpretation.

### **Generating theory through fieldwork**

All this is somewhat abstract. Let us consider an example of the interaction between theory and fieldwork in practice. We begin with an early oral history classic, Peter Friedlander's *The Emergence of a UAW Local 1936–1939*, about the growth of trade unionism in a Detroit car parts factory. He sets out unusually clearly how his research proceeded. He had at his disposal at the start certain facts, like gross census figures, dates, and a bare narrative from contemporary documents; and also various general theories, such as the Marxism of class struggle underlying labour history, and from Max Weber the concepts of rationality and individualism as essential to a bourgeois epoch. But the gaps were enormous. There was no documentary evidence of attitudes in the factory to authority and how this changed as the trade union was organised; of who made up the inner circle of union leaders, how they were related to social groups

within the factory, and whether these leaders led or reflected opinion; or of which were in fact the key social groups of workers in the factory, how their attitudes to the union struggle varied, and how it affected their personal lives and outlooks.

Equally, the theoretical concepts failed to meet. This trade union struggle took place not merely within a highly developed industrial capitalist society with its own powerful values. The majority of the workers had migrated into the city where they worked from quite different social contexts. Their fight to unionise was thus also part of a much wider transformation of social cultures in migrant families and individuals: in this case, religious-minded Slavs, revolutionary Croatian nationalists, Yankee and Scots artisans, Appalachian farm families, and urbanised American blacks. These specific cultural subgroups were in the event to provide the key to interpretation. Yet, as Friedlander observes, 'labour historiography, which has tended to assume the presence of a modern, individuated, rational worker, has usually viewed the process of unionisation in narrowly rational, institutional, and goal-orientated terms. The problem of culture and praxis is passed over in silence'.<sup>41</sup>

Even where an explicitly Marxist framework is used in labour history, the tendency is for a whole section of society to be 'conceived of as an individual, and the problem is then to explain the institutional formation as the outcome of a rational process within the consciousness of this quasi individual'. But it is not always easy to locate this expected rationality, nor to explain its shortfall in a particular case in terms of general theoretical concepts, such as, for example, 'false consciousness'.

At each juncture where there is a gap between the abstractions of the political economy of work, and the concrete reality of individual, peer group, gang, clique, family, and neighborhood—of character and culture—there appear ad hoc psychological notions invested with an astonishingly ubiquitous explanatory power. Such notions ignore . . . the complex structure of cultures and relationships that develop and interact.

As the research proceeded, it emerged that only the older, established, American, skilled Protestant workers could be described in classic individualistic and rationalistic terms. This group supplied most of the leadership, although it also included many who felt no interest in the union. The Appalachians also acted as individuals, but principally on a moral basis: they joined the union relatively late, when they believed that its cause was right, and once having joined were as utterly loyal as to their religious sects. The older Eastern European migrants were much more concerned with what was right or wrong in social or ethical terms for the community, and acted explicitly as a group. Although personally cowed and submissive, they disliked the foremen and the management, and became dependable supporters of the union leadership.

Their children, by contrast, were much more active and outspoken, and in particular a group of young Poles who belonged to neighbourhood gangs played a special role in the struggle. Like the older Slavs, they acted together, but with little social and political consciousness: they were pragmatic, opportunistic, the uncontrollable militant wildcatters willing to break a contract by striking, and then to man the flying picket squad. It was as if the union to them was 'a bigger and better gang'.

It was only when these groups and their attitudes had been identified that the narrative of the struggle could be meaningfully reconstructed. Yet not only was none of this information available at the start, but it was not even known to be needed. The discovery of information and development of an interpretation went forward hand-in-hand as, over a period of eighteen months, Friedlander talked with the union leader, Edmund Kord. Kord had an exceptionally full and accurate memory, and indeed, remembered more as his mind became increasingly focused on these past years. Friedlander spent a full week with him three times, and each of these prolonged sessions produced drafts, comments, questions, and discussion. One of the two intervals between sessions included six hours of recorded telephone discussion; another produced altogether seventy-five pages of correspondence. They had to create between them not just the facts which were needed, but a mutual understanding and language of exchange. And if the 'thick description' into which Friedlander finally fuses both facts and interpretation does not allow him the last clear step into a new theory, he certainly laid the grounds for it in the marked differences which he shows between generations as well as between various social groups in the factory, in their particular roads from one consciousness to another.<sup>42</sup>

The contrasting paths taken by different generations of the same workgroup are also demonstrated by Tamara Hareven's remarkable studies of Manchester, once the textile capital of New England. Founded by the Amoskeag Company in the 1830s, the city grew around its booming mill yard, and the promise of steady, well-paid work drew in successive waves of immigrants. By the early twentieth century, its complex of thirty mills, employing seventeen thousand workers, made up the largest textile plant in the world. The giant works was so central to their lives that the people of Manchester believed it would stand for ever: 'You thought it would always be there'. Yet within two decades, undercut by cheaper labour and newer machinery in other regions, the giant was dead. Amoskeag closed its doors, bankrupt, in 1936. Smaller firms later revived parts of the mill yard so that textile work struggled on for another forty years in Manchester, but the last mill finally shut in 1975. Even then, there were workers who left in tears: 'I'll miss the people I worked with, I'll miss the mill itself'; 'It's like a second home'.<sup>43</sup> The industrial revolution had come and gone: a haunting allegory of the fate of much of the Western world.

Tamara Hareven has published two books about Manchester. The first, *Amoskeag*, was a dramatic documentary built around Randolph Langenbach's

photographs and the testimonies of former mill workers: about getting jobs and learning skills, the pleasures and tensions of work, larking about, company paternalism, and the bitter dying struggles with Amoskeag. It is a testament to industrial work, its centrality to people's lives, and the jeopardy in which that work now stands, told through the men and women of Manchester themselves—a book of rare power. *Family Time and Industrial Time*, by contrast, is a reflective and analytical interpretation marshalling a much broader range of source material. Alongside extracts from the interviews, the arguments are backed by numerous tables from the local census and from a sample of the Amoskeag's workforce records. Hareven provides a more fully documented labour history of the Amoskeag's evolving policies of paternalism, scientific management, confrontation with labour, and company unionism, as well as analyses of career patterns and opportunities for promotion within the mills.

The most important insights of the book come, however, from the juxtaposition of this study of the factory world with the family lives of Manchester workers which is made possible through oral history. The result is to challenge many widely held views. Hareven shows how it is not the 'modern' nuclear family which deals best with a catastrophe on the scale of widespread redundancy, but the more 'traditional' extended family, which can remain effective when scattered—indeed, more effective just because it is scattered. The extended family had been the channel of recruitment of migrant workers to the mill, and at the end, it was the safety net of the retreat.

Or again, workers who had not had steady careers proved more likely to have the adaptability to face such a crisis successfully than those who had. Such findings are set, moreover, within a clearly articulated theoretical frame of 'family time' and 'industrial time': the crosscutting struggle of family 'life plans' and industrial history. The clock analogy perhaps suggests too much certainty in the outcome, but it brings out well how, though some aspects of the life cycle were constantly repeated, the experience and the chances of each generation differed sharply. While to one the Amoskeag gave the security of a paternalistic family, and chances of promotion, to the next generation it offered a nightmare of tension, and to the last the hopelessness of a sinking ship. The twisting consciousness of the community—loyal, militant, despairing—reflected the historic moment at which the youth of each generation entered the factory gate.

This ability to make connections between separated spheres of life is an intrinsic strength of oral history in the development of historical interpretation. In studying the transition from one culture to another, in time, or through migration, we can not only look at those cultures separately, but observe the paths that individuals took from one culture to another. And almost every individual life breaks across the boundaries between home and work. Escaping from these conceptual boxes can produce strikingly new hypotheses even from a small-scale study.

Thus two radical re-interpretations of historical assumptions both came from projects for a graduate oral history course at Essex. The first resulted in a new perspective in demographic thinking. It had long been assumed by demographers that the use of birth control spread by the 'diffusion' of attitudes from the professional middle classes down the social scale to the working classes. At this point the available statistical evidence was based on interviews with men. Some exceptions to class patterns of family size, like the low fertility of cotton workers, had been noted, but it was a pilot oral history project by Diana Gittins, interviewing women rather than men, which first indicated that the basic 'diffusion' model was false: working-class women changed their birth-control practices through independent influences—notably discussion at work—rather than direct middle-class influence. Indeed, those with the closest contact with middle-class families, who worked for them as domestic servants, received the least advice on family limitation; and even doctors and nurses were generally unhelpful, if not positively misleading, to working-class patients.

This first exploratory discovery through oral history led to the substantial research, including statistical analyses of women workers' fertility rates and the use of early clinic records, which Diana Gittins published in *Fair Sex*. More recently, Kate Fisher and Simon Sretzer have argued that it is important to interview men as well as women, and suggest that Gittins underestimated the influence of the men, so the debate continues.<sup>44</sup> But it arises from, and can only be solved by, oral history evidence. And Gittins' re-interpretation is a typical outcome of oral history, for 'diffusion' theory gives credit to the middle classes for a social transformation which owes as much to the aspirations of working-class women themselves.

A second example comes from labour history. If working women have played such a crucial part in the profound social change marked by the demographic transition from the 1870s to the 1920s, from which so much else, economic and social, has followed, why have they been so much slower than men in recognising their collective self-interest in politics and trade unionism? Male politicians and labour historians, too, have too often assumed it 'natural' for women to take a less active part in the labour movement; and when the problem has been considered at all, it has been in terms of the workplace, and women's shorter, more interrupted working lives. But the research of Joanna Bornat on Yorkshire textile unions has shown how women's consciousness was shaped as much through subordination at home as in the factory. Women found their jobs through family contacts, were trained by kin at the mill, and handed back their entire wage packets to their mothers, and it was their fathers who decided whether or not they should join the union. If they joined, collectors took their subscription at their home doorstep, not on the mill floor. In short, the male division of the worlds of work and home has obscured any adequate understanding of the class consciousness of women workers. But a history which cannot account for them rests on flawed foundations.<sup>45</sup>

## The dynamics of social change

It is undoubtedly a danger that oral sources, used on their own, can encourage the illusion of an everyday past in which both the cut and thrust of contemporary political narrative and the unseen pressures of economic and structural change are forgotten, just because they rarely impinge directly on the memories of ordinary men and women. It is essential to place them in this broader context. But as we have seen, oral sources can also help us to understand how that context is itself constituted. They offer the promise, moreover, of advancing this understanding in a fundamental way.

They suggest, first, a basic misconception in the dynamics of social change. Social change is almost always described in terms which reflect the experience of men: of collective and institutional, rather than personal, pressures, of the logic of abstract ideology, acting through the economy, politics, and elite networks of unions and pressure groups. Behind are the deeper contradictions of social and economic organisation which sometimes openly, sometimes unknowingly, they express. But an equally crucial element is missing: the cumulative effect of individual pressure for change. It is this which immediately emerges through life histories: the decisions which individuals make—to move or improve a house; to leave one community and migrate to another; to leave a job which has become intolerable or to look for a better one; to put money into the bank, or shares, or a business of one's own; to marry or to separate; to have or not to have children. The changing patterns of millions of conscious decisions of this kind are of as much, probably more, importance for social change than the acts of politicians which are the usual stuff of history.

This becomes evident as soon as we look at the major long-term social changes of the Western world in the last century. Certainly the ebb and flow of political rights and civil liberties, and the growing state intervention in education and welfare, have been the outcome of collective pressure and political decision; and collective trade union pressure at least to the 2000s kept up the working-class share in real earnings and cut the hours given to paid work. But this does not touch the two most startling changes: the rise in economic productivity and living standards, and the reduction in the number of children. Neither is the result of political intervention—indeed, leaving aside the Chinese one-child policy, no state has yet shown much ability to influence either demography or economic growth. The truth is that the mechanics of change of both the economy and population, although basic to everything else, are very imperfectly understood.

They will remain so until we incorporate, as part of the structure of interpretation, the cumulative role of the individual. That implies recognising that a high proportion of crucial individual decisions are as likely to be made by women as by men—not only in spheres like family-building, but also as migrants and as workers (women change jobs more frequently than men). Equally important, we



need to know how public ideas, and economic and collective pressures, interact at an individual level—as in the seizing of economic chances, or in the shaping of attitudes through family and friendship and the media, and through childhood and adult personal experience—to form those myriad decisions which cumulatively not only give shape to each life story but can also constitute the direction and scale of major social change. Or to put it another way, it becomes clear that the production of people is as much the powerhouse of change as the production of things.

An example may again help. When I began the research for *Living the Fishing*, I assumed that the economy would shape family relationships. But both the experience of our own fieldwork and also comparisons with fishing communities in other cultures soon pushed our thinking from this initial simple material Marxism towards an interpretation much closer to Gramsci, emphasising the power of cultural practices and beliefs. Initially it did indeed prove true that women in fishing families in many parts of the world, because of the frequent absence of their men at sea, take a greater share of the responsibility and authority in the family; although this may range from the ‘partnership’ marriage common among inshore fishermen whose wives work with them in a joint enterprise gutting and marketing the fish, to the long-distance, deep-sea fishermen who are effectively absentee husbands, leaving their wives as single parents. Untangling the variations in between revealed a complex of other influences, too, in which economy, property, space, work, religion, and family culture all played a part.

