

# ORAL HISTORY JOURNAL

# @50

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# CONTENTS

**Oral History journal:  
Introduction to OHJ@50**  
Fiona Cosson .....2

**Current British Work –  
a brief reflection**  
Cynthia Brown .....6

**A whole world of oral  
history – an editor's  
reflections on  
International Work**  
Siobhan Warrington .....7

**The life history of Oral  
History from editors'  
memories of its origins  
and developments**  
Paul Thompson, Joanna  
Bornat, Rob Perks and  
Sean O'Connell .....9

## 1970s

1. **Raphael Samuel: 'Perils of the transcript'** (from vol 1, no 2, 1972)
2. **Paul Thompson: 'Problems of method in oral history'** (vol 1, no 4, 1972)
3. **George Ewart Evans: 'Approaches to interviewing'** (vol 1, no 4, 1972)
4. **Elizabeth Roberts: 'Working-class women in the north west'** (vol 5, no 2, 1977)
5. **Bill Williams: 'The Jewish immigrant in Manchester'** (vol 7, no 1, 1979)
6. **Virginia Berridge: 'Opium and oral history'** (vol 7, no 2, 1979)

## 1980s

7. **Harry Goulbourne: 'Oral history and Black labour in Britain: an overview'** (vol 8, no 1, 1980)
8. **Angela V John: 'Scratching the Surface. Women, work and coalmining history in England and Wales'** (vol 10, no 2, 1982)
9. **Graham Smith: 'From Micky to Maus: recalling the genocide through cartoon'**, (vol 15, no 1, 1987)
10. **Joanna Bornat: 'Oral history as a social movement: reminiscence and older people'** (vol 17, no 2, 1989)

## 1990s

11. **Gabriele Rosenthal: 'German war memories: narrability and the biographical and social functions of remembering'** (vol 19, no 2, 1991)
12. **Alun Howkins: 'Inventing Everyman: George Ewart Evans, oral history and national identity'** (vol 22, no 2, 1994)
13. **Nicola North: 'Narratives of Cambodian refugees: issues in the collection of refugee stories'** (vol 23, no 2, 1995)
14. **Wendy Rickard: 'Oral history: more dangerous than therapy? interviewees' reflections on recording traumatic or taboo issues'** (vol 26, no 2, 1998)

## 2000s

15. **Michael Roper: 'Analysing the analysed: transference and counter-transference in the oral history encounter'** (vol 31, no 2, 2003)
16. **Anna Green: 'Individual and "collective memory"; theoretical perspectives and contemporary debates'** (vol 32, no 2, 2004)
17. **Alessandro Portelli: 'So much depends on a red bus, or, innocent victims of the liberating gun'** (vol 34, no 2, 2006)
18. **Anna Bryson: "'Whatever you say, say nothing": researching memory and identity in Mid-Ulster, 1945-1969'** (vol 35, no 2, 2007)
19. **Carrie Hamilton: 'On being a "good" interviewer: empathy, ethics and the politics of oral history'** (vol 36, no 2, 2008)

## 2010s

20. **Jenny Harding: 'Talking about care: emotions, culture and oral history'** (vol 38, no 2, 2010)
21. **Sean Field: 'Shooting at shadows, Private John Field, war stories and why he would not be interviewed'** (vol 41, no 2, 2013)
22. **Pippa Virdee: 'Remembering Partition: women, oral histories and the Partition of 1947'** (vol 41, no 2, 2013)
23. **Linsey Dodd: "'It did not traumatise me at all": childhood 'trauma' in French oral narratives of wartime bombing'** (vol 41, no 2, 2013)
24. **Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen and Ulla Savolainen: 'The interplay of memory and matter: narratives of former Finnish Karelian child evacuees'** (vol 44, no 2, 2016)

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While every effort has been made to update the articles included in this collection to correspond with the journal's current house style, we accept that some errors may have been missed and we apologise to authors and readers.

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## Oral History journal: Introduction to OHJ@50

This year, 2019, *Oral History* celebrates its 50th anniversary, making it the oldest oral history journal in the world. Established in December 1969 at a meeting at the British Institute of Recorded Sound (later to become the British Library Sound Archive), the journal started out as a news-sheet, published by Paul Thompson in the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex. Founding members included Theo Barker (University of Kent), George Ewart Evans, Stanley Ellis (University of Leeds), Brian Harrison (Corpus Christi College, Oxford) and Raphael Samuel (Ruskin College, Oxford). Its aim was to 'bring together some of those scholars known to the organisers to be using the interview method in social and political history, and to discover whether any further liaison would be valuable'.<sup>1</sup>

Since 1969, *Oral History* has published articles reflecting the changing topics, debates, and practices of oral historians in Britain and around the world. To mark its 50th anniversary, *Oral History* is republishing twenty-four articles to celebrate and revisit some of the most memorable, influential, and ground-breaking contributions that made it into its pages over the period, particularly those articles that aren't already readily available through other anthologies and readers. These articles were nominated and selected by readers of *Oral History* and

members of the journal's current editorial group. The articles in this issue not only reflect some of the most important work published in the journal, but collectively, they reflect the various trajectories and trends in oral history research, theory and practice over the last fifty years, and as such, stand as testament to the diverse, evolving and inspiring nature of oral history. Each article has a foreword, from the author or someone invited to represent them, which comments on the article's origins and influences, and including their thoughts and reflections.<sup>2</sup>

The emergence of oral history in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, including the founding *Oral History* in 1969 and the establishment of the Oral History Society in 1973, had many varied ingredients and influences, from local history, anthropology, sociology and folklore studies, to the History Workshop Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement and always coupled with an accessible interview method and sense of a social and political purpose on the part of its practitioners. Early articles in *Oral History* indicate concern about how to collect, interpret and use oral history testimony as an historical source, and if and how to make comparisons and contrasts with printed and published historical sources, notably interview technique, interview questions, and transcription. Yet oral historians were

not uncritical about the testimony interviewees gave, and the early issues of the journal were strongly concerned with questions about the character of this newly developing methodology and practice.

Raphael Samuel's 'Perils of the Transcript' (1972) draws attention to the potential distortion of transcribing a spoken dialogue and implored oral historians not to impose their own order on the speech of their interviews, advocating the importance of archiving recordings for future use. In 'Problems of Method in Oral History' (1972), Paul Thompson addresses issues of accuracy and reliability in oral history testimony. He reminds those both supportive and critical of oral history that whilst accuracy was an issue, it was not something limited to oral sources, but present in all historical sources. Further, he noted that oral history's apparent biases and unreliability could be its greatest strength: 'We should never dismiss information because we know that it is not literally accurate. The problem is how to interpret it'. George Ewart Evans, in his article, 'Approaches to Interviewing' (1972) emphasises that interview should be focussed on the interviewee, rather than the method; that is, unhurried, relaxed, and welcoming of tangents, informed by a belief that there is value in talking to older people, both in the immediate social relationship and for the purposes of the historical record.

There was an explicit mission amongst this first generation of oral historians to use oral history to fill in the gaps of the historical record. This positivist approach would later receive much criticism. When *Oral History* published a commemorative issue to mark its 25th anniversary in 1994, Alun Howkins addressed some of this criticism in a re-examination of the life and work of George Ewart Evans in 'Inventing Everyman' (1994), defending Evans's literary and folklorist approach to 'spoken history'. Howkins argued that much of the criticism aimed at Evans was misplaced and arose from a misunderstanding of his project. Despite key developments in oral history identified with memory, culture, and myth, Evans remains an inspiration to many oral historians.

Articles questioning and suggesting developments in the methods of oral history were not the sole focus of the journal during its early years, and thus, beside articles concerned with method and practice, were articles that presented the fruits of oral history research. By exploring the histories and experiences of those groups hitherto marginal or absent in the historical archives, oral history became an important tool in the mission to correct a deep and lasting imbalance in historical accounts. Many oral historians began working to recover and record the experiences of working-class, women, black and ethnic minorities, and other groups hidden from history. Elizabeth Roberts' article, 'Working-Class Women in the North West' (1977) is one such example of this application of oral history. Roberts was researching the lives of working-class women from the north-west of England at the turn of the twentieth century, and collected second-hand evidence from their children. She explains that this was necessary because 'we have very little else, for apart from their children these women left no memorials'. Similarly, Bill Williams, in 'The Jewish Immigrant in Manchester' (1979) found either an absence of adequate written sources, or histories which reflected the interests and preoccupations of an elite. Oral

history, Williams suggests, could serve as a powerful corrective to building a better understanding of Jewish life and experience. Further, oral history testimony could not only help explode collective and community myths, but also work to help explain them, their power and their function. Oral history is also seen by Harry Goulbourne in his article 'Oral History and Black Labour in Britain' (1980) as indispensable to the writings of the histories of black people in Britain since the late nineteenth century to the 1970s, acting as 'a rich source for data which will dispel some of the common and superficial observations regarding black workers in this country'.

Elsewhere, oral history was being put to work to uncover the social experiences and cultural contexts of everyday practices of work, home, family, and health, and how these oral histories sat beside state interventions, approaches and records. Virginia Berridge's 'Opium and Oral History' (1979) uses oral history as a means by which to explore the use and control of opium in the early to mid-twentieth century; her oral history interviews revealed a gulf between the way in which the state had designed opium as dangerous, whilst there continued to be a popular reliance on the drug. Angela John's work 'Women, Work and Coalmining' (1982) not only uses oral history to examine a 'completely neglected group of women workers', their lives, family, work and leisure, but also draws attention to narrative, discourse, and subjectivity in the interviews. She shows how these women's oral history testimonies were shaped by the context in which they were conducted, and how they used their interviews to reject assumptions and stigmas about their employment experiences.

Whilst those in academics circles - principally sociologists, anthropologists and historians - were taking up the challenge of oral history method and applying it to their fields, there was of course much oral history taking place in educational, community and

healthcare settings, which would in turn shape the theory and practice of the discipline. Developments in oral history practice, community publishing and life review are brought together in Joanna Bornat's 'Oral History as a Social Movement' (1989), where she suggests that older people's social interactions and memory processes have the potential for personal, social and historical benefits, drawing on older people's awareness of care, family and intergenerational communication, and their insights into the nature of historical change over time.

In the 1980s, as survivors of the Holocaust started to speak more openly about their experiences, oral historians grappled with issues of and boundaries between history, memory, experience, and narrative. *Oral History* increasingly became a focal point for exploring the experiences and memories of war and trauma as well as narration and healing. Graham Smith's 'From Micky to *Maus*' (1987) is an unusual insight into the process by which comic artist Art Spiegelman used oral history interviews with his father, who was a Holocaust survivor, to develop his graphic novel, *Maus*. The interview transcript revealed the layers of complexity of a strained father-son relationship, and the fine-line trodden between 'fact' and 'fiction'. Elsewhere, issues of the narration and remembering of the Holocaust were central to Gabriele Rosenthal's 'German War Memories' (1991). In an early demonstration of her Biographical Interpretive Method, Rosenthal analysed the oral histories of non-persecuted Germans of World War Two, and argues that their long verbose narrations, compared to the relevant silences of National Socialism's victims and German soldiers of World War One, were a means of handling of the political contexts, responsibilities, burdens and suffering in their life-stories during World War Two.

*Oral History's* interdisciplinary openness continued into the 1990s and 2000s, attracting readers and research from those working in related fields of ethnography, anthropology, and sociology, who



saw similarities between their social science interview methods and oral history. Nicola North draws on oral history techniques with her work on 'Narratives of Cambodian Refugees' (1995), documenting the strengths, weakness and compromises made in collecting the stories of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural research, as well as issues of ethics and the power relationship between interviewer and interviewees. North suggests that as disciplinary boundaries became more porous, the sharing of research experiences would enrich research practices.

At the same time, the long-established presence of women's history and black history in the pages of *Oral History* combined with newer preoccupations informed by postcolonialism, and the linguistic and cultural turns, and two key areas of concern emerged from those using oral history method. First was the interview itself; power, relationships, emotions, empathy, reflexivity, and intersubjectivity, with approaches and analyses borrowed from psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Wendy Rickard's 'Oral History: More Dangerous Than Therapy?' (1998) considers the synergies between therapy and oral history in relation to issues of identity, acceptance and taboos. Rickard suggests that, despite many ethical complexities, oral history can inspire different personal insights than therapy which can be affirming for some interviews, as interviews move from 'private' sphere of therapy to a 'public' sphere of oral history publishing and preservation. Michael Roper suggests that oral historians should think more deeply about the interview encounter than just intersubjectivity. In 'Analysing the Analysed' (2003), Roper proposes that the notions of transference and countertransference borrowed from psychoanalysis might usefully be applied to oral history interviews and considers the interview as a 'total situation', paying attention to the entirety of the interview and its material, and the interviewer's feelings, conscious and unconscious. In Carrie Hamilton's article, 'On Being a 'Good' Interviewer' (2008),

Hamilton draws on interviews with members of the Basque separatist group ETA, considering the deployment and limits of empathy in relation to accounts of violence, and reflects on the experience of challenging and uncomfortable interview encounters.

The second concern of oral historians at this time was over memory and narrative, not only exploring what people remembered and why, but how these narratives sat next to broader public and cultural narratives, histories and representations. Anna Green's article, 'Individual and Collective Memory' (2004), written in response to the memory studies boom of the time, urges caution against the overreliance and generalisation of the notion of collective memory. Whilst oral historians might find useful the concepts of scripts and templates for understanding the social and cultural contexts of remembering, Green advises, they should not dismiss the significance or richness of individual memory.

The notion of memories and narratives jostling for dominance is a theme in Alessandro Portelli's 'So Much Depends On A Red Bus' (2006), which explores aerial warfare and bombardments in Italy in the Second World War, drawing parallels with the function of historical approaches of top-down and bottom-up histories. Portelli suggests that oral history enables us to bring history from above and history from below to the 'negotiating table'. The question of competing and conflicting identities and experience is also taken up in Anna Bryson's article 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing' (2007) on the memories of members of both Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland. Bryson examines the construction of two different communal narratives and the very different emphases that were placed on the same events and developments. Following Green's call to pay attention to the complexities of individual experience, Bryson shows how it is possible, as she puts it, 'to unpick generalisations about the two communities by carefully contrasting

collective states with evidence of individual experience'.

Another article exploring wartime bombardment and memory is Lindsey Dodd's 'It Did Not Traumatise Me At All' (2013). Dodd analyses the way in which the notion of trauma was downplayed and refused by interviewees who recounted their experience of bombing as children. In relating this refusal to the construction of post-war public memory in France, Dodd shows how the greater significance of other experiences, the suffering of Prisoners of War or resistance fighters or Holocaust victims, meant that there was little or no space to speak of allied bombing as trauma. On the more familiar topic of childhood memories of wartime evacuation, Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen and Ulla Savolainen, in 'The Interplay of Memory and Matter' (2016) offer revealing insights into the construction of sites of memory by drawing attention to the role of sources, mementoes, or simply 'matter' in the articulation of memories of Finnish Karelian child evacuees. In particular, they emphasise the affective character of these materials and the embodied and tactile knowledge they carried in the narrating of memories.

The introduction of new concepts and tools of analysis into oral history methods has not meant the abandonment of older ideals, and *Oral History* has continued to publish research that recovers, supplements or challenges the historical record. Pippa Virdee's article, 'Remembering Partition' (2013) explores how oral history method had helped to reshape histories of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Virdee combines a traditional use of oral history to recover and supplement the written records of Partition with postcolonialist and feminist perspectives, to create a gendered, female gaze on Partition. She also draws attention to the sense of empowerment and validation felt by her interviewees as a result of their interview experience. Jenny Harding's article 'Talking About Care' (2010), which discusses young people's accounts of being in care,

reaffirms a commitment to giving voice to marginalised groups and to using interviews as a way of lending legitimacy and authority to their understandings. Yet it also poses new ways of thinking about the role of emotions in oral history, showing how they are constituted in specific cultural and historical circumstances; in this case, how care and love were critically described and reflected upon by care leavers in forging their own subjective experiences and identities. Finally, Sean Field's 'Shooting at Shadows' (2013) explores intersubjectivity from a moving and personal perspective, as he discusses why he was never able to get his father to consent to an oral history interview about his experiences in World War Two. By piecing together fragments of stories, Field recognised his

father's feelings of failure, shame, trauma, and fear of disbelief which overrode Field's pleas to his father to be interviewed. As a result, Field suggests that oral historians to think differently about the definition and format of the interview.

And so, what might the next fifty years hold for oral history, and for *Oral History*? The early practitioners of the craft surely could not have foreseen the many ways in which oral history practice has evolved since 1969, nor could they have envisaged the mainstream respectability it now enjoys in many fields of study. But it seems safe to assume that oral history will continue to be powerfully shaped by the emergence of new intellectual currents, alongside broader political and societal developments. At the same time, however, these changes

will be mediated and made meaningful only by a set of flexible yet enduring practices that have come to represent the very core of the oral history craft, grounded above all in that most social of research practices: the oral history interview. This collection of articles is testament to both the staying power and innovative potential of oral history.

**Fiona Cosson**  
**June 2019**

#### NOTES

1. "Conference on 13 December 1969 at the British Institute of Recorded Sound," *Oral History* no 1 (1972), pp 1–3.
2. Many thanks to Heather Norris Nicholson, Kate Melvin, Sean O'Connell, and Rob Perks for their work in putting this issue together and thank you to authors who revisited and commented on their articles.

## Current British Work – a brief reflection

I've lost track of how long I've been editing Current British Work – but I started to read it in the early 1990s when I was working in a community history unit at Leicester City Council. It was invaluable in terms of making new contacts as well as providing information and ideas for what my colleagues and I might do in the future: much the same reasons that make it such a popular section of the journal today. From a historical point of view it also has great value as a record of changes in the nature of oral history projects over time, their funders, and the extent to which their objectives have reflected wider educational or social issues or priorities. There is no space here for more than a few examples – but plenty of scope, perhaps, for a scholarly analysis of this in the future.

In the UK, public authorities such as archives, libraries, museums and community history units were still prominent in the Autumn 1992 (vol 20, no 2) entries, often with the aim of making local history more accessible and giving a voice to communities under-represented in more traditional approaches. Among them was Southampton City Council, which had devoted an entire edition of its free newspaper to the work of its Oral History team: a 'wonderful example', as the then CBW editor Joanna Bornat noted, 'of what is possible with local government funding'. Current British Work also mirrors the effects of cutbacks in local

government funding and changing priorities, particularly after unitary status reforms in 1997. The Autumn 2000 edition (vol 28, no 2) notes the ending of local authority funding for the Scottish Borders Memory Bank; but at the same time the Worcestershire Record Office 'Memory Recall' project to provide memory boxes for day centres and residential homes highlights a more positive move towards partnerships to spread the financial load, in this case with the County's Social Services.

The massive contribution made by Heritage Lottery funding is also abundantly clear in Current British Work, not least in enabling other partnerships across a wide range of ages and organisations: supporting cross-generational work, for instance, and encouraging BME communities to record their own histories and present them to wider audiences. Another encouraging development has been the number of projects supported by academic funding councils, such as post-graduate research opportunities, and partnerships with community organisations – like the Manchester Metropolitan University 'Graphic Lives' project in which British Bangladeshi women produced digital comics based on their life stories and historical narratives of their communities (Spring 2018, vol 46, no 1).