But we also came to see that economic influence did not work in one direction only. In a wage-earning company port like Aberdeen, life aboard became so rough, and family life so battered by drink and violence, that the next generation voted with its feet; mothers sent their sons to look for other work, and young women looked for husbands other than fishermen. Family culture was equally critical to the economic survival of family boat-owning communities, but in a very different way. Here the widespread encouragement of individual initiative among the fishermen was needed to ensure recurrent adaptability in the face of rapidly changing fish stocks, technology, and markets. Part of the secret of the most successful ports turned out to be the inculcation of an ideology of hard work, thrift, achievement, and independence, from childhood onwards. But this valuing of individual worth had to go with an acceptance of some eccentricity as the price of creativity. And the transmission of such values was encouraged by the affectionate gentleness typical of a Shetland upbringing, where children were encouraged to talk and reason for themselves in a relatively egalitarian home; while it was severely inhibited by the more authoritarian, punitive, hierarchical, male-dominated family characteristic of Lewis. With apparently equal chances, the fishing of one flourished, while the other withered.<sup>46</sup>

Certainly the constraints exercised by the economic system, technology, and resources from which men and women live their lives are fundamental. But the

economy is a social creation, and part of its making is in the family. The unpaid labour of women within the household not merely services it, but also, through the rearing of children, the workforce of the future, lays part of the foundations of the future. Clearly both the transmission of values between generations and the moulding of personality within the family are questions of critical importance to historical understanding, as they are also constant themes of both private gossip and public debate.<sup>47</sup>

Oral history interviews are a particularly powerful way of looking at these issues, both in terms of cultural patterns and also of emotional configurations which may repeat themselves over the generations in different families. In my own work with Daniel Bertaux on this theme, we looked at families as a whole rather than as the typical father-son unit of purely statistical social mobility studies. In terms of theory, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital was especially stimulating for this theme of intergenerational transmission (although not very helpfully categorised). It quickly became clear to us that, as models, women were as crucial family influences as men, and that families often had two or more occupational traditions, some passed down through the men, some through the women, and some through both. When mobility did take place, it was as often a woman as a man who was seen as the push or model behind it. Thus one woman who achieved mobility only after separating from her lorry-driver husband saw as her inspiration an aunt who divorced: 'It was all the scandal at the time, no one got divorced. She just used to enjoy life, really enjoy it . . . She was always the gay one, always for a laugh. A right flirt, she was terrific. She was my favourite'.<sup>48</sup>

We also found, contrary to popular assumptions, that a strong family culture tended to root people where they were, rather than to encourage upward mobility. Those who did move upward socially almost always had experienced the loosening of family ties, most typically through migration or through divorce (which was especially important in giving chances to women).

By contrast, the mechanics of familial transmission can be seen at their most powerful especially clearly in small business families. The Mullens, a four-generation family of Midlands silversmiths, were a rare classic instance. Sal's grandfather, two great-uncles, father and mother, brother, husband, father-in-law, and two sons have worked in the trade. 'My father used to work for his father, and his workplace was built at the top of the garden, so when I was old enough to go with my father, he used to take me down to work'. The grandfather who founded the firm is now a legendary example in the family story: 'My grandfather kept tight reins on everything until the day he died. He wouldn't even have a telephone put in the factory. He used to say, "If people want us and want our stuff, they'll come"—and they did. It had a very good name. They made spoons, cutlery . . . only spoon maker in Birmingham. Oh a very good living yes'. Nevertheless, the transmission of the family occupation had been far from painless. Some family members had deliberately chosen to escape into other work,

while one unlucky man, who had already started as a professional accountant, had been forced to return to rescue the firm when his father became ill. Indeed, Sal's father himself took a bitter resentment against her grandfather, and the trade into which he had been born, to his grave: as he lay dying, he was heard to mutter, 'I never liked spoons.'<sup>49</sup>

Yet were the Mullens so exceptional? In fact the culture of innumerable families conveyed, albeit less compellingly, similar beliefs in continuity. Just as the aristocratic family's pride centred on their country house, so a mariner's family home might be full of model ships, or a mining family might treasure a lump of coal they claimed to be the first hewn from the local pit.

As with the Mullens, family legends and myths are also important elements in the intergenerational transmission of many families. Sometimes they are positive, like the entrepreneurial builder who attributes his dynamism to 'Jewish blood in the family, going way back'; sometimes they are of lost riches; sometimes they haunt. Mystery is a catalyst of myth, and when the mystery is repeated in more than one generation, it can become a particularly powerful family script. In Eileen Moriarty's family, unexplained parental separations have occurred trans-generationally, and moreover, taken precisely the same form. Her father's mother had 'left when he was very young as well, and it was an exact repetition of the situation that I had', when Eileen lost her own mother. After her father's mother had gone, her father never knowingly saw her again. Only after she died did they discover, it is said, through an uncle who read gas meters, that she had lived two hundred yards away for years: 'and he's never known, all his life'.

Yet when his own wife, Eileen's mother, deserted him in turn, the breach was as absolute, the absence even more total than after a death. 'She left, she just walked out one day, one night, and that was it. She was gone. She never returned'. Eileen's father pushed her out of their lives, just as his father had his own mother.

It was never mentioned again, her family . . . It was something that was never talked about, once she was gone. Everything was banished from the house one night; and that was it. Just like that . . . It went straight to him. Just that day. And dad just—everything like, little photos, he cut her picture up and everything; it was just gone. Amazing. Strange.

Eileen is still haunted by the fear that her father will be the next to disappear. When she is away for any length of time she phones compulsively, not to talk, but to be sure he is still there. 'It's very strange, the same happened to him, as what happened to us. It's really awful to think that—I hope it will never happen again. Oh yeh, I often do [wonder], yeh; but to think that someone was so near . . .'<sup>50</sup>

As these instances show, transmission within families can take practical, cultural, and emotional forms. Hence to fully understand intergenerational transmission will also require a major imaginative leap in our use of theory.

At present we can turn to one of two general types of theoretical interpretation. On the one hand, there are the big theories of social organisation, social control, the division of labour, the class struggle, and social change: the functionalist and other schools of sociology and the historical theories of Marxism. On the other hand, there is the theory of individual personality, of language and the subconscious, represented by the psychoanalytical approach. They can be layered together, as in an individual biography, but no satisfactory way has yet been found of bonding them. Psychohistory has simply resorted to the crude device of 'analysing' whole groups—even whole societies—as if they were a single individual with only one life experience. The difficulties in any more subtle reconciliation have emerged very clearly in the debates on Marxism, feminism, and women's history. The fundamental problem lies in the fact that each type of theory turns its back on the other. Marxism, like sociological theory in general, is deliberately concerned with minimising the role of the individual, as opposed to the social group. Psychoanalysis claims to be founded upon the elemental human personality, and thus to be independent of history. Yet while Marxism rests on the belief that men and women create their consciousness through what they do, the archetypal Freudian psychoanalysis assumes that the fundamental shaping of personality is completed in infancy—before the limits of remembered conscious action. This leaves few clues as to how a bridge between the two types of theory can best be constructed. It is nevertheless an essential task if history is to provide a meaningful interpretation of common life experience. And in this task, oral history will have a vital role. Its evidence intrinsically combines the objective with the subjective, and leads us between the public and private worlds.

It is only by tracing individual life stories that connections can be documented between the general system of economic, class, sex, and age structure at one end, and the development of personal character at the other, through the mediating influences of parents, brothers and sisters, and the wider family, of peer groups and neighbours, school and religion, newspapers and the media, art and culture. Only when the precise role of these intermediary institutions in, for example, socialisation into sex and class roles has been established, will a theoretical integration become a possibility. Until then we can only guess how far the economic and social system moulds personality, or the system is itself shaped by basic biological drives. A beginning to such work can be seen, but it would be foolish to claim more than this as yet. It represents, nevertheless, for the future probably the greatest challenge and contribution which oral evidence may offer to the making of history and the interpretation of social change.

### New riches of the past and for the future

Nearly forty years ago, when I drafted the first edition of this book, I ended with a brief look forward into that future. We have still to crack the overall theoretical issue, but we are now much more aware of the role of theory in oral history. In other ways many of the changes I then hoped for have come about. Our understanding of memory has become much more subtle, shifting from a search predominantly for objective reliability to realising that the re-shaping of experience in memory can also be a vital clue to the shaping of consciousness. As Portelli put it in 1979, 'the very changes wrought by memory . . . reveal the narrators' effort to make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives'; so that 'oral history sources are credible, but with a *different* credibility'.<sup>51</sup>

Since then oral history has been vindicated in a whole series of publications, in history and the social sciences, from local community to national studies, empirical and theoretical. While the most hidebound opponents continue to snarl, mostly in private, the main debate has shifted from whether to use oral history or not, to how best to use it. It has left a more general awareness of how all historical evidence is moulded by individual perception and, selected through social bias, conveys messages of prejudice and power. The nature of history in this double sense has been an issue too long evaded by historians.

Oral history has diversified, particularly at a community level. Entirely new uses of history have sprung up in the movements for reminiscence group work and drama. Oral history is far more extensively used in university education, and in North America—although, alas, less now in Britain—in schools, too. There has also been a growth in resources. At both a local and a national level, oral history archives are now well established, and the digital networking of catalogue information is gradually spreading. Before long it should become relatively easy to search nationally for a recording of a particular person, event, or on a theme in either political or social history.

At the same time, there has been a remarkable worldwide growth of oral history activities. While social researchers began using life stories nearly a century ago, in the 1970s oral history was a small fringe network in the United States, Britain, and Italy. Since then it has grown into an organised international network, and oral history activity can be found in locally distinctive forms right round the globe. At the same time there has also been a striking growth of parallel activities, such as illness narratives, memory studies, and digital forms of autobiography.

Unique, often disarmingly simple, epigrammatic, yet at the same time representative, the voice can, as no other means, bring the past into the present. And its use changes not only the texture of history, but its content. It shifts the focus from laws, statistics, administrators, and governments, to people. The balance is altered: politics and economics can now be seen—and thus judged—from the receiving end, as well as from above. And it becomes possible to answer previously closed questions: extending established fields such as political history,

intellectual history, economic and social history; adding to other newer areas of inquiry—working-class history, women's history, family history, the history of racial and other minorities, the history of the poor and of the illiterate—a whole new dimension. We have already from earlier life story and oral history titles—*Akenfield*; *Where Beards Wag All*; *Working*; *Workless*; *Pit-men, Preachers and Politics*; *From Mouths of Men*; *Division Street*; *The Classic Slum*; *Below Stairs*; *The Children of Sanchez*; *All God's Dangers*; *Blood of Spain*; *The Dillens*; *Madness in Its Place*; *Wild Swans*—the first swallows of a new summer. Looking back, it is striking that these titles nearly all come from the United States or Britain. A parallel set from the last twenty years would all be from other countries: *The Whisperers* and *Ivan's War* from Russia; *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide*; *What it Means to Be Palestinian*; *The Corpse Walker* on marginal people in China; *The Other Side of Silence* on the Partition of India; *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba*; *Walking on Fire*, about women in Haiti; and *Bodies of Evidence*, the one exception, about gay history in America. As others follow, history will continue to be changed and enriched.

We want to highlight four other very special books. Two demonstrate the continuing vitality of the life story tradition, but in different ways. Daniel James' *Doña María's Story* is a subtly interpreted life history of an Argentinian woman who worked in a meat factory, a model for working with both facts and memory. By contrast, Elena Poniatowska's *Here's to You Jesusa*, the life story of a Mexico City laundress, has little commentary, but is undeniably fascinating and powerful. Its Spanish original found a mass audience in Latin America. And recording Jesusa profoundly changed Elena's own sense of self.

The other two books are both about collective struggles, but presented in different ways. Alessandro Portelli's *They Say in Harlan County* is a very powerful historical community study of a coal mining valley in the Appalachian Mountains. It covers family life, poverty, work in the mines, accidents, death and religion, trade unions and strikes, race issues, the Depression and mine closures, open-cast mining and environmental pollution. Portelli evokes both the community's bonds and its tensions. He writes passionately about its struggles, interweaving his own comments with abundant quotations from some 160 interviews he has recorded, typically brief, which along with illustrated photos and documents achieves something of the montage and bricolage polyphony he used in his earlier book on Terni. This is a book with a huge canvas, a local story set in its national context, about big issues, but full of evocative detail—an oral history masterpiece presented in a way which can appeal meaningfully both to locals and to a wider audience of social researchers and historians.

Equally impressive but in a very different way is Loring Danforth and Riki Van Boeschoten's *Children of the Greek Civil War*. This is a rare example of an oral history which presents both sides of a still bitter historical dispute: a model for historians and social researchers, but unlikely to have much appeal with local audiences. The fates of the children who were evacuated by both sides during the Greek Civil War remain a highly contentious and political topic in Greece. In

particular, the angry views of Nicholas Gage shadowed the authors. The authors open with Gage interrupting the early seminar that they gave at Princeton, and they conclude with their investigation of the claims Gage has made in his best-selling novel, *Eleni*, about the killing of his mother, and 'the abduction of innocent children by evil Communists'.<sup>52</sup> This context makes *Children of the Greek Civil War* a remarkable achievement, readable and moving, yet also very carefully balanced in its use of sources, selection of interviewees and quotes, and evaluations. It is particularly commendable in two other ways. Firstly, it makes equal use of traditional historical archive sources, oral history, and anthropological observation of present-day memory practices. Secondly, the authors are as much concerned with understanding what did happen to children in the Civil War as with evaluating how the past is remembered today.

During the Second World War, in 1941, Greece was occupied by the Germans. A left-wing resistance movement, the National Liberation Front, developed especially in the countryside, bringing new democratic practices, including policies for gender equality, to villages under its control, and challenging the right-wing royalist government-in-exile in Egypt. After the Germans withdrew in 1944, attempts to mediate between the two sides proved unsuccessful. A full civil war broke out in 1946, and by 1949 the left-wing forces had been defeated and driven northwards across the Slavic borderlands—which introduced further identity problems—and out of Greece. The war was brutal, with many villages burnt down for their support of one side or the other.

During the war, some thirty-eight thousand children were evacuated, roughly half by each side. The immediate motive was to protect them, but they were sent to hostels and schools where they received highly politicised upbringings, whether on the right or the left. Each side accused the other of kidnapping and indoctrination. The authors show the complexity of the truth: how many families wanted their children evacuated to safety while some did not, and how teenage children could be quickly recruited to join the fighting, bringing a different purpose to evacuation. In most respects, they conclude, the practices of each side were similar. The main differences were that those who went to Eastern Europe were likely to get a better education, but would stay for far longer away from their Greek homes. They had to make new lives in Communist countries, and few were able to return to Greece before the 1980s. Hence the experience of return was crucially different for children from the two sides.

The middle third of the book presents seven in-depth life stories chosen to show the variety and common themes of children's experiences. Thus, in terms of identity, Evropi Marinova explains how at school in Hungary they were taught both Macedonian and Greek: 'at that time it didn't matter whether you were Greek or Macedonian, we loved each other like brothers and sisters'. But in adulthood identity became a more complex issue, for the Greeks in Greece could be much less welcoming. Again and again Evropi was refused a visa, because she was a Macedonian Greek and she called her destroyed village by its Macedonian



name. She turned on one embassy official: 'I shit on your country and on all the Greeks who live there, because you don't recognise that we're from there'. As other interviews reveal, it had become much easier to be a Macedonian refugee in Toronto than in Greece.<sup>53</sup>

Some of the most vivid memories recounted are of the experience of returning from exile to Greece in adulthood. There was a double problem for returnees: many had lost contact with their families for years, and could scarcely imagine them; and they had equally little understanding of the home conditions in their mountain villages. For those returning to Greece in the 1950s it could be a shocking experience. Stefanos Gikas, a building worker, describes returning to his childhood home in Epirus:

'Where's the village? Where's the village? Ah! There it is!' The village was on the edge of a steep ravine—old stone houses. My first disappointment; I couldn't believe it. I didn't recognise anyone. The old man showed us our father's house. 'This is your father. This is your mother. This is your sister. This is your brother'. One person said, 'I'm your uncle'; another said, 'I'm your cousin' . . . They were poor, really poor. All they had were a few sheep and goats . . . I didn't stay in the village for long; I couldn't stand it. They were all strangers. They had nothing to offer us'.<sup>54</sup>

These returning migrants had left their city lives for a world of donkeys, muddy paths, and arranged marriages, without running water or electricity. Most moved on quickly.