As Current British Work also demonstrates, many oral history

projects are prompted by significant anniversaries, like the centenary of GirlGuiding UK (Spring 2010, vol 38, no 1); or the 130th anniversary of Barnsley Town Football Club (Spring 2018, vol 46, no 1). When *Oral History* was first published it was intended to act as a reference point and source of information about oral history projects across the UK. On this, the 50th anniversary of the journal, the survival of the Current British Work section is testimony to the liveliness and creativity of oral historians over the last 50 years, working in a variety of community settings and interacting with each other. The Oral History Society's Regional Network deserves a special mention in this respect for its invaluable role in acting as a first point of contact, offering advice and support, organising events that bring oral historians together – and providing me with news of local projects for Current British Work itself.

There is no question that oral history has a bright future, and I look forward to receiving and sharing more news of it in the coming years.

**Cynthia Brown**

# A whole world of oral history: an editor's reflections on International Work

The *Oral History* journal has been international in its outlook since its early days; the News from Abroad section began in 1978 with a lengthy section compiled by Paul Thompson that covered work across Europe, North America Latin America, Oceania, Asia and Africa. The section continued to be compiled by Paul until the early 1990s when Al Thomson took over and around the same time started to invite contributors to submit their own news. Michelle Winslow took over from Al in 2002 and I took over from Michelle in 2009, shortly after the section was renamed International Work.

At the time I managed Panos London's Oral Testimony Programme – an international programme of community-based oral testimony projects, focused on themes such as conflict, poverty, environmental change, HIV stigma and displacement. Following Panos London's closure in 2013 I established Oral Testimony Works, a community interest company, to take forward this work and to act as custodian of the archive of 1300 oral testimonies recorded over the Panos Oral Testimony Programme's 20-year history (1993-2013).

As editor of the International Work section, twice a year I'm involved in what I could only describe as a last-minute global treasure hunt, making up my own clues using google and social media. The 'searching' is not

very sophisticated and often involves considering countries we've not featured before and typing, "Iceland oral history" into google (we did in fact feature a project from Iceland in 2015). Inevitably, this method involves a fair amount of fails, and I'm also aware that as an English-speaker I'm restricted from accessing online content in other major languages such as Spanish, Arabic and Chinese. In parallel to the 'googling', I do invest in more strategic methods – contacting those we've featured several years previously requesting updates, and approaching oral history contacts in the region for suggestions; contacts such as Al Thomson in Australia, Pablo Pozzi in Argentina and Indira Chowdhury in India have often helped with sourcing the 'treasure'.

The section is organised according to the International Oral History Association (IOHA) regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America and Oceania. I try to prioritise projects that have originated from the countries where they are carried out, but at times, do feature projects (often academic) that may originate in Europe and North America for example, but that work with partner organisations to record oral histories elsewhere in the world.

If I'm honest, there is a small amount of dread associated with each issue, the fear of starting from scratch and the pressure to meet the deadline. However, as soon as I start finding the clues to the treasure, it's becomes

a task that is a real joy and a privilege. I get a total kick out of the diversity of places, project approaches, and issues that this section covers.

The first section I edited included projects from Afghanistan, Georgia, Greece, Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa and Spain. The most recent issue of the journal included projects from Australia, Canada, Honduras, Hong Kong, Iraq, Ireland and Poland. Issues covered in these two issues include conflict, architecture, HIV stigma, citizenship, industrial heritage, displacement, the legal profession, journalism and female fire fighters. The projects had both academic and advocacy aims and the resulting oral histories were used as the basis of radio programmes, exhibitions, books, websites, virtual reality films, archives and conferences.

I thoroughly enjoy networking with people around the world and find that most people are really pleased to be asked to contribute to the journal. Everyone also appreciates the complimentary copy of the journal I send to all contributors. I provide potential contributors with a set of prompt questions to serve as a guide and to make the process of sitting down and sharing information about one's project in 300-500 words as straightforward as possible. This is especially important given that for many contributors to this section, English is not their first language.

Not all oral history practitioners are in the position, or have the required English language skills, to develop full journal articles about their work. The International Work and the Current British Work sections enable us to celebrate a great range and volume of oral history initiatives, creating a journal that is both lively and inclusive.

Earlier this year I spent a few hours analysing the countries covered in the last ten years. Before I started this counting activity (strange to be combining counting and oral history), I knew the section had covered a good number of countries

but I'd no idea how many exactly. In hindsight, I should have developed some monitoring system to log all the projects featured, note to self -must set this up from now, moving forwards.

The reveal is in the ten years since I've edited this section; we've featured 160 projects from 73 different countries. That figure astounds me: 73 different countries. To me, that is a truly brilliant reflection of the resonance of the value of oral history around the world.

Should my quest for the next ten years be to research and explore the use of oral history in the rest of the

world? Another commitment looking ahead is to work more closely with the rest of the editorial team to encourage some of the individuals who contribute to the International Work section to consider writing full articles for the main journal section. And finally, what I'd really like to do is to create an online and interactive map as a way of celebrating these oral history initiatives, especially those outside North America, UK and Oceania. This needs more thought, and funds, but it would be great to map the world of oral history that is out there.

**Siobhan Warrington**

## The life history of *Oral History* from editors' memories of its origins and developments

In December 2018, Paul Thompson, Joanna Bornat, Rob Perks and Sean O'Connell, past and current editors of *Oral History* got together round a microphone and back issues of the journal in a British Library studio. Their aim was to recall the origins of *Oral History*, its development and how, as an independently produced journal, it continues to survive the challenges which come its way. From the start *Oral History* has been a platform for oral historians working in the community as well as in higher education. This article is an edited transcript of a morning of remembering the journal's beginnings, its life stages and continuation over fifty years.

**Rob:** Shall we start at the beginning, Paul, and just get a sense of, you know, how it all started really.

**Paul:** Yes. I think it's important to realise two things about the situation in 1969 when this meeting [an initial meeting of interested people – eds] was held. One is that, at that point we had no idea that there was oral history going on in America. I mean it was just simply an English group. But, the other thing is, it was a very small group of people, so everybody very quickly knew everybody else. And I would say the key elements were, first of all Theo Barker, who was a history professor at Kent, and he had been interested both in doing oral history but also in the media. He had a vision of creating a kind of major national centre with the BBC involved and the British Library. That's what he really wanted to happen. But of course it didn't happen like that. So he was the chair of this meeting.

Then there was Patrick Saul, who was running the British Institute for Recorded Sound [...]. The collection had developed in a rather bizarre way. So there was an awful lot of animal and bird noises, quite a lot of music, but very little oral history. And what oral history had come there, I don't think had been him asking for it. Like George Ewart Evans actually I think offered his material rather than they said, 'Could you deposit it?' But he was the main facility at that point. And for a while we all thought this was the person to work with. But I became very disillusioned when he said he would accept all the *Edvardians* material, and then he invited me to come along and listen to some of it. And when I came,

there were three or four recording machines but none of them would work, so we couldn't listen to anything. And I thought, this is, I don't want go on with this until it's sorted out really. [laughs] It came in later, as you know. Anyway, that was Patrick Saul. That later became the National Sound Archive [...]

**Rob:** Well it was around the time that the British Institute of Recorded Sound became the Sound Archives when it joined the Library.

**Paul:** Yes.

**Rob:** Which... I'm just trying to remember when that was. Mid-eighties I would say, mid, late eighties. [...]

**Rob:** Can I ask you about Theo Barker? [...] I mean what was his interest in oral history? I mean did he understand the notion of oral history? ... Well did anyone understand the notion of oral history at this time?

**Paul:** Well at that time I think the person who understood best was George Ewart Evans (teacher, writer and folklorist – eds), who was at the meeting. Because he, well, it's partly his background from the South Wales mining communities, but also he was strongly influenced by ethnography from Sweden, which you could also find in Scotland and so on. So, I mean in terms of doing what we now regard as an oral history approach to interviews, he was the person I learnt most from. Because I came in more from a sociological approach, how to do an interview, you know, with a questionnaire and all that, and then gradually it loosened up. And



particularly him saying, 'You have to listen to people. You don't interrupt. You must give them space.' Those kind of key lessons. That came from him at that stage. [...]

**Rob:** [...] And where had he got that from? From folklore practice...

**Paul:** I think so, yes.

**Rob:** ...going back, what, how far? I mean when was...

**Paul:** Well, going back to Sweden and Scotland [...]

**Rob:** This is the School of Scottish Studies?

**Paul:** Yes. Yes.

**Rob:** Yes, Edinburgh University.

**Paul:** [...] Well and I never tried in Dublin, with their archive. [...]

**Joanna:** Because you've got Stanley Ellis (senior lecturer and dialectologist University of Leeds – eds) and dialect studies in...

**Paul:** He was there, yes.

**Joanna:** And also John Saville (Professor of Economic History, University of Hull – eds) from the labour history side of things. So it was quite a broad-ranging network.

**Paul:** Yes. So you might say there was a northern network, with John, who was doing a different kind of thing. He was doing a focus... He used documents, and really almost a legal kind of cross-questioning of people. Very intense. But the other person right at the beginning was John, from Lancaster. John Marshall (historian and lecturer at Lancaster University – eds), who, later Elizabeth Roberts was there (oral historian of the North West Lancashire working class at Lancaster University – eds). But they were doing... He was doing good work I think, and he had more, he had some understanding I would say of how to do it. But he was essentially a regional historian. [...]

**Paul:** We haven't... Can I just say about Raphael? Because he was there too. Raphael Samuel (Marxist historian, lecturer at Ruskin College, Oxford – eds). [...] Well he, I think, he was probably still working on that famous book on the guy in the East End who was partly a crook and, and so on (*East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding*, 1981 – eds). [...] And it raises all these interesting questions of memory, which Raphael was already thinking about actually. [...] And, and also, of course, [...] his attitude to transcription was very far seeing actually. He was the first person to really say loudly, well, a transcription is another type of document; it's not the audio, it doesn't literally have the audio words in it, you know. His presence in the seventies was very very powerful. He was really into oral history. And, he asked for this campaign committee, that you were involved in it seems.

**Joanna:** Yes.

**Paul:** [laughs] I didn't remember that. But I mean this is a very kind of CP (Communist Party – eds) type thing you know, campaigning on a specific issue, approaching all the local libraries, trying to get them to subscribe, and, and so on. And we met, pretty often I think, maybe every month or two, for, I would guess, I would guess about three years or so it went on actively.

**Rob:** Can we jump back a bit? Because we've talked about this first meeting at the BIRS in 1969, from which this first sort of, publication emerged. So can you say a bit more

about this as the origins of the journal?

**Paul:** Yes. Well this, this was intended simply as a kind of message to the people who had come, and anyone else who was interested, what we talked about. So it's essentially, you know, it's like minutes of a meeting, but more, more detailed really than most minutes. And, in terms of the way it was produced, well, this was the era of cyclostyling, so we had this cyclostyle machine at Essex. And, we didn't have to pay in those days for secretarial help, and Mary Girling, who was the department secretary, actually just typed it out. But I would say about Mary, I mean she's not interested really in academic things, never has been actually, but she was sympathetic to oral history, and she did become the treasurer after a crisis about two or three years later. So, she was for a while I think combining typing the journal and acting as treasurer. How she managed to be treasurer, I find very hard to understand. [...] But she managed to run the department, I think from sheer force of character in many ways, and combine it actually with doing a bit of sales of her own eggs and vegetables, you know. So she would come into the office with the, [laughs] the eggs and so on for sale. And also, she's internationally known as a breeder of deerhounds, and she's many times gone to America for instance to be a judge and so on. And if one of these enormous dogs was sick, [laughs] he used to be brought into the department. So you would come in and see a dog almost as tall as yourself in the department. So the journal was being produced in a very strange context.

**Rob:** And, it's in foolscap rather than A4.

**Paul:** Yes. That's right, first we had foolscap.

**Rob:** I mean, what was the reason for that?

**Paul:** Well I guess we had foolscap paper around.

**Joanna:** There wasn't anything else. [...]

**Rob:** So this was the standard size? [...] How many copies of this were circulated?

**Paul:** I don't know. One would have to see the list. Presumably... Well you've got the archive, haven't you, here, I think. [...]

**Joanna:** Maybe. But, maybe it was only fifty. I have a feeling... Would you say fifty to 100?

**Paul:** Fifty. Even less for the first number maybe. [...]

**Joanna:** [...] But it was really just an information sheet, wasn't it, for people who were interested in oral history, at that point.

**Paul:** Yes. Well that's right.

**Joanna:** I mean, I don't think, there's nothing you would, could possibly look like, say was an article.

**Paul:** No no, definitely not. What was important in this first one, and one we've continued ever since, is the information about other people's work. You know, there's, 'Current British Work in Oral History' you see.

**Joanna:** Still got that same section in.

**Paul:** Exactly, yes.

**Rob:** Same title.

[...]

**Rob:** And where was that information gathered from in that first edition?

**Paul:** Well people were writing in to us. Very often we just didn't know about them. We wrote to people we had heard about, asking them to describe what they were doing.

**Joanna:** Paul, when you say 'we', who, who do you mean, beyond yourself?

**Paul:** We? Well it probably was me and, and... Yes, me writing to people saying, 'What are you up to?' Yes.

**Joanna:** So you effectively were the secretary then of this new venture?

**Paul:** Well very briefly I suppose, yes.

[...]

**Rob:** So, when was the decision made to continue something called *Oral History: an occasional news sheet*, when was that decision taken?

**Paul:** Well I think it must be pretty soon, because the format, it looks different, this number two, doesn't it, as if we are thinking of continuing.

**Joanna:** It's got a cover.

**Paul:** And it's got a title too.

**Rob:** It's got a cover.

**Paul:** But do you know, it still says '*an occasional news sheet*'.

**Rob:** But this, this seems to me, this is number two we're looking at seems to me, it's interesting in various ways. One is, it mentions a subscription.

**Paul:** Yes.

**Rob:** Although it doesn't call it a subscription.

**Paul:** No.

**Rob:** Or... No, it does, 'Subscription Form', sorry, at the top. And that's returnable to you. And then, 'Cheques are payable to Paul Thompson.'

**Paul:** Yes. But I had an oral history account. [laughs]

**Rob:** So you were, you were receiving...

**Paul:** I've lived off it for years. [laughter]

**Rob:** So you were producing the journal, and taking all the subscriptions.

**Paul:** Yes, at that point. But I don't think that goes on very long actually. And I'm interested to see that we had an American subscription rate as well. Didn't we? Wait a minute. Yes, 'For United States subscribers, \$5.' [...]

**Rob:** So I'm assuming that this is a 1971 issue. [...] But this does have discernible articles in it, doesn't it?

**Paul:** Oh absolutely. Yes. Absolutely.

**Joanna:** So, who is it, who have we got in that one?

**Paul:** Well, we've got Raphael on the perils of the transcript. And then articles on the Dutch, a couple of Dutch archives, by Rolf Schuurmsma. And, Brian Harrison on teaching oral history. Because at that stage Brian Harrison was very pro oral history; as you probably know, he became rather hostile. But he did a project with his own students about the history of his Oxford college, Corpus Christi College, which was actually rather a good project, you know, about the college servants and so on.

**Joanna:** We have published a sort of, looking back article from him, relatively recently [...]

**Rob:** So who decided the content of this issue, this number two?

**Paul:** Who was I talking to, is really the answer to that isn't it? I wonder... [pause] I would have been talking to Raphael of course, because I was very close to him in those years. Who else out of this lot? Well, we would get advice from John (Saville – eds) and, and Theo (Barker – eds), I think.

**Joanna:** Because I think John has an article in almost the next one, doesn't he [...] about trade unions.

[...]

**Rob:** And what were you thinking at this time about what was the function of this occasional news sheet?

**Paul:** Well I can't say that, that there was any kind of clear vision ahead where this was going to, but we felt we were in a kind of expanding situation. And so, this was the next step. I mean, we hadn't even got a society at that point, it wasn't at all clear that, that it would be viable to have a society. And there was a lot of argument around that as you know. So, I think it was really just to facilitate the network, to help the network to grow, people to understand what was happening, so they could get in touch with each other and so on.

**Joanna:** Paul, when did you start... I mean, you had the MA in oral history, or social history.

**Paul:** Yes. I think that was from '73, but, I would need to check on that.

**Joanna:** Yes. Because that was quite important for... I mean I remember joining it when I was doing my PhD. And somehow that, again, I mean that could be another audience for a newsletter like that. That you wanted to support... students' learning and, bring them in.

**Paul:** [...] What happened with him (Steve Humphries, later author of *Hooligans and Rebels: Oral History of Working Class Childhood and Youth 1889–1939*, 1981, founder of Testimony Films – eds) was that he was at Sussex, but he knew about me and asked for me to be his examiner. [...] And I was impressed by what he had done, and how fast he was actually. Because he got a PhD on two years' work by using a [laughs] a

Manpower Services grant to do the interviews. But I mean I was really impressed by this guy. And I was, by that point I was head of department, and, and you know, we needed somebody to do teaching, so I suggested him. And he came for a year to Essex to teach.

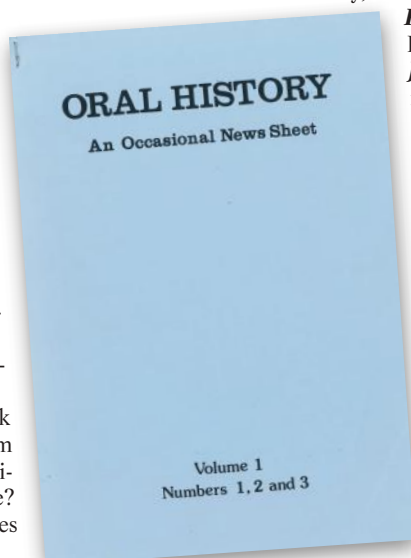
[...]

**Joanna:** But I think those postgraduates, they were a part of the development, not necessarily a plan...

**Paul:** Yes. No, you're right.

**Joanna:** ...but they must have fed into it, their interests, and feeding back to them.

**Paul:** That's right. In fact the VC at Essex said... Because I wanted to set up an oral history centre at Essex. So I went to see the VC. Well he was never in favour of me, because of my role in '68. The Senate several times, year after year it agreed that I should have a personal chair because of what I was doing, and every time he blackballed me actually. So I mean he definitely wasn't in my favour. [laughs] But



anyway, I thought he might support the idea of a centre, and he refused. He said, 'You should just have a course, and have students. That would bring in the same amount of money, and that would be OK.' So that was one reason why we started. And then, you're right, that had a transforming effect on what I was doing actually. You have to think it all through in a different way, you know, have book lists and things like that. [laughs]

**Joanna:** And also, something like that is putting oral history out, on the map, in a way, isn't it?

**Paul:** Yes. Yes.

**Rob:** Indeed. And I notice that this number two is distributed by British Institute of Recorded Sound.

**Paul:** Is it? Oh good. Yes.

**Rob:** So, so what does that mean? Does that mean that the BIRS produced it, or...?

**Paul:** [...] Well it means that we would have got it typed on cyclostyle equipment, however you do it, at Essex, and then they would have posted it out. Where the copies were printed, I don't know. I think they were more likely to have been printed at Essex, and one took the stuff down to be distributed, but I don't know, I'm just guessing.

**Rob:** So why, what was that, what... Was that an offer from the then director or something...

**Paul:** Yes. Yes, that's right.

**Rob:** ...just to be helpful?

**Paul:** Yes, that's right. Yes.

[...]

**Rob:** So how long did that quite, obviously quite close relationship carry on with BIRS then, connected to the journal?

**Paul:** That's a very good question. We ought to... I mean we possibly could find out from some later issues.

[...]

**Rob:** Well shall we have a look at Volume 3 Number 2, which is the 'Family History' issue. I notice it is now calling itself *The Journal of the Oral History Society*, which suggests this, I mean this is autumn 1975, and as we know, the society was formally constituted in 1973. So, when the society was formally constituted, was that the point that it changed its name to what it is now?