The book concludes by evaluating the issues with which it opened, bringing in recent observation of the local 'politics of memory'. Vividly yet calmly they describe how Nicholas Gage's mountain village, Lia, has become a 'memorial village' sustained by political heritage tourism. They end in ethnographic mode, describing an argument in a local bar which brings out the difficulties of even today reaching some mutual understanding about the past. This is an unusually rewarding work of oral history, rich in detail, skilful in research design, making powerful reasoned contributions to passionate past issues.

More generally, the new balance to the content of history, and the sources of its evidence, through introducing the experiences of those who lived through it, can alter our judgements of the past, and so, eventually, its message as public myth. We can hope too for a different set of heroes: ordinary people as well as leaders, women as well as men, black as well as white. History, which once could only weep for a King Charles I on the scaffold, can now share grief with the old illiterate widower, Nate Shaw, the twice arrested black Alabama sharecropper, at the loss of his wife Hannah:

I just felt like my very heart was gone. I'd stayed with her forty-odd years, and that was short, short—except bein pulled off and put in prison.

I picked her out amongst the girls in this country and it was the easiest thing in the world to do . . . She was a Christian girl when I married her. And she was a woman that wanted to keep as far as her hands and arms could reach, all the surroundings, she wanted to keep it clean. And I've kept myself clean as I possibly could. But in past days, I've sneaked about in places, I did. I own to my part of wrongness . . . I liked women, but . . . I desperately kept clean of runnin too much to a extreme at other women when I had her. Regardless of all circumstances, I weren't a man to slip around at women and no matter what I said to another woman or what I done, I let my wife come first . . . I'm praisin her now, I'm praisin her for what she was—she was a mother for her children, she was a mother for her children—and when they put me in prison, the whole twelve years, she stayed by her children, she didn't waver. I loved that gal and she dearly proved she loved me. She stuck right to me every day of her life and done a woman's duty. Weren't a lazy bone in her body and she was strict to herself and truthful to me. Every step she took, to my knowledge, was in my favour. There's a old word that a man don't ever miss his water until his well go dry.<sup>55</sup>

There will be more biographies like Nate Shaw's. Whose, we can only guess. A London West Indian bus conductor, a Ford assembly line car worker, a Belfast boilermaker's wife, a supermarket cashier, a Welsh sheep farmer, a migrant Bangladeshi mother, a Pittsburgh steelmaker, a Norwegian oil rig worker, an Italian marbleman, a New York financial dealer, a New South Wales truck-driver, a Japanese whale-fisherman, a refugee from Middle Eastern conflicts, a victim of forced marriage . . . Who knows? Or what particular questions oral history will succeed in solving: The riddle of working-class political voting for the right? How far industrialisation emancipated women, or confined them as housewives to still more limiting male domination? What makes some social groups prefer to educate, and others to beat their children? How some persecuted immigrant minorities prosper, and others not? In what social context are major scientific discoveries made? Why have the same religions in different times and places been more or less tolerant of others? Why are some people concerned about the environment, and others not? To each of these problems, oral history could make a critical contribution.

In principle, the possibilities of life stories and oral history extend into every field. But they are more fundamental to some than to others. And they provide an underlying current: towards interpretations that are more personal, more social, and more democratic. This affects both what is published, and also how it is written. Working with life stories and oral history is interdisciplinary, bringing together social researchers, anthropologists, psychologists, and historians.

Equally important, the academic is prised out of the closet into the outside world. Old and young are brought into exchange and closer sympathy. And

there has been a quiet sea-change in the process of historical writing, scarcely noticed by the book reviewers. Increasingly, small oral history groups have been bringing out their own publications. Certainly most would gain from more interpretation, and often only a local could make the most of all the detail. It may be a history of the street and its families; of a factory; about a strike, or a bomb explosion; recollections of past leisure, education, or domestic service. These local publications are gathering new historical material for the future which would otherwise have been lost. They are tapping the river water at the sea's mouth. The far limit of the past recoverable through oral evidence recedes remorselessly through death, day by day. But the real justification of history is not in giving an immortality to a few of the old. It is part of the way in which the living understand their place and part in the world. Landmarks, landscapes, patterns of authority and of conflict have all become fragile. By helping to show how their own stories fit into the changing character of the place in which they live, their problems as workers or as parents, history can help people to see how they stand, and where they should go. This is what lies behind the present popularity of recent history in Britain. It also points to the key social and political importance of oral history. It provides a new basis for original projects, not just by professionals, but by students, by schoolchildren, or by the people of a community. They do not just have to learn their own history; they can write it. Oral history gives history back to the people in their own words. And in giving a past, it also helps them towards a future of their own making.



# Appendix: Three Life Story Interview Guides

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## 1: A life story outline

This was designed for the Millennial Memory Project of the BBC and the British Library, for which over six thousand interviews were recorded. The guide provides a very brief outline, which can be developed by interviewers in a great variety of contexts and in many different ways.

### *Some suggested topics*

Everyone's life is different but a typical life story, written or taped, is likely to cover many of the following areas:

#### Family and early life

- Memories of *family background* and *grandparents* and their influence
- *Parents*—where they came from, their jobs, their characters, could you talk to them, were you close to them; parents' attitude to *discipline*; parents' ambitions
- *Brothers and sisters*—how you got on, what happened to them later
- *Everyday life* in childhood, describe the *house* you lived in, who did the *housework* and the garden
- Describe *food* and mealtimes
- Children's *games* and family *leisure*—sport, pubs, clubs, books, etc.; weekends and holidays
- *Weddings* and *funerals*; attitudes to *money*; going *shopping*
- Describe the *street*, the *town* or *village*, the community, neighbours, who was important, interesting characters; local *churches* and local *politics*
- *Education*—school and beyond: important friendships and influences
- *Youth*—going out to the cinema or dances or pubs or sport; music; bikes; gangs; tensions with parents; first boy- and girlfriends; past attitudes to *sex*; what you did in the *war*—or national service

#### Work

- *First job*—why you chose it, how you got initiation
- Describe the *workplace*, what exactly you did, whom you worked with
- Other early jobs and then *main job*—why and how; did you plan a *career*, or find it by chance; *training*
- Describe a *typical working day* at different stages
- Chances for *promotion*; important *influences* at work, friends and enemies, pranks and jokes
- Professional *organisations* or trade unions
- *Social life* connected with work; what you are most proud of

#### Later family life and leisure

- Whether single or married; while *single*, key friendships and leisure activities; if married, how you met your *husband or wife*, their background, character, jobs; wedding
- Setting up *house*, handling money together, dividing *decisions* and chores
- Ideal of *marriage*—what matters most, if it ended and why
- Describe *homes*

- *Children*—childbirth, childcare, ideals of parenting, affection and discipline, hopes and ambitions for children
- Family and own *leisure* and holidays: radio and television, games and sports, books and hobbies
- *Friends* and relationships; entertaining; *clubs* and societies; the *community*—neighbours, shopping, religion and politics
- *Later life*—retirement, any new activities, becoming grandparents

These are only some ideas: a lot of what people remember will not be covered by this. You will obviously need to adapt to specific experiences and ask other questions if, for example, your interviewee came to Britain from another country, or has not been in paid employment for reasons of family or disability. Also, when you are interviewing someone, it can take you two or three sessions to record a life story following these topics. Some people will have no memories about certain topics and might want to spend longer talking about other things that are important to them. Obviously, if you come across unexpected and unusual memories, well told, you should give them as much time as you can. It is important to be as flexible as possible.

## 2: An outline thematic life story

This second example is still an outline, but more elaborated, designed for a specific type of interviewee, a social researcher, and his or her working life.

### Pioneers of Social Research: Interview guide

#### *Pre-interview*

Look for an outline biography or CV of the person you are recording (Wikipedia, *Who's Who*, or they may send you a CV).

Try to give a hard look at what seem to be the researcher's key books.

#### *For every interview*

It is essential to establish in the early part:

- a) the date and place of birth of the interviewee, their family background and occupations;
- b) what led them towards research and university work;
- c) what were the key influences in leading them towards their pioneering research themes.

#### *Opening questions*

Date of birth, family, and own occupations.

Can we begin by talking about your family background and early life, and any early influences which may have led you towards university work?

#### Family and early life

- Memories of *family background* and *grandparents*: were they an influence?
- *Parents*—where they came from, their jobs, their characters, could you talk to them, were you close to them
- *Education*—school and *university*: important friendships and influences
- *Youth*—important friends and their influences; what you did in *National Service*

#### Pioneering research

- *Main research interest*—how you got into it, describe what it was:

Go through the sequence of main projects and books

With each, ask what was the objective, what were the difficulties

When there was fieldwork, ask for a detailed account of how it went: types of contacts—insider or (colonial) outsider? (especially for work overseas)—types of samples and interview, participant observation, etc.

What documents were kept (and could be archived)

*Sometimes, I think, in this section you can risk debating a little, to clarify the researcher's position*  
What would you say is the key contribution which you have made?

### Working career

- *First job*—why you chose it
- Other early jobs and then *main jobs*—why and how; did you plan a *career*, or find it by chance
- Describe your work role
- Do you remember some of the people you worked with—important influences at work, friends and enemies—can you tell us something about them?
- *Social life* connected with work

### Later family life and leisure

- Whether single or married; if married, how you met your *husband or wife*, their background, jobs
- *Children*—ideals of parenting, hopes and ambitions for children
- *Leisure and hobbies*—what have been your main enthusiasms outside work
- *Friends*—how important have friends been to you? Have any been special influences?
- *Later life*—how do you see your focus in or approaching retirement: continuing research and writing, or new activities, becoming grandparents?

### Closing questions for all interviews

Looking back on your working career, in your work, what you are most proud of?

Summing up your life as a whole, what have been the worst and the best things?

## 3: A full life story guide

Versions of this guide were used in the interviews for *The Edwardians*, *I Don't Feel Old*, and *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic*.

This guide is focused on family and wider social experience through a lifetime. The questions are not intended to be used as a questionnaire, but a schematic-outline interviewer's guide for a flexible life story interview, in the spirit of chapter ten. The interviewer's directions are printed in italics. In many instances the full form of the question is given, but in others an expanded form is needed in actual use. In general the questions on work are particularly likely to need further specific detail, and for any project a much fuller development of questions on its specific key themes will be needed.

### Preliminary

First of all, can you tell me when and where you were born?

How many years did you live there? Where did you move to then? (*Trace key moves between places by rough dates.*) Can you remember why the family made those moves?

### Long-distance migration

*NOTE: when appropriate, this section is to be inserted at whatever point in the narrative it occurs during the following sections.*

When did you first think about going abroad? Why? Had anyone in your family gone abroad before you? Or friends? Did they write and talk about it? Were you going for work, education, to join family, for an adventure? How long did you think you would be away? What did you know about Britain? Who from? Did you have family or friends who were already there? Did you contact them before leaving? Did you have a job waiting for you? How did you raise the money for the ticket?

Did you leave a wife/husband/partner/children back home? How did you feel about that? Who helped look after them while you were away? When did you next see them? Did they come over later?



What was the journey like? What did you imagine Britain would be like? Were you disappointed/satisfied? What struck you most when you landed? Did you have any difficulty understanding how people spoke? Did any one bother you about your accent or your clothes? Would you say that people were generally friendly or hostile towards you?

Did you have anywhere to stay? Who met you? Did you stay with them? Did they help you in any other ways (money, loans, equipment, advice)?

How did you find your first proper accommodation? Can you describe it to me? What were the facilities (cooking, bathroom, etc.) like? Did you have to share? How did you get on with the other people in the house? With the landlord? Did you make friends locally? Did you change your style of food or not? Did you join any local associations, sports clubs, or churches? Did you find a 'grapevine' for meeting people, or finding work/housing? Who belonged to your grapevine?

Did you feel at home in Britain? Do you now? Have you had experiences of racial discrimination or abuse? Have you been back to your original home? How often? Have you thought of returning permanently? Or of moving somewhere else? Do you keep in touch with your family back home? How often do you see each other? How often do you write or phone? Do you exchange news, gossip, confidences, or advice? Do family members send presents, parcels, money, or other kinds of help to each other? Who would you say your family consists of now?

### *Grandparents' generation*

Now can we talk about your grandparents? Let's take your mother's parents first. Do you remember your grandmother? And your grandfather? Where had they lived? (*Details of where born; any migration story.*) What had been their occupations? Can you describe their characters? How much did you see of them? Did they help to bring you up? Did you ever stay with them? Has your mother helped them in any way (practically, or financially)? What do you think were their main interests? Were they religious? How did they get on together? Were you close to them? Was either of them a strong influence on you?

How many children did they have?

Now can I ask you about your grandparents on your father's side? *REPEAT as above. Also, ask in similar detail about any stepgrandparents.*

Do you remember any other relatives of the older generations in your family (great-uncles and aunts, cousins, stepkin)? What kind of work did they do? How much contact did you have with them? Were you close to any of them? Was anyone an important influence on you? *If yes: ask in detail.*

Were there any other old people who were especially important to you as a child? *If yes: ask for detail.*

### *Parents*

Now I'd like to ask you about your parents. Let's start with your father. When was your father born? Where? How old was he when he died? When was that? Can you describe his character to me? Did he show affection? What about anger? Were you close to him? Was he easy to talk to?

What work did he do? Did he always do that kind of work? Did he sometimes do more than one job? Do you remember your father ever being out of work? *If yes: How did you manage then?*

Now I'd like to talk about your mother. When was she born? Where? How old was she when she died? When was that? Can you describe her character to me? Did she show affection? What about anger? Were you close to her? Was she easy to talk to?

What kind of work did she do (before and after children)? Did she always do that kind of work? Did she continue working after she had her children? *If yes: Who looked after you while she worked? Was she ever out of work? If yes: How did you manage then?*

How many children did she have? Can you remember when they were born?