**Paul:** I think so. Mm.

**Rob:** And is this the first special issue?

**Paul:** Yeah, I think that's true, yes.

**Rob:** What can you remember about that?

**Paul:** Well, because a group of us were very excited about the whole idea of family, using oral history with family history. Because it was an obvious area where oral history could give you information that weren't in the conventional archives. And, if you look at this list, there's, the first one is, Thea has become Vigne by that point, because she split up from me that year, or I split up from her [laughs], which way you look at it. But she was very into that, and writing, you know, she was writing interesting things.

**Joanna:** And she is editing, she is actually editing this issue.

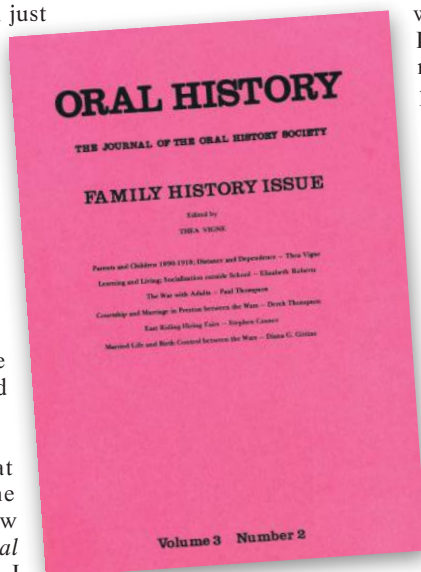
**Paul:** Yes. Yes. Although we did it together actually, but she definitely, it was one of her things. And she later... You know, there was a man we recorded in Great Bentley, a village next to Essex (University of Essex – eds), who became a family friend, but she went on and on recording this amazing man whose father had been a farmworker, and he was like, a mixture of a farmworker and a gardener. And he had an infinite number of stories, and we'd never... You know, this was a revelation to us. So we produced a kind of transcript about 150 pages long. We applied for money from the Research Council, [laughs] and we were able to send them the whole transcript. Of course you could never do that now. And that was because they had just been set up, and they hadn't got these stricter rules. Michael Young (Lord Young of Dartington: Educator, author, academic, policy maker, political activist d 2002 – eds) was the key person I think behind setting it up, and was the first director, I think I'm right in that. Wouldn't that be '72 that he...? I think that's it. Anyway, you know, they were looking for applicants too, and I, that, this is, certainly '72, because, I

was a Fellow for a year at Nuffield, and, I remember the warden saying to me, he received this thing, and he was very pleased, because, they didn't have enough good applications. So, we applied to do this national study, with, actually originally 600 people. Well we never managed to do that. It got down to about 450 in the end. But, I think it was such a lucky moment in that way that we could get that money, no young academic now could just waltz in with a new method of doing history or sociology, and get a big grant. It's just, totally impossible now.

**Joanna:** And that was *The Edwardians*.

**Paul:** Yes, and Thea supervised all the fieldwork there, and took an incredible amount of detailed trouble. She was ringing up the interviewers, listening to their inter-

views, ringing them up, commenting on exactly how they did things and how it could be better and so on. I mean she was brilliant in that way. Well then there's Elizabeth Roberts, whose work I think is very very high quality early oral history, very good interviews, excellent, interesting interpretation. Then this little article I did, 'The War with Adults', was I guess partly inspired by Steve Humphries actually. [laughs] But it drew on, I think, the material from *The Edwardians*. And then... Now Derek Thompson, 'Courtship and Marriage in Preston'. [...] And then Stephen Counce, who was more a folklore person. Do you remember him at all? [...] East Riding horsemen I think it was. Yeah. And, and then there's finally Di Gittins, who was at Essex, doing a PhD, not with me but with Leonore Davidoff (feminist historian and sociologist, d 2014 – eds), and, well she was a brilliantly imaginative person, well she still is and... Because she, she used a combination of statis-



tical material and interviews to look at family limitation, and showed that women's work was as important as men's work. Because, up till that point the statistics had been entirely about women's husbands, and not about themselves. And she showed that there were different fertility rates if they were, like Lancashire textile women, like the ones you [Joanna] interviewed. [...] That they had much lower birth rates and... So that was very important. [laughs] It's been... As you have pointed out to me, it's been challenged since of course by that recent really good work on, on that issue. But then, she went on to do quite a lot of things, but one of them was a wonderful study of a big mental hospital which was closing in Colchester. Now what's that one? [...] *Madness in its Place*. Yes. Several. I think that's absolutely brilliant.

**Rob:** I mean this issue begins to me to feel much more like the journal that we would recognise today...

**Paul:** Yes. Yes.

**Rob:** ...in terms of, you know, number of articles.

But, can you explain, who was, who was reading, deciding on the articles that should go in there? Can you say a bit about the editorial process at this time?

**Paul:** Well, I don't think there was a lot being sent to us spontaneously. So I think we had to get in touch with people and say, you know, 'Well we hear you're doing this interesting work, and, would you perhaps write an article?' And who was doing that? Well, probably me I think.

**Joanna:** Were there no conferences where people...?

**Paul:** Well, of course this... There was a workshop, and following that meeting there were training workshops run with the BBC, which were rather important I think.

**Rob:** This is in the early seventies.

**Paul:** I think Michael Mason (BBC radio producer of 'The Long March of Everyman', 1971, and 'Plain Tales from the Raj', 1974 – eds) was involved in that. You know, he was one of the BBC... You know, he did the stuff on the colonial elite in India and so on.

[...]

[Sean O'Connell joins the recording]

**Sean:** Yes, I'm Sean O'Connell. I'm a recent acquisition I suppose to the editorial team, two and a half years now maybe I think. So I'm the new kid on the block I guess. [...] I suppose I've been using oral history since the nineties when I was a PhD student, looking at the social history of the car. I used oral history to talk to people who had cars in the twenties and thirties, or the families of car owners. And as soon as I got my first temporary job at Liverpool, I was using oral history in the classroom, using, you know, as a way to excite students and interest students. I think about oral history as a subject, and also to get them to do the history of the cities where I've worked. So that was, in that case Liverpool, and since then, Belfast. And I've used it ever since really, including on a module that I'm teaching at Queen's University at the moment, which involves the BBC in Northern Ireland, and involves the students pitching ideas for radio documentaries based on their oral histories, to the BBC. And so far we've got one commissioned, and that was very successful. It won a radio awards documentary. I won't tell you the full story here, but it was about a one-armed footballer. If anybody wants to listen to it, it's called

*Diamond in the Rough*, and it's on the BBC iPlayer. So, I'll tantalise people with that.

**Rob:** So, Sean, we're still, I think, in the seventies at the moment, looking at some of the early issues and, and getting a sense of how the journal has been put together and so on. We were talking about the 'Family History' issue. But, Joanna just asked a question about these workshops that you were going to say a bit more about that were happening in the early seventies.

**Paul:** Well [...] there was somebody [...] they were teaching how to use decent equipment, and how to interview and, and so on, in the BBC style, but I mean there were important points that people needed to learn, like not talking too much themselves, and so on. And, I think Thea found them inspiring actually, those occasions. I didn't go to them, but...

**Rob:** And so this is based on BBC practice? About how they interview?

**Paul:** Yes, that's right [...] But of course they don't. As usual, they're very bad interviewers on the whole aren't they?! I mean they continually talk over people, and so on. But their model was different. [laughs]

**Rob:** The other thing I notice about this issue is that we now have a reviews editor. [...] Which is Alun Howkins.

**Paul:** Yes, well Alun came to me from... You see, as I said before, I was very close to Raph Samuel at that point, who was teaching at Ruskin, and he wanted to help some of his people go on to do PhDs. So, Alun was the first of those that came to me. And did a PhD on the Norfolk farmworkers, and later went on to become a professor at Sussex, and I think still propagating oral history [Alun retired to Norfolk on retiring from Sussex, and sadly died in 2018.] But his phase of involvement with us was very much in the seventies, and he then, after that he didn't really do anything active I think with the Oral History Society. He was more in [...] History Workshop. With that network. And I think, I think it's important to, if you do want a history of the movement, it's important to realise that we were one movement in the seventies, and then it sort of forked away, and History Workshop became rather, in some ways, somewhat exclusive. I mean if you were part of the History Workshop movement, then you could be sure of getting reviews and things like that, because there was enough of them to do that. But that wasn't so true of being an oral historian. I don't think we had that kind of, strong academic... Well of course they regarded themselves as community historians, but we were actually the real community historians. And Alun tried to persuade me to cut out chapter one of *The Voice of the Past*, which he said was too political, and I've often wondered why he wanted that. I've never understood that actually.

**Joanna:** I think History Workshop was very much, did give you the feel of a movement then.

**Paul:** Yes. Oh it did, it was astonishing, at first.

**Joanna:** It was. It was a political movement of...

**Paul:** It spread all over the country.

**Joanna:** Yes. And so... I think oral history found that voice later on, possibly with *The Voice of the Past* coming out in the late seventies. But I think, looking at that first committee, and looking at this, you know, how the journal was developing at that point, it was, it does feel quite universally based, doesn't it?



**Paul:** Yes, that's true.

**Joanna:** And although it's got the Current British Work, as we saw, in the very early issues, there isn't actually any current British work in that one on the family. And even in the next one, Women's History, there's only a very little amount. And so, I think that feeling of oral history as a political movement was something that possibly may have been borrowed from *History Workshop*, or somehow was generated by, maybe by the students and people who were coming through.

**Rob:** So was *History Workshop Journal* a sort of... When, what was the chronology of that? And was that regarded as a competitor in any way to *Oral History*?

**Paul:** Well I think that's what happened. I think they became, to some extent, competitors, yes. And, and of course, *History Workshop Journal* leapt to a very big circulation, I mean, 3,000-odd or something. I'm not sure exactly, but it's a lot.

**Joanna:** Well I think, it... There's a whole issue there about what happens when a journal goes commercial. And the one thing which I feel strongly about, and I think we should be proud of, is the fact that *Oral History* is still independent. And I think *History Workshop* has lost its base in a way, its community base, by going commercial, because it's quite an expensive journal now. And it's got an online section where you can put news items up, I've done something recently. But it's not quite the same, I feel, as a journal which is drawing directly from practice.

**Paul:** Oh it's become totally different.

**Rob:** So, let me get this right. Raph Samuel was obviously involved with you in the early *Oral History Journal*. But obviously he's very involved in, presumably, *History Workshop Journal*. So when, when did he concentrate his efforts on that rather than on *Oral History*?

**Paul:** We'd have to look at some old documents to answer.

**Rob:** But was that a conscious decision that he made to follow, to go, spend more of his time and effort with the *History Workshop Journal* than with the *Oral History Journal*?

**Paul:** I doubt it. I mean, and Raphael didn't sort of, make [laughs] obvious conscious decisions in that sort of way. No, I doubt it. But you see, with the *History Workshop*, I remember him launching it, and then trying... And I was worried about how that would affect the workshops, which were right, you know, nationally and local. And it was a fantastic movement at that point. And the journal was, he launched that as if it was going to be the voice of the movement. But within about two issues it was an academic journal. And I remember, one early one had an article in which there were two sets of footnotes. I mean footnotes were enough of a problem for non-academic people anyway, but, this had a double set, the a's and the numerals. [laughs] And, I said to him, 'Look, this is not what you stand for.' But he didn't take any notice of course.

**Rob:** And certainly when I started getting involved in *Oral*

*History*, I regarded it as quite a heavyweight academic journal... with quite theoretical, sophisticated, sometimes impenetrable articles in there. But, but, they published... You know, one of the articles I still regard as one of the best things ever written about oral history was, was Sandro Portelli's article, 'What Makes Oral History Different'. So, they clearly were engaging with oral history. I was wondering what that relationship was, and how you were feeling about that?

**Paul:** Well that was actually very annoying, because, in fact I had invited him to this conference, and, they, they pinched the article. I mean I was really annoyed by that. [laughs]

**Rob:** They being?

**Paul:** The *History Workshop* people pinched it. [...]

**Joanna:** So when you say a conference, was it one of the *History Workshop*'s, it was one of...?

**Paul:** No, it was an Oral History conference, at Essex. [...] And I was already admiring what Sandro was doing.

**Rob:** Can we go back to another sort of important early volume, which was Volume 5 Number 2, which was the Women's History issue from 1977. [...] And actually, we've added more people now. We've got, you know, a sort of nascent committee now being listed on the front page. We've still got Alun as reviews editor, yourself as editor. We've got Colin (South African historian and former principal of Green Templeton College, Oxford – eds) as treasurer. We've got John Saville as chairman, who was still chairman when I got involved. But this issue was edited by Joanna Bornat [...] Eve Hostettler (historian and key figure in the Island History Trust – eds), Jill Liddington (writer and historian – eds), Paul Thompson, and Thea Vigne. So Joanna, is this the moment for you to begin to talk about your involvement in the *Oral History Journal*?

**Joanna:** Well, I suppose it must be.... There was actually a day, there was

an oral history, and women's history day, at Essex. And I gave a paper. And that's when I guess I... That's from my PhD, it's when I suppose was beginning to publish. At some point you suggested that I join you with the editorial. And my job was to manage the current British work side of it. But I was also, when I look back at some of the correspondence that I've been looking at recently in the society's archive, was also commenting on articles. But I don't think in that issue... That's a collective editorial group, of the women who were contributing to that issue. But that's the first time my name appears in it I suppose, yes.

**Rob:** And what do you remember of the process of putting the issue together?

**Joanna:** Not a thing. [laughter] I can't remember anything about it. I imagine... I don't know. I mean Thea had already, she had already edited the previous issue, was it the previous issue? So she would know the system.



**Rob:** The Family History issue.

**Joanna:** Yes, the Family History issue, she's... [...]

**Rob:** But you mention a system. I mean, what was the system?

**Joanna:** Well I wasn't, obviously... I mean I don't think in that one there's much of a Current British Work section. And I think that developed, possibly the issue after that, when you had invited me to join you. [...] And I think you asked me to take it over. And so basically, I was responding to the letters that you were getting... [...] and encouraging people to write stories which would then get put into the journal.

**Paul:** Mm. So, don't you think, the Current British Work, one would have look at, but don't you think some of that was sort of, local people originally?

**Joanna:** Oh, yes, absolutely. Yes. I'm not... I'm just saying that, I think, it was probably developing quite a lot. It was getting, you know... You were probably having a lot of correspondence, a lot of people writing in and... inspired by what was going on, doing their own projects. And the journal had that function of, showcasing it in a way. And, and that's my memory, that you asked me to join, and that that was my responsibility. So I immediately set up this sort of filing system of people writing in, and then responding to them, and then getting them to actually turn what they're doing into a short piece, which would then be published. It was very much, yeah, it had come from that early, that first issue, which was, you know, showing what people were doing, and, and getting people to encourage each other I suppose through example.

**Paul:** Yes. Absolutely.

[...]

**Rob:** So who was receiving those letters? Are you receiving them directly, or they're going to the sociology department at Essex?

**Joanna:** I think they came to you, Paul.

**Paul:** Yes, probably. Yes.

**Joanna:** But after a while they were coming to me as well because I was also a postgrad at Essex then, so presumably I must have had some kind of a, a... [laughs]

**Paul:** You had a pigeonhole. [laughs]

**Joanna:** Yes. Whether it came to the Society and then was distributed to me. Because also remember, Brenda Corti was there as the administrator (in the Sociology Department – eds). [...]

**Rob:** I'm interested that we're still talking about a subscription now because I remember when I got involved, I was puzzled that I was a member of the Oral History Society but there wasn't a membership fee to the society. It was a subscription fee to the journal. So the relationship between the journal and the society was still sort of a way towards the journal as being what you were effectively a member of. I mean that didn't change till quite a long time after that. So, was it just a, is it a linguistic thing, or was there some distinction here?

**Paul:** Well I suppose the thing is that the journal had become a kind of running regular enterprise, and so it needed a kind of core group, and the subscriptions to make it possible. While the other main activity was, twice a year to have some kind of meeting, but usually in a different place. So there wasn't a kind of, conference group as it were, sustained

conference group. We would find, through Current British Work very often, there was interesting activity in some place, and then try and build a, a meeting round it. And these special numbers were outcomes of those sort of meetings.

**Joanna:** But I hadn't thought of that actually. I hadn't noticed that difference, that actually to start with it was basically a journal produced by a group. And then it becomes a society which produces a journal. And that's rather different isn't it?

**Paul:** Yes.

**Joanna:** And I wonder when that was.

**Paul:** Well after the, after, of course, the Oral History Society is formed, that formal change happens, and it's got the *Journal of the Oral History Society* on the top. But I think that, like the chairman, these people who were running the Society weren't very actively involved in the journal, because it was me and you and other people who were helping, either, review editor, Alun, and later Mary Chamberlain (later Emeritus Professor, Oxford Brookes University, historian and novelist – eds) and so on.

**Joanna:** But the idea that there would be a society with a separate life of committees, which the journal reported to, that, that's what it's become really. Well, it must, there must have been a point when, I think, were we aware of it, that this was happening?

**Sean:** Is that part of the democratic impulse, that the Society becomes where the editors have to report, or it's not a kind of, like, an authoritarian kind of clique that's running the journal? [...] So that the, the Society gradually became much more important in that respect.

**Joanna:** I think, I think it's something to do with oral history as a movement. And the Current British Work side of it becomes the society But the idea that the journal reports to the Society is, has never really been accepted by the editors. In fact there was a move in the eighties by someone called Rodney Mace (author and community historian – eds) to actually make that happen. And the editors, me at that time, and other people, were very strongly against it. You know, we reserve the right to appoint editors whom we choose. Rather than the committee.

**Rob:** I think that's still the case constitutionally. I mean it's not formally a subcommittee of the main committee; it's an editorial group, rather than a subcommittee. So, constitutionally it's slightly different I think isn't it? And I think it retains that autonomy. But we do report more formally now, don't we, than we, than, certainly when, that was the case before I first became an editor. It's a lot more formal, the reporting process, now, I think.

**Joanna:** That's more in the style of the way things are run these days, that you have to write reports, and you have to justify the existence really, and we've got a line in the budget which we have to pay attention to, and things like that.

[...]

**Rob:** So who was paying for the, for all the costs of producing this at this time?

**Paul:** Well, there was... Essex in those days, I mean it was quite easy to get funding for things. So, I should think that, any special activity, we could get money to help support at that time. Then there's the growing subscription list, which helped.



**Rob:** And that, that, you weren't personally taking this by now presumably; there was an Oral History Society account that was, and a treasurer who was managing that whole financial stuff for both the society and the journal, yes? [...]

**Joanna:** I think it's interesting though that, we say, you know, History Workshop was a kind of, a political movement. And Oral History also was but in a different sort of way. I mean there are certain, certain, it has a, what shall we say, an angle, *Oral History*. There are certain kinds of articles get published, and some others...

**Paul:** Yes, that's right.

**Joanna:** People wouldn't come to us to publish I think. [...] But I mean, it has got a kind of political mission to history from below, history to challenge, history that's radical, and questioning.

**Paul:** Yes. I'm, I'm wondering when we started sort of saying that. Because, I think I was personally very aware of it after I had been in America in '72, because I did a big tour around America, you know, with a car, across the whole continent twice, and tried to meet up with oral historians. And most of that was actually community oral history. So that must have influenced me a lot. But in *The Voice of the Past*, there are lots of phrases and so on which mostly, I mean sometimes I invented them, but they often come from people who were already working on oral history in England. So quite when that transfer of attitude came, I'm not sure. I think it must be mid-seventies that that happens.