Where do you fit into the order? Did all your brothers/sisters live with you? All the time? *If no: Where did they live then?*

Did your parents bring you up to consider certain things important in life? What kind of a person did they hope you would grow up to be? Did they hold up any examples to you? If you did something they disapproved of, what would happen? Was your father or your mother stricter with you? What sort of things was s/he strict about? Did either of them strike you physically? How would you compare your mother and your father as influences in your life?

Now can we think about your parents as a couple? Can you tell me the story of their relationship as you know it? *Check: How they met, how long together, whether married.*

What were the best things about their relationship? And the worst things? Do you recall any family violence when you were growing up?

*If split:* Why do you think that they split? Can you tell me the story of their break-up? Did you hear them quarrelling? Did they discuss it with you at all? Was there anyone else you could confide in?

How did life change for you then? Did you move house? Did your parents continue to quarrel after they broke up or not? How often did you see your (absent) father/mother? Where did you meet him/her? Did you miss him/her? Did you ask him/her for advice? What do you think you lost through not living with him/her? Were you in any way closer to your (co-residing) mother/father when s/he had no partner? Do you remember her/him crying? Were you criticised less or more now?

Were either your father or your mother involved in any subsequent relationships? *If yes:* How did that affect your own relationship with him/her? How did you get on with their new partner(s)? How did they treat you?

Did they have other children? How would you describe your relationship with your half-brothers/sisters? Were you close to them?

*If relevant:* Now I would like to talk a little bit about your stepfather/mother. When was s/he born? Where? Can you describe his/her character to me? What did s/he do? Did s/he always do that kind of work?

How were he and your mother (she and your father) as a couple? How long did s/he live with you? How were things changed by his/her joining the family? What about household tasks? How much of a role did s/he play in bringing you up (discipline, financial support, playing)? Did s/he bring in any new ideas or attitudes? How would you describe your relationship with him/her? Was s/he easy to talk to? Were you close to him/her? Has s/he been an important influence on you?

Did you know his/her parents and family? Did s/he have children of his/her own? Did they also move in or not? How did you get on with them? Were you close to any of them? Were there any difficulties between the children of different parents? Quarrels? When different people took sides, who was on each side? Did you ever all sit down and talk and try to sort things out together as a family? Who decided the rules in the house?

### *Siblings/cousins/uncles/aunts*

Let's talk now about the other people in your family (*including any half-blood kin*).

First, what about your brothers and sisters? Growing up as children, how did you get along? Did you feel any differently about your half/stepbrothers and sisters? Where do your brothers and sisters live now? Are you in touch with them? Do you/can you visit them often? How many of them are married? What sort of work are they doing? Do you have a favourite brother or sister? Can you tell me more about him/her? Was he/she an important influence on you?

What about your uncles/aunts? Did they live near you or with you when you were a child? How much did you see of them? Did you have a favourite uncle/auntie? Was he/she an important influence in your life?

I imagine you may have had some cousins—did you spend time with your cousins? What sort of relationship did you have with them? Did you have a favourite cousin? Are you still in touch? Has this cousin been an influence on you?

Did you have godparents? Or family friends that you might consider an aunt or uncle? Have any of them been an important influence in your life?

Were there any times when you got together with the wider family (a wedding, funeral, festival, or big event)? Can you describe a typical family get-together for me? Who was there? Did the family always get on together? How many would stay overnight? Do you still have any big get-togethers?

How did members of the family living in different places keep in touch in the past? What about today? How common was it/is it to write letters or phone? What information was important to pass on by phone/letter (such as family news and local gossip; tips about work opportunities at home and abroad, housing, or travel; etc.)?

### *Daily life in childhood*

Now I would like to ask you some questions about your daily life in childhood.

Who owned the house? The land? *If rented*: What was your relationship with your landlord like? *If owned*: Do you think that owning your house is important? Does your family still own the house/land? Can you describe the house to me? How many rooms did it have? Where did you all sleep in the house? What was the furniture like? Did your parents improve it in any way?

Who lived in your home when you were a child growing up? Was there anyone besides your parents and brothers and sisters (e.g., other kin, lodger, domestic help: if yes, probe for details of role, relationship with children)?

Who did what around the house when you were a child: the cooking/cleaning/washing etc.? Did you help around the house/garden? What kind of things did you have to do? Did your brothers/sisters have to help? Who made your clothes? Did your mother/father grow vegetables/keep animals? Did you help with this? Did your father help with the household tasks? In what way? Did he look after you on his own or play with you? Did your mother play with you? Did the family sit down together for meals? Were you allowed to talk then or not?

Who did you play with as a child? What sort of games did you play? Were you free to play with whom you liked? Did you keep pets/take part in sports/join any clubs? When your parents were not working, what kind of things did they do to enjoy themselves? Did they go out to clubs or pubs, sport, or cinema? Together or separately? Did you go out together as a family? Did you go on holidays?

Did you go to church as a child? Which religion or denomination? How often? How important was religion to you as a child?

Were any of you seriously ill when you were a child? What kind of help did they get? How did that affect your lives?

When you were a child, was there any talk of politics or trade unionism in your family? Were any members of your family involved with a trade union or with politics?

### *Community and class*

Do you think of yourself as a rural or an urban person? What's better about living in the town or the country? Has the local environment changed since you were a child? How? Has that concerned you?

Can you describe your childhood neighbourhood to me? Did you have neighbours living close by? Did neighbours help each other? In what ways? Did anyone help your family when, for instance, a baby was born or someone was ill or died? Did neighbours sometimes look after you? Did they discipline you? What sort of things would they correct you over?

Did your parents have friends? Were your mother's friends different from your father's? Where did they see them? Did they visit your home? How did they entertain themselves when they got together? How often were you included?

Many people divided society into different social classes or groups. What do you think the different ones were at that time? Which did your family belong to? Do you think it was possible then to move from one to another?

In your neighbourhood, were you considered better off or worse off than your neighbours?

In what ways did this show up? Were there people richer/poorer than you? Who were the best-off people there (*probe: occupations, ethnic groups*)? What was your relationship with them? Who were the poor people? What was your relationship with them? Who did you mix most easily with? Did one group feel itself superior to the other? Were there places your parents wouldn't let you go to or children they would not let you mix with? If yes: Why was that?

### *School*

Now I would like to ask you some questions about your schooling. When did you start school? What schools did you go to? When did you leave? What did you think of these schools? *If relevant:* Would you have liked to have stayed on longer? Did you leave school with any qualifications? Do you regret not having more? While you were at school, how well did you do in the class? Did your parents encourage you with your school work?

Can you remember the teachers? How did you feel about them? Were they strict? What about? Did you get into any trouble at school? Did they emphasise certain things as important in life? Did they encourage discussion? Was any teacher an important influence on you?

Did they treat children from different social backgrounds or races differently? What about the other children? Were there any gangs in the school? Who were your friends (e.g., occupations/race)? Did you go to each other's houses? Were you good at sports/games?

What were your own dreams and hopes on leaving school?

*If went on to higher education:* Subjects, new friends, new attitudes, influence of lecturers, clubs and leisure, position of women.

### *Employment*

Now I would like to talk about your working life. While you were at school, did you have any part-time jobs? When you left school, what did you want to do?

Did you experience any difficulties getting work? Why do you think this was (economic situation, race, etc.)? When you were growing up, did anyone talk to you about prejudice? Have you had other similar experiences—in work, or social services, or socially?

How did you get your first full-time job? Was it through family/friends/other connections? What did you do in that job? How did you feel about it? How did you learn?

Did you have to go to any courses? Were any practical jokes played on you? What hours did you work? Did you feel you were reasonably paid or not? How much of it did you give to your mother? How did you get on with the others at work? Did men and women work together? Could you talk or relax or have fun together at all at the workplace? Did you join any trade union or works associations? What contact did you have with your employers or managers? How did you feel about them? Did you have any chances of promotion?

How long did you stay in that job? What was your next job? How did you get it? What did you do in it? How long did you stay in it? (*For all significant jobs, repeat as above; for all main occupations, it is important to devise fuller questions specific to that occupation.*)

Did you ever have more than one job at the same time? What were the jobs? Why did you do more than one job? How did you manage the time? Did you ever work away from your home area? When and where? What do you think is the difference in work opportunities and experience between working here and abroad? How far has changing technology affected your working life? Your relationships with others at work? Your pride in the job? Which of these jobs do you think was the best? Did you ever think of changing to another occupation?

### *Leisure and courting*

Now could we talk about your leisure activities, including courting when you were young? How long did you live at home? Did you have your own room where you could entertain your friends? Where did you live after you left home? Who did you share with? *Describe house.* Were you expected to help your family (brothers, sisters, parents) by earning?

During your leisure time, what did you like to do? Did your interests change? Were there any sports that you played regularly? Did you belong to any clubs, associations, or churches? Did you have any hobbies? Did you go to the cinema, dance halls, shopping, pubs, etc.? What was a good night out in those days?

Do you remember doing anything which could have got you into trouble with the police?

Did you do anything that your parents would have disapproved of? What did they think of young people who got into fights, or pinching things? Gambling or drugs or smoking?

Did you make new friends after leaving school? How did you meet? Did you stick to a group? What did you do together? Did you have any special friends at this time? Did any of them become an important influence? What about girlfriends/boyfriends? Do you remember

your parents' attitudes towards sex? How would they have reacted to your having sexual intercourse when you were going out? Did they offer you advice on sex or on relationships? Who did you go to if you needed that kind of advice? What were your parents' views on having children before marriage? And your views on that? What did they think about inter-racial relations? About same-sex relationships? And you?

*If not married and still single:* Why do you think you have not had a long-term partner or married? Did you ever feel family/community pressure to be married or be in a relationship? How do you deal with this? What are the advantages in staying single? And the disadvantages?

*If married or living together:* Can you tell me the story of the main relationships you had before marrying/settling down? How did you meet? What did s/he do? How did the relationship develop? What was good and what was difficult about it? Why did it end?

### *Marriage and children*

Can we now talk about your later family life? Can you tell me how you and your partner first met? How old were you then? And s/he? Can you tell me about him/her (country of origin, social background, job, personality)? How do s/he and your parents get on? How much do you have to do with his/her family? What are they like?

Did you live together or marry first? Why did you decide that? How long had you been going out before you lived together? Where did you live? Can you describe it? Did your parents help you in any way in setting up house? Or did they help you later on? How long did you live there? Can you describe the subsequent homes you lived in together (*probe as above: for main homes describe rooms, furniture*)? Were they rented (*relationship with landlord*) or did you own them? Why? Did you improve any of them? If married, either to former or present partner: Why did you get married? How old were you then? How old was your wife/husband? How long did you know each other before you married?

Did you have children before you married? If yes: Who was their father/mother? What was the reaction of your mother/father when they learnt you were going to become a parent and were not married? Did they help you? What kinds of help did they offer?

Can you remember your wedding day? Can you describe it? Who came? Who helped? Who paid for the event?

Do you still live with your husband/wife?

*If yes:* How would you describe your relationship now? Do you talk together and share important things? What do you do if you disagree? How has your sexual relationship changed?

What kind of work has your partner done since you were together? Do you discuss money? Who would you say is in charge of the household budget? Do you share the household chores and responsibilities? Who does what?

*If no longer together:* How did that come about? What went wrong with your relationship? Can you tell me the story of the break-up? How do you and your ex-partner get on now?

Can you tell me about your subsequent partners? (*Repeat detailed questions.*)

Now can we talk about your children?

Did you want to have children sometime in your life? How many children have you had? Names and years of birth. Did you plan to have the number you did? Contraception. Where were your children born? *If man:* Were you present? How did you feel? What part did you play in caring for the baby?

*If woman:* Did you know what to expect in childbirth? Books; classes; medical care. How did you get on? Who else was there? How did you feed your first baby? Did you have any difficulties? If you needed advice, who did you ask? Did you punish your child if s/he was naughty? How? For what? Did you continue working when the children were small? How did you manage care for the child? (Neighbours/friends/creche; pay?) Did you get practical or financial help from the family?

*All:* When you were bringing them up, what did you think was most important to give them?

Did you think there was a right and a wrong way of bringing them up? How much did you talk to them? Who did you talk to if you were worried about them? How helpful were your mother and mother-in-law? Did you believe that girls and boys should be treated the same or differently? How much did you expect them to help in the home? Boys as much as girls? Did

you bring them up to believe that certain things are important in life? If they did something you disapproved of, what would you do? Would you sometimes strike them? Did you or your partner play with them or take them out? Did you go on holidays together?

How has your children's education gone? What kind of schools did they go to? How involved have you been? Have they experienced any difficulties in school? As they grew older, how much freedom did you give them? Did you know their friends? How did you treat their boy/girlfriends? What did you think if they went out with someone from another race? What would have been your view of your son/daughter having children before marriage?

Do you have any other children we have not mentioned, for example by other relationships?

Where do all your children live now? What are their occupations? When do you see each other?

How do you think that your attitudes towards your children were any different from your parents' attitudes towards you when you were growing up? What are your hopes, dreams, and aspirations for your children?

*If separated:* How did becoming pregnant change your relationship? Did you feel that a father should help provide for a mother and child (financial/spiritual/practical)? How many children did you have together? Did he/you support them? In what way? With money? Did he/you visit them? How often? Do you think he/you did enough to support them? What do you think the role of a father should be? Do you think that children need a father around when they are growing up? What do you think are the qualities of good parenting?

*If repartnered:* Can you describe the relationship between the children and your new partner? Has s/he been an influence on them? How did things change when s/he moved in (roles, housework, discipline, leisure)? Have you (and your present partner) been bringing up children by different relationships? How have they got on together? Have there been any special difficulties? Quarrels? When the family takes sides, who is on which side? Do you ever sit down and talk and find solutions together as a stepfamily?

### *Changing daily life*

In your adult life, what have you (and your partner) most enjoyed doing for pleasure (*probe: watching TV, sport, music, pubs, hobbies, travel, etc.*)? Together or separately?

How important have friends been to you in your adult life? Who have been your closest friends? What do you share with them? What do you do together? Do you help each other? Where do they live? How much contact do you have?

Can you describe how the experience of travelling has changed in your lifetime? How did you mostly get about when you were younger (bus, tram, bike)? Did you bike far? Do you remember how things were different when fewer people had cars? Is it still a pleasure to go for a drive? What about the experience of shopping, how has that changed—where you shop, what you buy? What about the food you buy? Can you describe how typical meals have changed since your childhood? (*Probe for continuities in orthodox religious or ethnic diets.*) How much variety was there in food when you were younger? Did it taste better? Do you cook yourself? How did you learn?