**Rob:** Shall we move on to Volume 7, which is the spring of '79 because this seems to me to be a change in appearance. It becomes much less sort of, homemade shall we say. Is this the first... I think this is the first printed issue?

**Paul:** Yes.

**Joanna:** And with a photograph on the front.

**Rob:** So this is, yourself as editor, Mary Girling treasurer, Joanna as deputy editor, and then Alun Howkins still as reviews editor. And I notice that the deadlines for submission here are almost exactly the same as we still have today, the 1st of December and the 15th of June, which suggests that this is moving much more to sort of, regular pattern of publication ... Can you remember this...?

[...]

**Paul:** So who decided I wonder in that case to have this printed.

**Joanna:** It was printed by a commercial printer in Colchester, wasn't it?

**Paul:** Was it?

**Joanna:** Well, does it say that? [...] ...printed in Colchester. Printed by...

**Paul:** Progress[ph]. That's in Manchester. Well you see that's the Manchester Studies influence.

**Rob:** OK. Do you want to say more about that?

**Paul:** Well, I mean Manchester Studies was a very big project which was partly funded by Manpower Services, led by Bill Williams (Centre for Jewish Studies, Manchester University – eds), who sadly has recently died, and Colin Bundy. And, I think quite a lot of the community side of oral history actually came through them. Because Bill worked very intensely with the Jewish community, and set up this Museum of Manchester Jewry where you can listen to, I don't know whether it's still like that, but you could go and listen to recordings with, you know, local people. And he worked with Rickie Burman. She was actually running the Jewish Museum in London for several years, and did a lot to push that towards genuine social history and use oral history. So a very striking sort of influence actually I think.

**Rob:** So what was their involvement in the journal, Manchester Studies?

**Paul:** Well... I would have thought, you know, if it's being printed up there, they're going to be involved in some of the practical details. But, I, I don't think they were writing things. In fact Bill didn't write much, did he?

[...]

**Paul:** Yes, OK. And Colin, Colin as you know probably, did very important work in South Africa later, doing recording there and, and setting up cross-race oral history teaching, before the end of apartheid. I mean, very remarkable. And then came back to be head of SOAS [in London][...]

**Rob:** So what's the editorial process at this point then, Paul, in 1979, then?

**Paul:** The process hadn't changed much really. Well, you and I would talk about possible issue themes, wouldn't we?

**Joanna:** I think so. We certainly...

**Paul:** Yes, and there would be the, the conferences, which ultimately gave the...

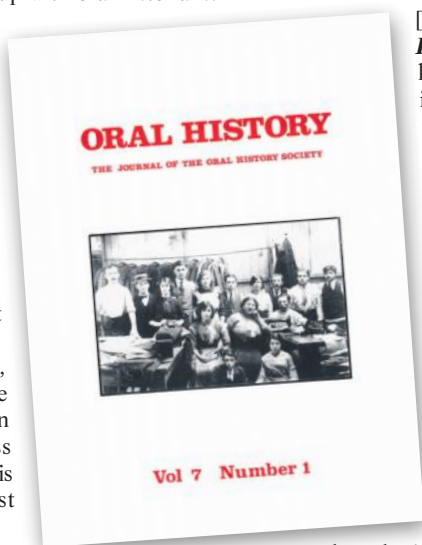
**Joanna:** Yes. I was looking at that, because what is interesting there is

that, the journal begins with reports from conferences, which we've obviously asked people to write. There's one from Jill Liddington, there's one from you on History Workshop, and one or two others, national ones, and international. And then there's the articles, and then the reviews. And at the end is Current British Work. So at some point Current British Work is brought to the front of the journal. Which is something we're often criticised for, but I still think it defines us in lots of ways. And so, whether that was just a one-off, and, you know, it was at the end of the journal, I don't know. We should look at the next one possibly. But, maybe still a bit fluid what the different sections of the journal are, and where we're indicating our strengths will...

**Paul:** Well certainly there's an overlap between reporting conferences and current work, isn't there?

**Joanna:** Yes. We now have stopped reporting conferences. We haven't done that for a number of years. It just became too complicated as conferences got bigger.

[...]



**Rob:** But are you, two of you here, as the key editors, are you still soliciting content for this? I mean, are all these articles, that you are approaching people saying, 'Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame for instance, are you saying, you know, 'Isabelle, will you write an article for the journal?', or is she approaching you? I mean how, how is that...

**Paul:** I approached her. Well I knew her. [laughs]

**Rob:** So you... It was just a question of you as editors reaching out, and, people would say yes or no?

**Paul:** Yes, so I mean that was introducing French material, which came... Well originally what happened was that Daniel and Isabelle, Daniel Bertaux and Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame, they came to visit us in Colchester. And we realised they were doing very similar work in France, really sort of good work. But it's not... Although some of it's about communities, it's not community projects in the sense that we mean. It's, that is definitely academic actually.

**Joanna:** I notice that we, in the editorial, which presumably you wrote, Paul, it says, 'Welcome to the first number of *Oral History*,' I don't know why it said, put it like that, 'new style,' right? 'We hope readers will find it more attractive and more useful than our first series.' Inviting contributions. And actually, this time, demonstrating the international reach of oral history and the journal, the authors come from France, Germany and the United States.

**Rob:** So, this suggests a new international presence in the journal. What had that come out of?

**Joanna:** Well Ron, Ron Grele's...

**Rob:** Yes, Ron Grele is in this issue as well.

**Paul:** Well this is... Yes, 1979. That was the international conference, which was about to happen I think at that point. [...]

**Rob:** Can you two talk a bit about your relationship as editors at this time then? I mean how did you work together?

**Paul:** The relationship was ever improving, wasn't it? [laughter]

**Joanna:** Well...

**Rob:** How did you work together?

**Joanna:** I don't know. You would send... I mean I can only say this because I've been looking at the archives recently. And I was surprised to see letters by me commenting on articles. I had quite detailed comments.

**Paul:** Oh absolutely.

**Joanna:** I hadn't realised I was doing that so early.

**Paul:** No, you always did that.

**Joanna:** So I guess we were passing articles between us. And occasionally one of us would take the lead with a contributor. Though I wouldn't have done it with that issue, because those are all people you knew from the international movement that I didn't know.

**Paul:** Yes. And we had to translate these, a lot of these. Because I usually did that.

**Joanna:** Oh you would do that. I didn't have that, I don't do...

**Paul:** You know, ones sent in Spanish, or French, or Italian and so on.

**Rob:** And who was typing stuff? I mean you couldn't use word processors in those days. So things were typed; things

were coming in, and, you were writing on them? I mean how, explain how it worked.

**Paul:** Probably writing on them weren't we?

**Joanna:** Yeah. We must have asked people to supply a clean copy once we had actually got them to accept amendments and things. I was going to say, there must have a house style, you know. I mean we've always had the same style of footnotes, haven't we, from the start?

**Paul:** Yes, that was an absolutely pain. And of course it still always is.

**Joanna:** Well it's a history style rather than a social science style isn't it.

[...]

**Paul:** But getting people to write to the same style is always, takes a lot of time, and, nobody notices of course actually. [laughs] If you've got it right, they don't notice.

**Joanna:** I just notice, in this issue there is actually a page printed twice.

**Paul:** Oh. [laughs]

**Joanna:** Two Westphalian fiddlers[?].

**Rob:** Oh it wouldn't happen now. [laughter]

**Paul:** No, absolutely.

[...]

**Sean:** Can I ask a question? Because I was involved a few years ago with the setting up of *Cultural and Social History*, and I remember there were a few sleepless nights when you wondered whether you'd have enough articles that would be there for the first issue, or for one of the first issues. Was there ever a period in these days, pre-REF (Research Excellent Framework – eds), when everyone was consciously churning things out, whether you sat there and you thought, is there going to be enough material for, for an issue that's coming out in the next six months or the next twelve months?

**Joanna:** I don't remember that. We might have solicited, we might have gone to people because we had thought they had something interesting to say. But I don't remember...

**Paul:** Well if there was a conference which didn't bring in much good material, then we would be in trouble, wouldn't we?

**Joanna:** I suppose so.

**Paul:** But you tend not to remember the worst issues. [laughs]

**Joanna:** Well I can... I mean, that would be the... That was the most troubled one. Well the troubled conference. But it did actually produce some articles.

**Rob:** Well shall we talk about this? Because I think this is, it seems to me, another turning point. This is Volume 8 Number 1, and the subject is 'Oral History and Black History'. Paul is editor, yourself, Joanna, is deputy editor, treasurer Mary Girling. And then we have Mary Chamberlain now appearing as reviews editor. But, it sounds like there's a bit of history to this issue and the conference. Do the two of you want to just, talk us through that a bit? Particularly in regard to the journal.

[...]

**Paul:** Why not? Well, I think, it was clear, had been clear for quite a long time I would assume, that Black history would be an area where oral evidence was particularly important, because of the neglect of documentary evidence

about black communities. And, I may say, I mean you know, in recent years I've become even more aware of that, because, when we tried to look for material that had been recorded by oral historians and sociologists and so on since 1945. And there was a series of earlier black community studies, like, *Dark Strangers* for instance, about Brixton. And actually, as far as we could find out at that time, none of them, in no case has the basic material survived. And so it continues actually to be a real problem. But, anyway, we wanted to do something about that. I had become a friend with Harry Goulbourne (later Professor of Sociology and Director of the Race and Ethnicity Research Centre, South Bank University, London – eds), who is Jamaican, who was actually in politics, that's to say, his professional line, but he was very interested in oral history. And I got some money from the Nuffield Foundation so he could do some interviews in Brixton[...] they're in the British Library archive now. [...] And so that was the start of the idea of having a conference. And then Bill (Williams) of course was interested in ethnic history in Manchester. And so we organised to have this conference. He was the man organising on the ground, and he also found Pnina Werbner (Social anthropologist, Professor Emerita University of Keele – eds), who had also worked in Manchester, but she was, she is herself Jewish, had worked on, was it the, was it the Pakistani community? I'm not quite sure. I think it was the Pakistani... [...]