Can you describe the main neighbourhoods you have lived in as an adult? How much contact have you had with neighbours? Have any helped when you have been in difficulty? Can you describe the main social groups or classes in each neighbourhood? Do you think it is possible to move from one social class to another? Can you think of anyone who did? Which group/class were you closest to? Do you have any friends from other groups? Was there any conflict between the different groups? Have you ever been active in politics? Have you belonged to any local clubs or associations? Or churches?

How has your health been in your adult life? Have you been satisfied with the care you have received? Have you or your family ever tried any alternative therapies or complementary medicine? Can you tell me about anyone in your family or among your friends who has had experience of mental illness? How do you think social attitudes to dying have changed in your lifetime? How have funerals changed?

*Later life*

Do you have grandchildren? How often do you see them? Do you help your son/daughter take care of them? What kind of things do you do? Do you think this is the kind of help grandparents should give? Do they help you in any way (visiting/caring/money)?

When did you decide to retire? Why? How did that affect you financially? What has been your main interest since retirement—inside and outside the home? How has your relationship with your partner changed? And with your children? And grandchildren? And your friends?

*Conclusion*

How would you describe yourself, your identity now (e.g., as working class, a Yorkshireman, Black British, etc.)? How has that changed since childhood? Have you changed differently from your family and friends?

What has been the best thing in your life? The worst thing? What would you most like to do in the time ahead?

I'd like to thank you for giving me such a full and helpful account of your life and experiences, which will be very valuable for our research/my project.

**APPENDIX General Information**

*To be completed after the interview*

Interview number:

Name:

Male/female:

Address:

Date and place of birth:

Key moves between places and dates:

Present Occupation:

Single/with partner/married/separated/divorced/widowed?

If ever married/separated, dates of marriage and separation:

Number of children:



# Notes

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## Chapter 1

1. On the social purposes and manipulation of history: Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (1985); Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983); Chesneaux, *Pasts and Futures: What Is History For?* (1978); Samuel and Thompson, *The Myths We Live By* (1990).

2. Notable examples of this type of oral history work include Brody, *Maps and Dreams* (1982), on mapping hunting rights, and his eloquent overview of oral tradition societies, *The Other Side of Eden* (2001); Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories* (1998); Cross and Barker, *At the Desert's Edge* (1991); Miller, *Oral History on Trial* (2011). The London NGO Panos worked for twenty-six years in over thirty countries with its Oral Testimony Programme until its recent closing; for details, consult its website, which continues, or its last book, Bennett and McDowell, *Displaced* (2012). There is also a Panos Paris, which has been recording victims of sexual violence in the Congo (DRC).

3. For a pessimistic counter-view of the possibilities of linking historical study with popular socialist politics, see Popular Memory Group (1982).

4. Reinhartz, *Feminist Methods of Social Research* (1992), ch. 7; Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words* (1991); Armitage, *Women's Oral History* (2002).

5. For a good introduction to recent oral history work in the community, see Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, with different selections in the second edition (1998), Parts III ('Advocacy and Empowerment') and V ('Making Histories'), and third edition (2016), Parts IV ('Making Histories') and V ('Advocacy and Empowerment').

6. Brian Harrison, 'Tape Recorders and the Teaching of History', *Oral History*, 1, no. 2 (1972): 9.

7. Rob Perks, 'The Century Speaks: A Public History Partnership', *Oral History* 29, no. 2 (2001): 95–105; 'The Nineties', produced by Ann Paul (see Gloria Wood and Paul Thompson, *The Nineties* [London: BBC, 1993]); Steve Humphries, 'Oral History on Television: A Retrospective', *Oral History* 36, no. 2 (2008): 99–106.

8. Schweitzer, *Reminiscence Theatre* (2007). The transcripts and images are archived at the University of Greenwich, where they are being used by a new generation of students. American oral history theatre also goes back to the 1980s, as in 'Baltimore Voices' or the St Paul History Theatre.

9. See chapter eight.

10. There are many excellent oral histories focusing on past community life in Britain: one long-circulating example, portraying neighbourly life in crowded Glasgow city tenements, is Jean Faley, *Up Oor Close* (Glasgow: White Cockade, 1990). And for the most powerful of all community oral histories, on the mining towns in the American Appalachians: Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County* (2011).

11. Benjamin Filene, 'Listening Intently: Can Storycorps Teach Museums How to Win the Hearts of Audiences', in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: Pew Center, 2011), 174–87; Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories* (1998); Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom* (1991). There are many excellent humbler publications on these themes, for example *Voices from Detention* (London: Barbed Wire Britain, 2002); or on migrants, for example *Asian Voices: Life Stories from the Indian Sub-Continent* (Hammersmith, London: Ethnic Communities Oral History Project, 1993); and Stephen Garr Ostrander and Martha Aladjem Bloomfield, *The Sweetness of Freedom: Stories of Immigrants* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010). On war and trauma, see chapter eight.

12. Voice of Witness series (San Francisco: McSweeney's), including Chris Ying and Lola Vollen, *Voices from the Storm* (2006); Vollen and Eggers, *Surviving Justice* (2008); Walzer, *Out of Exile* (2008); Cave and Sloan, *Listening on the Edge* (2014).

13. Krog, *Country of My Skull* (1998), 31; Kenneth Christie, *The South African Truth Commission* (London: Macmillan, 2000). For analyses of the restitution, truth, and reconciliation process in Africa, see E. Stanley, 'Evaluating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 39, no. 3 (2001): 525–46; and Joseph Ben Kaifala, JD, 'Transitional Justice in Sierra Leone: Oral History, Human Rights and Post-Conflict Reconciliation', *Forum* (2014): 34.

14. George Ewart Evans, 'Approaches to Interviewing', *Oral History* 1, no. 4 (1973): 57.

## Chapter 2

1. Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, trans C. Cocks (London: H. G. Bohn, 1848; originally published in Paris, 1847), ii: 530.

2. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française* (1848), ii: 530: 'la tradition orale'; James Westfall Thompson, *History of Historical Writing* (London: Peter Smith, 1942), ii: 241.

3. Reissued as *Oral Tradition as History* (1985), expounding a similar viewpoint, although more cautiously. For an autobiographical account, see Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994). His first recording was in the Congo in 1953, of a Bushong poet-historian who had told him, 'we carry our newspapers in our heads': 17. On oral tradition and history, see also Cohen, *Womunafu's Bunafu* (1970); Henige, *Oral Historiography* (1982); Miller, *The African Past Speaks* (1980); Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond* (2007).

4. D. T. Nian, ed., *Sundiata: Epic of Old Mali* (London: Longman, 1965), 1.

5. Alex Haley, 'Black History, Oral History and Genealogy', *Oral History Review* (1973): 14–17. Haley has been criticised for inaccuracies and even plagiarism in his account, but his underlying aim was not so much to write his own family history as to convey the group story of black Americans brought over as slaves: a transgenerational *testimonio*, attacked just as was *I, Rigoberta Menchu*.

6. On the transition to literacy, Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (1982); Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977); Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality* (1988). Vail and White, *Power and the Praise Poem* (1991), trace the evolution of these ideas in colonial anthropology and how they linked with the more recent ideas on the media of Marshall McLuhan, who was Ong's supervisor: xi.

7. A sustained critique of both oral and printed sources over three centuries on a single topic, the Protestant defiance of the French state in the Cévennes, is in Joutard, *La Légende des Camisards* (1977).

8. Bede, trans. L. Shirley-Price (London: Penguin, 1955), 34. On the Spanish friars in Mexico, Georges Baudot, *Utopie et Histoire au Mexique* (Paris: Privat, 1977).

9. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (1982); Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977); Bishop Burnet, *History of His Own Time* (The Hague, 1724): 89.

10. Voltaire, *Works*, trans. W. F. Fleming (New York: Dingwall-Rock, 1927), v. 62, xi. 9, and xviii. 6, 8, and 15; Thompson, *Historical Writing*, ii: 67.

11. Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, 13 Oct. 1750; James Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (London: Charles Dilly, 1785), 425–26.

12. Trans. R. Rawlinson (London, 1728), 276–68.

13. Thompson, *Historical Writing* (1942), ii: 67.

14. Thomas Babington Macaulay, *History of England* (London, 1848–55), i. 382–84, 418.

15. David Vincent, 'The Decline of Oral Tradition in Popular Culture', in *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth Century England*, ed. Robert D. Storch (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 20–47.

16. Evans, *From Mouths of Men* (1976), 179; Sir Walter Scott, *Tales of My Landlord* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1817).

17. Oliver Lawson Dick, ed., *Aubrey's Brief Lives* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949), xxix.

18. Richard Gough, *Human Nature Displayed in the History of Myddle* (London: Centaur Press, 1968), 1 (Hoskins); David G. Hey, *An English Rural Community: Myddle under the Tudors and Stuarts* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1974).

19. Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); James Everett, *Wesleyan Methodism in Manchester and Its Vicinity* (Manchester, 1827), 1. The London Baptist minister Josiah Thompson was compiling testimonies on early dissenting congregations in 1772–84, now in Dr Williams Library, London (information from John Walsh); Antoine Court among French Protestants in the 1730s. Eleanor Eden, ed., *The Autobiography of a Working Man* (London: 1862), is especially remarkable for its lively, almost spoken style. The *How I Became a Socialist* series of the 1890s illustrates the conversion testimonial in reverse. See also David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiography* (London: Europa, 1981). For full listings, including over a thousand authors, John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall, eds., *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated Critical Bibliography (1750–1945)* (New York: New York University Press, 1985–87), i–iii.

20. Anthony Oberschall, *Empirical Social Research in Germany 1848–1914* (Paris: Mouton, London, 1965), 81. For a selection, see Alfred Kelly, ed., *The German Worker: Working Class Autobiographies from the Age of Industrialization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). In France working-class autobiography began with militants and the 1848 Revolution and the Paris Commune of 1871, but remained a rarity: Lejeune, *Je est un autre* (1980).

21. Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), 1–3.

22. John Millar, *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, 3rd ed. (London: J. Murray, 1790), 1.

23. *The State of the Poor* (London: 1797), ii. On the development of survey research in Europe and America from the 1830s onwards, Martin Bulmer, Kevin Bales, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, eds., *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

24. Eileen Yeo, 'Mayhew as a Social Investigator', in Thompson and Yeo, *The Unknown Mayhew* (1971), 54–63; Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851).

25. Mary Higgs, *Glimpse into the Abyss* (London: King, 1906); Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (London: King, 1906); George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (London: Gollancz, 1933).

26. Paul Göhre, *Three Months in a Workshop* (London: Sonnenschein, 1895).

27. Robert Sherard, *The White Slaves of England* (London: James Bowden, 1898), 41–43; Harold Wright, ed., *Letters of Stephen Reynolds* (London: Leonard and Virginia Woolf, 1923), 109, and *Daily News*, 22 May 1923.

28. Webb, *Our Partnership*, 27, 158; Margaret Cole, *Beatrice Webb* (London: Longmans, 1945), 59.

29. *Economic Journal* 16 (1906): 522.

30. Twaddle, 'On Ganda Historiography', and Law, 'Early Yoruba Historiography'; Denis and Ntsimane, *Oral History in a Wounded Country* (2008), 5–6; *The James Stuart Archive*, 1–5 (1976–2001).

31. Perkins, *Border Life: Experience and Memory in the Revolutionary Ohio Valley* (1998); Caughey, *Hubert Howe Bancroft: Historian of the West* (1946); Willa Baum, 'Oral History: A Revived Tradition at the Bancroft Library', *Pacific North West Quarterly* (April 1967): 57–64.

32. Jules Michelet, *Le Peuple* (Brussels: Wouters, 1846; trans. London: Charles Edwards, 1846), i–ii.

33. Michelet, *Le Peuple* (1846), i.

34. Michelet, *Le Peuple* (1846), vi.

35. Jules Michelet, *History of France*, trans. G. H. Smith (London: Whittaker, 1844–47), i: i–ii.

36. F. W. Maitland, *Domesday Book and Beyond* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1897), v, 3, 520.

37. William Robertson, *History of Scotland* (Dublin: G. and A. Ewing, 1759), 1: iv–vi, 1, 5, 11. David Hume and Edward Gibbon worked with similar care.

38. Dilthey, *Meaning in History* (1961), 85–86.

39. C. V. Langlois and Charles Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History*, trans. G. G. Berry (London: Duckworth, 1898), 17.

40. Acton's letter to contributors: Fritz Stern, *The Varieties of History* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 247.

41. Langlois and Seignobos (1898), *Introduction to the Study of History*, 129, 134, 155, 175, 196; R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 131.

42. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 569–72.

43. *Listener*, 1 Feb. 1973: 148; Ian Cobain, *History Thieves: Secrets, Lies and the Shaping of a Modern Nation* (London: Granta, 2016).

44. A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–45* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 609; *Struggle for Mastery*, 574.

45. We survey this in two stages: first, in this chapter, looking at modern oral history in the English-speaking world, and then in chapter three sketching recent developments in the rest of the world.

46. Walter Lowe Clay, *The Prison Chaplain: A Memoir of the Rev. John Clay* (Cambridge, UK: Macmillan, 1861). For perceptive discussions of Chicago life story sociology, see especially Bennett, *Oral History and Delinquency* (1981), and Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Shepton Mallet: Open Books, 1982), ch. 9.

47. H. L. Beales and R. S. Lambert, *Memoirs of the Unemployed* (London: Gollancz, 1934). The work of Mass Observation, the main centre in Britain for collecting written diaries and essays from the broader population, began in the late 1930s.

48. James T. Baker, *Studs Terkel* (New York: Twayne, 1992); John de Graaf and Alan Harris Stein, 'The Guerrilla Journalist as Oral Historian: An Interview with Louis "Studs" Terkel', *Oral History Review* 29, no. 1 (2002): 87–107. You can listen to audio extracts of interviews for some of his books through the website 'Studs Terkel: Conversations with America/Historical Voices'.

49. Bronislaw Malinowski, 'Myth in Primitive Psychology', in *The Frazer Lectures*, ed. W. R. Dawson (London: Macmillan, 1932), 97; cf. *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1927), 104.

50. Radin, *Crashing Thunder* (1926), viii. American anthropology was also strongly influenced by the commitment of Franz Boas to personal fieldwork, which was unusual among nineteenth-century anthropologists: he went thirteen times to Arctic North-West Canada, and his students included Paul Radin. For the American anthropological tradition, see Plummer, *Documents of Life* (1983); Allport, *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science* (1942); Gottshalk, Kluckhohn, and Angell, *The Use of Personal Documents in History, Anthropology, and Sociology* (1945). Other outstanding examples include Dyk, *Son of Old Man Hat* (1938); Mintz, *Worker in the Cane* (1960); Lewis, *Pedro Martinez* (1964); Hughes, *The Fantastic Lodge* (1963). An early instance of representing a culture through a woman is Underhill, *Autobiography of a Papago Woman* (1936). The rare British anthropological contributions to the method include Gorer, *Himalayan Village* (1938), and an outstanding early woman's life story in Smith, *Baba of Karo* (1954).

51. Hirsch, *Portrait of America* (2003); Couch, *These Are Our Lives* (1939), ix–x. Somebody was also playing with such ideas in New York: witness the caricature of Professor Sea Gull, with his vast project of 'An Oral History of Our Time', an informal history of 'the shirt-sleeved multitude', incomplete after twenty-six years of bar-room tipping and flophouse dossing, of Joseph Mitchell's *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* (New York: Duck, Sloan and Pearce, 1943), 68–86.

52. On archiving, e.g., Ellen D. Swain, 'Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century', *American Archivist* 66 (2003): 139–58.

53. On oral history as popular culture, e.g., Loyal Jones, *Minstrel of the Appalachians* (2002) on Bascom Lamar, folksinger; Taylor, *Counter Culture: The American Coffee Shop Waitress* (2009); Jones and White, *All Around the Track* (2007) on racing drivers; and on leisure motoring, David King Dunaway, *A Route 66 Companion* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

54. On Australian oral history, Darian-Smith and Hamilton, eds., *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia* (1994); reports in *Oral History* 18, no. 1 (1990) and 22, no. 2 (1994).

55. Brian Attwood and Fiona Magowan, eds., *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand* (Crow's Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2001); Sir Raymond Firth interviewed by Paul Thompson, 'Pioneers of Social Research', British Library.

56. Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007). Local centres include the Clare Oral History and Folk Group, whose website mentions work with local care homes.

57. Clear, *Women of the House* (2000); Elizabeth Kiely and Maire Leane, *Irish Women at Work, 1930–1960: An Oral History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012).

58. On Northern Ireland: Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* (1982); Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past* (2007); also Johanne Devlin Trew, *Leaving the North: Migration and Memory, Northern Ireland 1921–2011* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), especially on family memories of migrations in multiple directions.

59. For an overall review, Angela Bartie and Arthur McIvor, 'Oral History in Scotland', *Scottish Historical Review* 92, Supplement, 234 (2013): 108–36. On science, see Edge, *Astronomy Transformed* (1977); on leisure, Devlin, *Kings, Queens and People's Palaces* (1991); on religion, Calum Brown and Jayne Stephenson, "'Sprouting Wings?" Women and Religion in Scotland, 1890–1950', in *Women in Scottish Society, 1800–1945*, ed. Esther Breitenbach and Eleanor Gordon (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 95–120.

60. Macdougall, *Voices from Work and Home* (2000); Terry Brotherstone and Hugo Manson, 'Voices of Piper Alpha: Enduring Injury in Private Memory, Oral Representation and Labour History', *Scottish Labour History* 46 (2011), drawing on their large North Sea Oil project archived at the British Library.

61. Cant, *Footsteps and Witnesses* (1993); Annmarie Hughes, *Gender and Political Identities in Scotland, 1919–1939* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 199. This is a scholarly multi-sourced book, but given the fear and secrecy around domestic abuse, I do not see how any evidence can establish whether the situation was worse in the 1930s than earlier.

62. Abrams, *Myth and Materiality* (2005).

63. Ugolini, *Experiencing War as the Enemy Other* (2011); Boyle, *Metropolitan Anxieties* (2011).

64. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 12–13.

65. *Auto/biography*, 1992–2008; Okely and Callaway, *Anthropology and Autobiography* (1992).

66. David Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain 1918–51* (London: Clarendon Press, 1953), 214; Nelson Mandela, *The Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), ix.

67. *History Workshop Journal* 1, no. 1 (1976): 1; Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto, 1973).

68. Gentle Author, *Spitalfields Life* (London: Saltyard Books, 2012).

69. SSRC Newsletter, 31 July 1976: 6.

70. E.g., on Cardiff, Kenneth Little, *Negroes in Britain* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948); on Brixton, London, Sheila Paterson, *Dark Strangers* (London: Tavistock, 1963).

71. Elder and Giele, *The Craft of Life Course Research* (2009); Cherlin and Furstenberg, *The New American Grandparent* (1986); Paul Thompson, 'Researching Family and Social Mobility with Two Eyes: Some Experiences in the Interaction Between Qualitative and Quantitative Data', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 7, no. 3 (2004): 237–57.

72. For a more moderate, but still uncomprehending, critique of oral history from this standpoint, see Louise Tilly and the ensuing debate on 'People's History and Social Science History', *International Journal of Oral History* 6, no. 1 (1985): 5–46.

73. Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (London: Garland, 1970), 142. He shifted later, but very grudgingly—1981 ed., 141.

74. Surprisingly, this generational scepticism was shared by older left-wing historians: e.g., the condescending remarks about oral history by Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 272–73. Eric regularly lectured on 'grass roots history', and when he came to Colchester he included an attack on 'young men going around with tape recorders', glaring at me and my students who had enthusiastically come to hear him.

## Chapter 3

1. Keegan, *Facing the Storm* (1988), 10, 122.

2. Field, Meyer, and Swanson, *Imagining the City* (2007); Field, *Oral History, Community and Displacement* (2012).

3. Magema Fuze, *Abantu Abamnyama*, privately published 1922; republished in translation as *The Black People and Whence They Came*, trans H. C. Hugg, ed. A. T. Cope



(Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press; Durban: Killie Campbell Africana Library, 1979). The book is a mixture of oral tradition, recent Zulu history, and ethnography. Fuze was country-born around 1840, a convert to Christianity who worked for Bishop Colenso's mission, and hence got to know the Zulu royal family and teach their children, but retained his sympathy for rural customs. Killie Campbell (1881–1969) also played a significant role: daughter of a Durban magnate, her passion was for Bantu history, and she built up a huge archive, including over twenty thousand books, which she gave to Natal University. She understood the importance of oral memories, encouraged old white settlers to record their reminiscences, and in 1912 she ran an essay competition for Zulu and Sotho speakers to record the histories of their families. There were also African writers linked to the East Cape missions who drew on oral memories, among them A. Z. Ngani (*Ibali laba Gqunukhwebi* [Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1947]).

4. W. le Roux and A. White, eds., *Voices of the San: Living in Southern Africa Today* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2004). Regrettably there do not seem to be many parallels in North America or Australasia. In Brian Attwood and Fiona Magowan, eds., *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2001), of eleven contributors only one is indigenous.

5. Field, Meyer, and Swanson, *Imagining the City*, (2007): 51.

6. Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond* (2007); Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts* (1992); Luise White, Stephan Miescher, and David William Cohen, eds., *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); also, in this volume, chapter two notes 2, 5.

7. Cross and Barker, *At the Desert's Edge* (1991); Bennett and McDowell, *Displaced* (2012); Walzer, *Out of Exile*, (2008); Gardener and El Bushra, *Somalia—The Untold Story* (2004); Staunton, *Mothers of the Revolution* (1990); Baker, *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women* (1998). See also on men and war, Judy El Bushra, *The Impact of War on Somali Men* (World Bank Study Series; Washington, DC: Logica, 2015).

8. Shostak, *Nisa* (1983), 354; Davison, *Voices from Mutira* (1989); Andras P. Lyons and Harriet D. Lyons, eds., *Sexualities in Anthropology* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

9. Munson, *House of Si Abd Allah* (1984); Vincent Cranpazano, *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

10. Aomar Boum, *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

11. Rochelle Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Sherna Berger Gluck, 'Oral History and *el-Nakbah*', *Oral History Review* 35, no. 1 (2008): 68–80. Since 2010 an Iranian group has been publishing an *Oral History Weekly*. In February 2014 a conference on oral history in the Arab world was held at the Arab Centre for Research in Beirut, with papers from Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq, and themes including the role of women in the Egyptian revolution, Libyans deported by the Italian colonisers, political prisoners in Tunisia, and migrants—from Kerala to the Gulf, and from Iraq to the Netherlands. Diana Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 64; Matar, *What It Means to Be Palestinian* (2011), 349.

12. Alan Rosen, *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Interviews of David Boder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Tony Kushner, 'Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience: Holocaust Testimony in a Museum Setting', *Oral History* 29, no. 2 (2001): 83–94.

13. Gorkin, *Days of Honey*, Preface.

14. P. Lim Pui, James H. Morrison, and Kwa Chang Guan, *Oral History in South-East Asia* (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 1998); *Forum* 33 (2013), 'Special Issue: Confronting Mass Atrocities'; John Roosa, 'Who Knows? Oral History Methods in the Study of the Massacres of 1965–1966 in Indonesia' and Annie Pohlman, 'Telling Stories about Torture in Indonesia: Managing Risk in a Culture of Impunity'; Albert Maori Kiki, *Kiki: Ten Thousand Years in a Lifetime* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1968); Roger Keesing, *Elota's Story: The Life and Times of a Kwaio Big Man* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1978). A remarkably early example of academic work based on oral history in this region is John R. W. Smail,

*Bandung in the Early Revolution, 1945–46: A Study in the Social History of the Indonesian Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964).

15. Sulekha Creative website.

16. Hindu, 4 June 2012. The GandhiServe Foundation has a longstanding programme of political recordings of early nationalists. They also publish an information newsletter on folklore activities. Indira Chowdhury, *Growing the Tree of Science: Homi Bhabha and the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

17. Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert, 'Nationalist Memories: Interviewing Indian Middle Class Nationalist Women', *Oral History* 27, no. 2 (1999): 35–46; Chawla, *Home Uprooted* (2014), 8. On partition, also Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition Narratives among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Menon and Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries* (1998); and the Muslim experience of separation in Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). On other struggles: Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (Durham: Durham University Press, 2011); Lalita, Melkote, et al., *Women in the Teleghana People's Struggle* (1989); Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the North-West Frontier* (Oxford: James Currey, 2001).

18. Gugelberger, *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America* (1996); Arturo Arias, ed., *The Rigoberta Menchu Controversy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); William Westerman, 'Central American Testimonies and Performed Life Stories in the Sanctuary Movement', in Benmayor and Skotnes, *Migration and Identity* (1994), 167–82.

19. Domitila Barrios de Chungara with Moema Viezzer, *Let Me Speak! Testimony of a Woman of the Bolivian Mines* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978); Ricardo Valderrama, *Andean Lives: Gregorio Condori Mamami and Asunta Quispe Huaman* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Joanne Rappaport, *The Politics of Memory: Native Historical Interpretation in the Colombian Andes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Canessa, *Intimate Indigeneities* (2012); Elizabeth Dore, *Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

20. Winn, *Weavers of Revolution* (1986); Elizabeth Dore, 'Cubans' Life Stories: The Pains and Pleasures of Living in a Communist Society', *Oral History* 40, no. 1 (2012): 35–46; Gorkin, Pineda, and Leal, *From Grandmother to Granddaughter* (2000); Bell, *Walking on Fire* (2001); Hamilton, *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba* (2012); Gaby Küppers, ed., *Compañeras: Voices from the Latin American Women's Movement* (London: Latin American Bureau, 1994). See also Reed and Brandow, *Testimonies from the Guatemalan Labor Movement* (1996). In the 1960s Oscar Lewis was researching families in Cuba (briefly) and in Puerto Rico: e.g., *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty in San Juan and New York* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1967).

21. Valderrama, *Andean Lives* (1996), 35–37.

22. Steve Stern, *The Memory Box of Pinochet's Chile* (trilogy) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Winifred Tate, *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); on the children of the disappeared, Kaiser, *Postmemories of Terror* (2005).

23. Ecléa Bosi, *Memoria e Sociedade: Lembranças de Velhos* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999).

24. José Sergio Leite Lopes, *O Vapor do Diabo* [The Steam of the Devil] (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1978); José Ricardo Ramalho, *Mundo do Crime: a Ordem pelo Averso* [World of Crime: The Underside of Order] (Rio: Graal, 1979); Matthias Röhrig Assunção, *Capoeira: A History of an Afro-Brazilian Martial Art* (London: Routledge, 2005).

25. Worcman and Garde-Hansen, *Social Memory Technology* (2016), Section III.

26. Erna Brodber, *Myal* (London: New Beacon, 1988); Jean Besson, *Martha Brae's Two Histories: European Expansion and Caribbean Culture-Building in Jamaica* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). For Trinidad, Shaheeda Hosein, 'Marriage, Divorce and the Indian Woman in Trinidad', *Oral History* 30, no. 1 (2002): 63–72.

27. Including notably Franco Ferrarotti, *Vite di baracati* (1974) and *Vite di periferia* (1981); Alessandro Portelli, *Biografia di una città* (1985); Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory* (1987); Nuto Revelli, *Il mondo dei vinti* (1977) and *L'anello forte* (1985).

28. Adler, *The Gulag Survivor* (2002); Leydesdorff, *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide* (2011).



29. Alain Prévost, *Grenadou: paysan français* (Paris: Du Seuil, 1966); Pierre-Jakez Hélias, *Le cheval d'orgueil* (Paris: Plon, 1975) (trans. *The Horse of Pride* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978]); Serge Graftaux, *Mémé Santerre* (Paris: Editions du Jour, 1975) (trans. New York: Shocken Books, 1985).

30. Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 'Artisanal Bakery' (1981); Gilles Chantraine, *Par-delà les murs* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004); Marie-Thérèse Têtu-Delage, *Clandestins au pays des papiers: Expériences et parcours de sans-papiers Algériens* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009).

31. Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Hans Zeisel, *Marienthal: The Sociology of an Unemployed Community* (1933), trans. London: New Brunswick; 2002; Lutz Niethammer, 'Oral History as a Channel of Communication Between Workers and Historians', in Thompson, *Our Common History* (1982), 23–37; von Plato, Leh, and Thonfeld, *Hitler's Slaves* (2010).

32. Fritz Schütze, 'Pressure and Guilt: War Experiences of a Young German Soldier and Their Biographical Implications', *International Sociology* 7, no. 2 (1992): 187–208; Martin Kohli, 'Biographical Research in the German Language Area', in *A Commemorative Book in Honor of Florian Znaniecki*, ed. Zygmunt Dulczewski (Poznan: Naukowe, 1986), 91–110; Rosenthal, 'The Reconstruction of Life Stories' (1993), 59–91; Rosenthal, 'The Biographical Meaning of a Historical Event' (1989) and 'German War Memories' (1991). See also chapter ten.

33. Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf, *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science* (2000); Rosenthal, *The Holocaust in Three Generations* (1998); Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographical Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001) (over 1200 pages long). Hollway and Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* (2000), surprisingly advocate starting the interview in contradiction to their main approach, with a series of detailed hard questions, rather than an open question. For intergenerational life stories, Bertaux and Thompson, *Between Generations* (1993)—including Lena Inowlocki, 'Grandmothers, Mothers and Daughters: Intergenerational Transmission in Displaced Families in Three Jewish Communities', 139–53. There are also the transgenerational family studies of Michael Gorkin.

34. J. P. Roos, *Suomailen elämä* (Finnish Life) (Helsinki: SKS, 1987); Gullestad, *Everyday Life Philosophers* (1996), x; also on a competition, May, *Lone Motherhood in Finnish Women's Life Stories* (2001). For a recent overview of oral history work in Scandinavia, see *Oral History* 44, 2 (Autumn 2016), Nordic-Baltic Special Issue: especially Anne Heimo, 'Nordic-Baltic oral history on the move': 37–46, and Miika Tervonen, 'Going from house to house: exploring Roma encounters in rural Finland through oral history and written reminiscences': 91–99.

35. Lewkowicz, *The Jewish Community of Salonika* (2006); Peter Loizos, *The Greek Gift: Politics in a Cypriot Village* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975) and *The Heart Grown Bitter: A Chronicle of Cypriot War Refugees* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Holgar Briel, ed., *Challenging History: Oral History Work in Cyprus* (Nicosia: University of Nicosia Press, 2014)—including ch. 2 by Charis Psaltis on mixed villages, 34–47.

36. Daniela Koleva, 'Narrating Nature', in Hussey and Thompson, *The Roots of Environmental Consciousness* (2000), 63–75; Coleman, Koleva, and Bornat, *Ageing, Ritual and Social Change* (2013); Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution* (2010).

37. Skultans, *Testimony of Lives* (1998); Leinarte, *Adopting and Remembering Soviet Reality* (2010); Tim Smith, Rob Perks, and Graham Smith, *Ukraine's Forbidden History* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 1998); Rob Perks, 'Ukraine's Forbidden History', *Oral History* 21, no. 1 (1993): 43–53.

38. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain* (1995), 372; Alain Brossat, Sonia Combe, Jean-Yves Potel, and Jean-Charles Szeurek, *A l'Est la mémoire retrouvée* (Paris: La Découverte, 1990).

39. Irina Sherbakova, 'Voices from the Choir: Reflections on the Development of Oral History in Russia', and Daria Khubova, Andrei Ivankiev, and Tonia Sharova, 'After Glasnost: Oral History in the Soviet Union', in Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism* (1992), 89–116.

40. Bertaux, Thompson, and Rotkirch, *On Living Through Soviet Russia* (2004), 7. This also includes Victoria Semenova and Paul Thompson, 'Family Models and Transgenerational Influences', 220–46, and Irina Korovushkina Paert, 'Memory and Survival in Stalin's Russia: Old Believers in the Urals during the 1930s–50s', 195–213. On the 'long habit of silence' see more

recently Jehanne M. Gheith and Katherine R. Jollock, *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Incarceration and Exile* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

41. On women's testimonies: B. A. Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, eds., *A Revolution of Their Own: Women in Soviet Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998); Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History* (1997); cf. Gary Bruce, *The Firm: The Inside Story of the STASI* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

42. Michael Glenny and Norman Stone, *The Other Russia: The Experience of Exile* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990); Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

43. Parker, *Russian Voices* (1991), 303–305.

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35. Rosenthal, 'The Reconstruction of Life Stories' (1993); Reinhard Sieder, 'A Hitler Youth from a Respectable Family: The Narrative Composition and Deconstruction of a Life Story', in Bertaux and Thompson, 99–120; Roswitha Breckner, 'The Biographical-Interpretive Method: Principles and Procedures', in *SOSTRIS Working Paper* 2 (London: Centre for Biography in Social Policy, University of East London, 1998), 91–104; Michael Rustin, address on 18 Sept. 1998, and 'From Individual Life Stories to Sociological Understanding', *SOSTRIS Working Paper* 3 (1998), 112–27.
36. Trevor Lummis, 'Structure and Validity in Oral Evidence', *International Journal of Oral History* 2, no. 2 (1981): 109–20; *Listening to History* (1987), 94–106; and *Occupation and Society* (1985).
37. George Cook, *Canadian Oral History Association Journal* 1 (1975–76): 28–29.
38. John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (1976), xiv.
39. Annabel Faraday and Ken Plummer, 'Doing Life Histories', *Sociological Review* 27 (1979): 773–98; cf. Plummer, *Documents of Life* (1983), 119ff.
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41. Friedlander, *Emergence of a UAW Local* (1975), ix–xxxiii.

42. Friedlander, *Emergence of a UAW Local*, ix–xxxiii.
43. Hareven and Langenbach, *Amoskeag* (1978), 381–88; Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time* (1982).
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45. Joanna Bornat, 'Home and Work: A New Context for Trade Union History', *Oral History* (1977): 101–23.
46. Paul Thompson, 'Women in the Fishing: The Roots of Power Between the Sexes', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27 (1985): 3–32.
47. Paul Thompson, 'Life Histories and the Analysis of Social Change', in Bertaux, *Biography and Society* (1981), 289–306.
48. Bertaux and Thompson, *Pathways to Social Class* (1997); Paul Thompson, 'Family Myth, Models and Denials in the Shaping of Individual Life Paths', in Bertaux and Thompson, *Between Generations* (1993), 13–38 (33); Gorell Barnes, Thompson, Daniel, and Burchardt, *Growing Up in Stepfamilies* (1997).
49. Bertaux and Thompson, *Between Generations* (1993), 22.
50. Bertaux and Thompson, *Between Generations*, 35–36.
51. Alessandro Portelli, translated from *Primo Maggio* 13 (1979): 54–60 as 'What Makes Oral History Different', *History Workshop Journal* 12 (1981): 96–107; another version is in his *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (1991).
52. Danforth and Van Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War*, 2, 272.
53. Danforth and Van Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War*, 135.
54. Danforth and Van Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War*, 143; Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *No Mean Fighter* (London: Pluto Press, 1978).
55. Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers* (1974), 453–54.





# Bibliography

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We have added to this edition a full bibliography of the works most significant for oral history. All works cited by author and title in the main text are referenced either in the bibliography or the notes, but not in both: additional references for works not in the bibliography are cited in full in the footnotes. Dates are only given in the main text when thematically relevant.

## Key Books

On oral history there are two basic books in addition to *The Voice of the Past*. These are the general anthology by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (2nd ed., 1998; 3rd ed., 2016), and the overview by Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (2010). For life stories in social research, the best introduction is Ken Plummer, *Documents of Life: An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method* (1983) and *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism* (2001).

We may divide the other key general books between those before and after the early 1980s. Two early classics are Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (1965; modified reissue, *Oral Tradition as History*, 1985), and George Ewart Evans, *Where Beards Wag All: The Relevance of Oral Tradition* (1970), the first based on historical fieldwork in Africa, the second in eastern England. The earlier phase of life history sociology is represented by Daniel Bertaux, ed., *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences* (1981); and of European oral history by Paul Thompson, ed., *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe* (1982).

Subsequently, a crucial collection is Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (1991), while key new interpretative approaches are highlighted in Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (1991), Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, eds., *The Myths We Live By* (1990); and Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (1992).

On practical methodology, especially useful books include Don Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (2003); Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (2015); and Ken Howarth, *Oral History* (1998)—Yow and Howarth especially on the varieties of oral history. Nancy MacKay, Mary Quinlan, and Barbara Sommer give refreshingly clearly set out advice in their *Community Oral History Toolkit* (2013). For work in developing countries, Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, *Listening for a Change: Oral Testimony and Development* (1993). For readers in French, Daniel Bertaux, *Les récits de vie* (1997) on life stories.

In addition to *The Oral History Reader*, the most valuable anthologies are Tom Charlton, Lois Meyers, and Rebecca Sharpless, *Handbook of Oral History* (2006)—handier than their split version—and Don Ritchie, *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (2011). Nigel Gilbert's, *Researching Social Life* (2008) is a good practical sociological anthology.

On analysis, two contrasting approaches are statistical analysis in Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (1987), and Catherine Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (2008).

Lastly there are the journals: most notably, from England *Oral History* (1970–), the journal of the Oral History Society, and from the United States the *Oral History Review* (1973–) of the Oral History Association. The International Sociological Association's Biography and Society Research Committee publishes a *Newsletter* (1983–), and there are journals of national oral

history associations in Canada, Australia, and Brazil, as well as the trilingual *Words and Silences* (1997–) of the International Oral History Association. The bilingual Canadian journal *Forum* is now available only online, which allows articles to include audio clips. Earlier the *International Journal of Oral History* (1980–90) and the *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories* (1992–96) were also important.

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# Websites

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This brief list of websites, from many round the world, provides an index of all the websites we refer to. We have selected a few among them for comment in order to illustrate the range of countries they come from and the diversity of their themes and purposes. All those we have chosen offer significant recorded memories in whole or in extracts, in audio as well as text. We have tried to choose sites which are easy to find and use, clearly set out, and well-designed visually, using photographs as well as interviews.

References to internet sources are given in the main text where possible through names directly accessible through Google. We have added this list of full internet addresses, but it is quicker to access through Google. All were visited in February 2016. Addresses are listed in the order of their short names.

**1956 Institute**, Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Dohany u. 74, Budapest 1074, Hungary  
[rev.hu/](http://rev.hu/)

**Ambleside Oral History**, Ambleside Library, Kelsick Road, Ambleside, Cumbria LA22 0BZ, UK  
A well-designed website with photos as well as audio, searchable by topic or keyword, from 450 interviews about the Lake District.  
[aohg.org.uk](http://aohg.org.uk)

**Apollo Theater Education**, 253 West 125th Street, New York, NY 10027, USA  
[apollotheater.org/education](http://apollotheater.org/education)

**Arbetets Museum, Norrköping**, Laxholmen, Norrköping 60221, Sweden  
[arbetetsmuseum.se](http://arbetetsmuseum.se)

**Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology**, American Institute of Indian Studies, 22, Sector-32, Institutional Area, Gurugram, 122 001 Haryana, India  
[indiastudies.org/ethnomusicology/](http://indiastudies.org/ethnomusicology/)

**Bancroft Library, Berkeley**, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA  
[bancroft.berkeley.edu](http://bancroft.berkeley.edu)

**Bangla Stories**, Runnymede Trust, St Clement's Building, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK  
[banglastories.org/](http://banglastories.org/) or [info@runnymedetrust.org](mailto:info@runnymedetrust.org)

**BBC Video Nation**, BBC, Portland Place, London W1A 1AA, UK  
[bbc.co.uk/videonation/archive](http://bbc.co.uk/videonation/archive)

***Britain at Work: Voices from the Workplace, 1945–1995***, Trades Union Congress, 23–28 Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS, UK

This nationwide oral history programme is included in the TUC's main website, 'The Union Makes Us Strong'. It includes well-presented audio and narratives from over 100 people about work and union organising since 1945.  
[unionhistory.info/britainatwork](http://unionhistory.info/britainatwork)

***British Library***, 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB, UK

The British Library is the most active source of online oral history in Britain, and the Survey of English Dialects is one of its most-used collections: transcripts and audio extracts of 287 interviews from every region of Britain recorded in the 1950s as a dialect survey by Leeds University.

Other online audio projects at the British Library include 395 highlights from the Millennium Memory Bank of 6,500 life story interviews recorded with BBC local radio in 1998–99 and a new oral history of British science, *Voices of Science*, presenting audio and text from the first hundred interviews recorded with pioneering British scientists.

Since 2013, the British Library has been archiving the whole UK web domain, taking snapshots at intervals. This provides a way of locating other British oral history websites.

***Directory of UK Sound Collections***

[bl.uk/britishlibrary/~media/subjects%20images/sound/directory%20of%20uk%20sound%20collections.pdf](http://bl.uk/britishlibrary/~media/subjects%20images/sound/directory%20of%20uk%20sound%20collections.pdf)

***Millennium Memory Bank***

[sounds.bl.uk/Accents-and-dialects/Millennium-memory-bank](http://sounds.bl.uk/Accents-and-dialects/Millennium-memory-bank)

***National Life Stories***

[bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories](http://bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories)

***Save Our Sounds***

[bl.uk/projects/save-our-sounds](http://bl.uk/projects/save-our-sounds)

***Sisterhood and After***

[bl.uk/sisterhood](http://bl.uk/sisterhood)

***Survey of English Dialects***

[sounds.bl.uk/Accents-and-dialects/Survey-of-English-dialects](http://sounds.bl.uk/Accents-and-dialects/Survey-of-English-dialects)

***Voices of Science***

[bl.uk/voices-of-science](http://bl.uk/voices-of-science)

***Canadian Oral History Association*** and its journal, *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*  
[canoha.ca](http://canoha.ca)

[oralhistorycentre.ca/oral\\_history\\_forum\\_project](http://oralhistorycentre.ca/oral_history_forum_project)

***Centre for Popular Memory***, University of Cape Town, South Africa

An oral history-based research, advocacy, and archival centre based at the University of Cape Town, with over 3,000 hours of audio and video collection. The website lists attractive videos of stories of city life which you can play through YouTube.

The centre is now closed, but you can hear extracts from their interviews through YouTube, as well as on its archives, hosted by UCT Libraries.

[youtube.com/user/centreforpop](http://youtube.com/user/centreforpop)  
[digitalcollections.lib.uct.ac.za/humanitec/cpm](http://digitalcollections.lib.uct.ac.za/humanitec/cpm)

***Stories of the Croft***, Alexandra Park, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire NG3 4JB, UK  
[storiesofthecroft.org.uk](http://storiesofthecroft.org.uk)



**Columbia Center for Oral History**, 6th Floor East Butler Library, 535 West 114th Street, New York, NY 10027, USA  
[library.columbia.edu/indiv/ccoh.html](http://library.columbia.edu/indiv/ccoh.html)

**Counterculture**, Institute of Contemporary Arts, The Mall, London SW1Y 5AH, UK  
[counterculturellp.com](http://counterculturellp.com)

**Croatian Memories**, Unveiling Personal Memories on War and Detention, Human Rights House, Selska cesta 112c, HR-10000 Zagreb, Croatia  
[croatianmemories.org](http://croatianmemories.org)

**DeadSocial**, Symes Mews, 37 Camden Highstreet, London NW1 7JE, UK  
[deadsocial.org/features](http://deadsocial.org/features)

**Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project**, 1416 South Jackson Street, Seattle, WA 98144, USA  
 The Densho project holds 745 interviews with Japanese Americans who were incarcerated in World War II. Firsthand accounts are accompanied by photos and learning resources.  
[densho.org](http://densho.org)

**Digital Beyond**  
[thedigitalbeyond.com](http://thedigitalbeyond.com)

**digital:works Banging Out**  
[bangingout.org.uk/film.html](http://bangingout.org.uk/film.html)  
[digital-works.co.uk/news/film](http://digital-works.co.uk/news/film)

**Eastside Community Heritage**, Cardinal Heenan Centre, 326 High Road, Ilford, Essex IG1 1QP, UK  
 Regular information about a succession of small projects on local communities, minorities and racism, disability, cultures of hair styling, or tattooing, illustrated with podcasts of 'Eastside Stories'. They have opened a pop-up People's Museum and Gallery in Newham.  
[hidden-histories.org.uk](http://hidden-histories.org.uk)

**Foundling Voices**, Foundling Museum, 40 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ, UK  
 Audio and transcripts of interviews with 74 former Foundling children, from a notably balanced oral history project recording both good and bad experiences of Foundling Hospital childhoods between 1912 and 1954.  
[foundlingvoices.foundlingmuseum.org.uk](http://foundlingvoices.foundlingmuseum.org.uk)

**The Hackney Podcast**, London, UK  
 The Hackney Podcast created an app called Hackney Hear that provided audio tours of London. While the app is no longer available, the podcast archive is, and a review of the app can be found from the Londonist.  
[hackneypodcast.co.uk/](http://hackneypodcast.co.uk/)  
[londonist.com/2012/03/app-review-hackney-hear](http://londonist.com/2012/03/app-review-hackney-hear)

**Health Talk**, University of Oxford, UK  
 A medical initiative, run as an independent charity based at Oxford University's Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, through which patients share their experiences in photos, interview texts, and audio. The project focuses on a growing number of important illnesses, at present 85, and is currently used by two million visitors annually.  
[healthtalk.org](http://healthtalk.org)

**Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum**, 1-2 Nakajimacho, Naka-ku, Hiroshima 730-0811, Japan  
[pcf.city.hiroshima.jp](http://pcf.city.hiroshima.jp)

**Hong Kong Memory Project**, HK Oral History Archives, Leisure and Cultural Services Department, Hong Kong  
[hkmemory.hk/index.html](http://hkmemory.hk/index.html)

**H-Oralhist**, H-Net, 141H Old Horticulture, Michigan State University, 506 East Circle Drive, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA

This is a website for researchers and lecturers interested in oral history, with news, announcements, and reviews; it is affiliated with the Oral History Association.  
[networks.h-net.org/h-oralhist](http://networks.h-net.org/h-oralhist)

**Hurricane Digital Memory Bank**, University of New Orleans with the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, Department of History and Art History, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, MSN 1E7, Fairfax, VA 22030, USA

The interviews from the Great Deluge Oral History Project are now available through this archive. New stories can be entered and tagged by location.  
[hurricanearchive.org](http://hurricanearchive.org)

**Institut für Geschichte und Biographie (Institute of History and Biography)**, Fernuniversität, Liebigstraße 11, D-58511, Lüdenscheid, Germany  
[fernuni-hagen.de/geschichteundbiographie](http://fernuni-hagen.de/geschichteundbiographie)

**Karta Centre**, Ulica Narbutta 29, 02-536, Warsaw, Poland  
[jri-poland.org/karta/karta\\_archives\\_project.htm](http://jri-poland.org/karta/karta_archives_project.htm)

**Kettle's Yard**, Castle Street, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire CB3 0AQ, UK

A well-presented small project featuring photos, text, and audio memories of this art collectors' house and art gallery of early modern art. The archive of 100 interviews includes memories of working at and visiting Kettle's Yard and of Jim and Helen Ede, the collection's founders.

[kettlesyard.co.uk](http://kettlesyard.co.uk)

**King's Cross Voices**  
[kingscross.co.uk/kings-cross-voices](http://kingscross.co.uk/kings-cross-voices)

**Knotify Me**  
[knotify.me](http://knotify.me)

**Lachine Canal Audio Walk**, Montreal, Canada  
[postindustrialmontreal.ca](http://postindustrialmontreal.ca)

**Memoria Abierta**, Avenida Libertador 8151 (C1429BNB), Buenos Aires, Argentina

This is the website of a human rights organisation which aims to raise social awareness of the dangers of state terrorism through documenting the last military dictatorship. This includes an oral history of the 1985 junta coup and subsequent trials, 530 hours recorded on the website, and good photos. The project has also recorded the stories of Argentinians repressed under the military dictatorship of the 1970s–80s.

[memoriaabierta.org.ar](http://memoriaabierta.org.ar)

***Memoryscape Audio Walks***, London, UK

Toby Butler has created a series of 'walk and talk' audio trails on this attractive website, with maps, art, and photos. You can download the audio and listen as you walk. The series tells 'the hidden history of the River Thames in London' from Hampton Court to the Royal Docks: 'Listen to the voices of people who lived and worked along the river'.

[memoryscape.org.uk](http://memoryscape.org.uk)

***Museu da Pessoa***, Rua Natingui, 1100, São Paulo, CEP 05443-002, Brazil

The elegantly designed website of the digital multimedia museum, which introduces its projects and their outcomes in photos, books, exhibitions, and museums. You can find summaries and transcripts of the interviews recorded and register to listen to highlights from a collection of over 6,500 items. The projects cover many different Brazilian regions and themes, including work, art, personal relationships, religion, and sport. You can also record yourself as part of an international digital life-story archive.

[museudapessoa.net](http://museudapessoa.net)

***Museum of Memory and Human Rights***, Avenida Matucana 501, Santiago, Chile

[southamerica.me/museum-of-memory-and-human-rights](http://southamerica.me/museum-of-memory-and-human-rights) or [www.museodelamemoria.cl](http://www.museodelamemoria.cl)

***Museums Association Oral History Films/Digital Storytelling***, Museums Association, 42 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1R 0AZ, UK

[museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/oral-history](http://museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/oral-history)

***National Folklore Support Centre***, 96 Uthamar Gandhi Road, Subba Road Avenue, Nungambakkam, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600034, India

[indianfolklore.org](http://indianfolklore.org)

***National Library of China***, Beijing, China

[nlc.gov.cn](http://nlc.gov.cn)

***NOHANZ: National Oral History Association of New Zealand***, PO Box 3819, Wellington 6140, New Zealand

[oralhistory.org.nz](http://oralhistory.org.nz)

***Nordic Museum***, Djurgårdsvägen 6-16, PO Box 27820, SE-115 93 Stockholm, Sweden

[nordiskamuseet.se/en](http://nordiskamuseet.se/en)

***Norwegian Folklore Archives***, Oslo University, PO Box 1010, Blindern 0315, Oslo, Norway

[hf.uio.no/ikos/english/services/norwegian-folklore/](http://hf.uio.no/ikos/english/services/norwegian-folklore/)

***Now Heritage***, UK

[nowheritage.org](http://nowheritage.org)

***Oor Mad History***, CAPS Independent Advocacy, Old Stables, Eskmills Park, Station Road, Musselburgh, Scotland EH21 7PQ, UK

[oormadhistory.blogspot.co.uk](http://oormadhistory.blogspot.co.uk)

***Oral History Association***, USA

[oralhistory.org](http://oralhistory.org) or [oha@gsu.edu](mailto:oha@gsu.edu)

*Oral History Association of Australia*, OHAA, 39 Cadell Street, Windsor Gardens, 5087 South Australia, Australia  
[oralhistoryaustralia.org.au](http://oralhistoryaustralia.org.au)

*Oral History Society*, % Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham Hill, Egham TW20 0EX, UK  
[ohs.org.uk](http://ohs.org.uk)

*Oral Testimony Works*, 2 Hillside, Portslade, Brighton, East Sussex BN41 2DG, UK (continuing the work of Panos London, see entry below)  
[oraltestimony.org](http://oraltestimony.org)

*Palestine Remembered/Nakba Archive*  
[palestineremembered.com](http://palestineremembered.com) and [nakba-archive.org](http://nakba-archive.org)

*See also* **Voices: Palestinian Women Narrate Displacement**

*Panos London*  
 Closed as an NGO, but its archive continues:  
[panoslondon.panosnetwork.org](http://panoslondon.panosnetwork.org)

*Project Jukebox*, Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, 310 Tanana Loop, PO Box 756808, Fairbanks, AK 99775, USA

The oral history program of the Digital Branch of the University of Alaska, with details on a large number of local projects, well organised, with historical introductions to each project.  
[jukebox.uaf.edu](http://jukebox.uaf.edu)

*QueenSpark Books*, 10–11 Pavilion Parade, Brighton, East Sussex BN2 1RA, UK  
[queensparkbooks.org.uk](http://queensparkbooks.org.uk)

*Reminiscence Theatre Archive*, University of Greenwich, Park Row, London SE10 9LS, UK  
[reminiscencetheatrearchive.org.uk](http://reminiscencetheatrearchive.org.uk)

*Scottish Oral History Centre*, Strathclyde University, 16 Richmond Street, Glasgow, Scotland G1 1XQ, UK  
[strath.ac.uk/humanities/research/sohc](http://strath.ac.uk/humanities/research/sohc)

*Shetland Archives*, Hay's Dock, Lerwick, Scotland ZE1 0WP, UK  
[shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk](http://shetlandmuseumandarchives.org.uk)

*Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*, University of Southern California, 650 West 35th Street, Suite 114, Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA  
[sfi.usc.edu](http://sfi.usc.edu)

*Sparrow—Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women*, The Nest, B-101, 201, 301, Patel Apartment, Maratha Colony Road, Dahisa (E), Mumbai 400 068, India

This Mumbai sound and picture archive offers brief summaries and audio extracts from 550 oral history recordings with women. Themes include movements for independence and feminism in India. It aims to provide a resource for outreach activities.  
[sparrowonline.org](http://sparrowonline.org) or on Facebook

***Stolen Generations Testimonies***, Australia

[stolengenerationstestimonies.com](http://stolengenerationstestimonies.com)

***Stories Matter***, Montreal Life Stories Project, History Department, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve Boulevard, West, Montreal, QC H3G 1M8, Canada

For excerpts, etc.: [lifestoriesmontreal.ca](http://lifestoriesmontreal.ca)

For free new software: [storytelling.concordia.ca/storiesmatter](http://storytelling.concordia.ca/storiesmatter)

***StoryCorps***, National Public Radio (NPR), USA

Archived at American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 101 Independence Avenue, Southeast, Washington, DC 20540, USA

Recording in travelling booths for NPR's weekly program since 2003. By 2013, 45,000 interviews from the project had been archived at the American Folklife Center.

Inspired by StoryCorps, in 2013 the BBC and British Library jointly launched The Listening Project, in which people are asked 'to share an intimate conversation with a friend or relative', for BBC radio broadcasting and archiving at the British Library.

[storycorps.org/listen](http://storycorps.org/listen) or [loc.gov/folklife/](http://loc.gov/folklife/)

***Studs Terkel***, The WFMT Studs Terkel Radio Archive, 1601 North Clark Street, Chicago, IL 60614, USA

[studsterkel.wfmt.com](http://studsterkel.wfmt.com)

***Sulekha Creative***, Sulekha Ltd, Nos. 484 & 485, 4th Floor, Pantheon Plaza, Pantheon Road, Egmore, Chennai 600 008, India

[creative.sulekha.com](http://creative.sulekha.com)

***Survivors and Post-Genocide Justice in Rwanda***, Outreach Programme on the Rwanda Genocide and the United Nations

[un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/about/bgjustice.shtml](http://un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/about/bgjustice.shtml)

***Swanshurst School: Oral History***, Brook Lane, Billesley, Birmingham, West Midlands B13 0TW, UK

[swanshurst.org/historychannel](http://swanshurst.org/historychannel)

***Telling Their Stories: Oral History Archives Project***, Urban School of San Francisco, 1563 Page Street, San Francisco, CA 94117, USA

[tellingstories.org/mccomb/](http://tellingstories.org/mccomb/)

***Truth and Reconciliation Commission***, South Africa

[justice.gov.za/trc](http://justice.gov.za/trc)

***Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia***

[trcofliberia.org/reports/final-report](http://trcofliberia.org/reports/final-report)

Diaspora Project: Interview with Georgette Gray: [theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/uploads/georgette\\_gray.pdf](http://theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/uploads/georgette_gray.pdf)

***UK Data Archive***, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, Essex CO4 3SQ, UK

[data-archive.ac.uk](http://data-archive.ac.uk)

For online social sources, including oral history,

[discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/QualiBank](http://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/QualiBank)

*United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, and *Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive*, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW, Washington, DC 20024, USA  
ushmm.org

***Voices: Palestinian Women Narrate Displacement***

A 'digital book' of interviews with 70 Palestinian women and some men, displaced from their villages since the 1950s, spoken in Arabic, with text in English.  
almashriq.hiof.no/voices

*Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop*, WF Oral History Workshop, % Vestry House Museum, Vestry Road, London E17 9NH, UK  
wforalhistory.org.uk

*The Whole World Was Watching (1968)*, South Kingstown (RI) High School and Brown University, Providence, RI, USA

Intended for wider educational work, with 'issues' picked out from the interviews, this is an oral history of 1968 portrayed through 30 interviews of Rhode Islanders recorded by students at South Kingstown High School. Transcripts and audio of each interview.  
cds.library.brown.edu/projects/1968

*Wortley Heritage*, Wortley Hall, Sheffield, South Yorkshire S35 7DB, UK

The Wortley Hall walled garden was recently restored for Heeley City Farm with Heritage Lottery Fund support. The website is a nice example of a small-scale project, combining old and new photos with audio and text memories of the former aristocratic owners and their servants.

sites.google.com/site/wortleywalledgarden

*Yad Vashem*, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, Har Hazikaron, PO 3477, Jerusalem 9103401, Israel  
yadvashem.org

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\*Of people, places, institutions, websites, journals, some projects, but not book titles

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