**Joanna:** 'Manchester Pakistani Life Histories'.

**Paul:** Yes. Well on the first day, things went quite well, I thought. And Elizabeth Thomas-Hope (University of the West Indies – eds), who's... [laughs] I recently recorded her actually, but, she is an interesting character, because she's Jamaican-born, from an old Jamaican family, but she's what they call high brown, which means that she's not really black. And, is a very interesting example of late colonial attitudes, very, Anglophilia you might say, Anglophilia? Anyway. She spoke about migration and did what was then a very original paper, has been the basis of her book which has come out twice, but that was the first time she presented. And, it's about how people when they migrate, they don't just look at economic factors; there's also a very strong cultural and emotional element in migration. Well now, most people would know that now, but she was I think the first person to really argue that strongly. So that was very important, and, it was Harry that found her actually you see. So the first day [was] like that. But on the second day, I think probably in the morning, Pnina Werbner spoke. Were you there actually?

**Joanna:** Yeah, I was there. Oh yes.

**Paul:** Yes. And there was this woman called Natasha Sivanandan (race and equality campaigner – eds) who is the daughter of a famous communist intellectual, who I think was an MP wasn't he, a London MP for a while, is that right?

**Joanna:** No. He ran the Institute of Race Relations, and... And it was... There were two women actually, Amrit Wilson (writer and race and gender activist – eds) and Natasha Sivanandan, who were kind of chairing it. But also, don't forget Donald Hinds (Jamaican-born writer, journalist, historian and teacher – eds) must have given a paper. And he was, actually, he might have also at that time been on the...

**Paul:** He was a friend of Harry.

**Joanna:** And he was on the committee.

**Paul:** Yes, he was for a while. Yes.

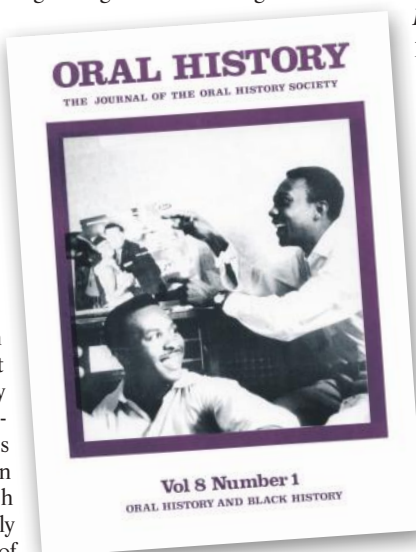
**Joanna:** And, an interesting guy.

**Paul:** Yes. He was a bus conductor who had done his own story hadn't he.

**Joanna:** And he was a teacher as well. Yes, and a writer.

**Rob:** And an associate of Claudia Jones (Trinidadian born writer and activist, d 1964 – eds) of course as well.

**Joanna:** Yes. I don't know, things just fell apart on the Saturday, and ended up with us being lectured by Natasha Sivanandan and Amrit Wilson, and, basically, told off for being white.



**Paul:** Yes, attacking us for being white people who were trying to be active in oral history. And the main victim of course was poor Pnina, who was totally shattered by the way they were treating her. So, I remember, after everybody had gone, I was with Bill, and, we both looked at each other and said, 'We'll never do anything in black history again.' [laughs] Well of course it didn't turn out to be true in my case, but, there was a long interval.

**Joanna:** I wrote up the report of that conference, which went in the next issue of the journal, and I was looking at it again the other day [...] So I just looked back at it to see, was it as bad as I remember, and it was. It included such famous statements as, you know,

'black people can't be racist'. You know, it was... [...] was very true of those times, late seventies, isn't it, still late seventies?

[...] And all the anti-racist, or racism awareness stuff was, was emerging. It was a very difficult time, and, I think they were very unsympathetic, and...

**Rob:** So, talking about this issue of the journal then, which is, which came out in spring of '80, this derived directly from that conference, did it?

**Joanna:** Yes. Because those, those were papers that were given at the conference.

**Rob:** But notably neither of the two people you've mentioned contributed to the issue, or, or did they contribute papers to the conference?

**Paul:** No, I don't think so.

**Joanna:** No, I don't... All I can remember is them somehow taking over. They actually physically took over the conference.

**Paul:** They wouldn't stop talking, and people were being sort of, stunned really. Well actually, eventually Harry got up and made a, a kind of very, slightly Stuart Hall-like speech actually. [laughing]

**Sean:** Was this in a kind of, a plenary session, or when did it happen?

**Joanna:** It was all plenary.

[...]

**Rob:** I'm just aware of the time. Shall we move on a bit?

**Joanna:** Yes. Leap on, to... [...]...Rob Perks.

**Rob:** I was doing oral history in Bradford in the early eighties, and my memory was that I went to a couple of conferences, and then, one or other of you approached me. Perhaps it was Paul.

**Paul:** I can remember talking to you, yes.

**Rob:** And saying, 'Would you be interested in getting involved in the journal?' And at that time, the other people involved, I seem to remember, if I've got it right, were Bob Little (at the time a sheltered housing warden – eds), and Michele Abendstern (later Research Associate, Personal Social Services Unit, University of Manchester – eds). I think...[...] was involved in some way.

And the two of you. So... But my first issue wasn't until autumn of 1987, but I think I was looking at things during early part of '87, if not at the end of '86. Because I was in Bradford from '83 to, late '87. And then, I moved to work with Steve Humphries at Testimony Films for a year before I then came to the British Library. But this was my first issue, which was the 'Childhood' issue in autumn 1987. And by then I was fairly familiar with the journal, but I felt that it needed a bit of a visual revamp shall we say. And I think that had probably come out of a lot of the work that I had done in Bradford, where I had worked quite closely with photographers, and was very visually aware. And I thought we should try and elevate the appearance a bit. So this was the first issue where we have an image bled to the edge of the cover really. And that's, I think it changes the appearance doesn't it?

**Paul:** Mm. A huge improvement.

**Rob:** It's all... And although the typeface I think is more or less the same, the typographical change didn't come next...

**Paul:** That's the Clarendon bold. Yes.

**Rob:** I mean we have now what I think really looks like the journal it does today, with a full-page image. Nothing on the back, interestingly, but, with the committee very firmly inside the front cover, with the contents, with the news leading, with the articles following, and the reviews at the end.

**Joanna:** Are there photographs through the journal? Because we now ask people to submit articles with photographs.

**Rob:** There's a few. [...] I remember myself being very keen on illustrations, and really pushing that very early on.

[...]

**Joanna:** For a while, and I can't remember how long, the journal was printed, still printed in Manchester, but by Manchester Free Press. [...] And, presumably we were then sending hard copy up to them. We wouldn't be sending any digital files. [...] We'd be risking [laughs], sending everything up.

**Rob:** Well, I mean occasionally, because I was based in Bradford, I would travel across to Manchester and talk to... I'm trying to think of the guys there. Andy Ceasar, was that his name?

**Joanna:** That's it.

[...]

**Paul:** Mm. And I remember the sort of, process of producing the copy was quite hard work, lots of to-ing and fro-ing, things being posted, and, different versions coming through. And then I remember you and I spending long, having interminable conversations on the phone, going through the proofs.

**Rob:** You know, I remember sitting in my flat in Bradford for like, two and a half hours, going page by page through every proof, you know, correcting it. And then I'd post it across to Manchester... I mean it seemed very laborious. But I think by then, I think the process of circulating articles around all the editors for comment, and then having a meeting where we would, we would make it a decision about the changes that are needed, and whether we were going... That seemed to be in place to me at that stage. Am I remembering that wrong?

**Paul:** I don't know. And, in practical terms, how would we do that photocopy, and send to all the editors.

[...]

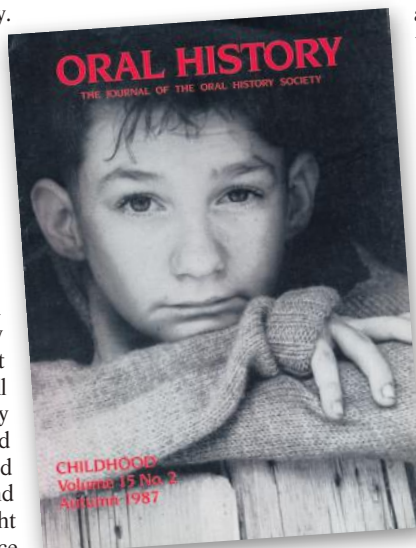
**Rob:** Brenda Corti is reviews editor. And I'm an issue editor here, I think. I think you still were trying me out a bit at this stage, to see whether I knew what I was doing. Because I'm an issue editor, rather than a full editor.

**Paul:** And also, you weren't really sure whether you wanted to commit yourself to it in the long term, I would say, at that point, isn't that right?

**Rob:** That's probably true, because I didn't know how long I was going to be in Bradford I suppose at that stage.

[...]

**Joanna:** But it's interesting seeing who the contributors are, because, Penny Summerfield is the lead... Oh I always think the first article is the lead article really, but other people don't see it that way. So, Penny Summerfield, we've got her writing about schooling in Lancashire. And then Joan Schwitzer and Katherine Thompson. Now they're local historians, in north London. Joan Schwitzer was very active in Hornsey Historical Society. [...] Elizabeth Atkinson, I'm afraid I don't remember her, about children's homes. Two from Northern Ireland, Cahal Dallat and Faith Gibson. And this would be a time when Faith was actually working a lot on reminiscence, and I had been as well. I started doing that in





1980. And Faith, from the University of Ulster, was bringing out her, we supported her, and Help the Aged, which I had left by then, in producing her, her slide show. And she was writing a lot more then about the importance of reminiscence in older people's lives. Andy Hill, I don't remember. And then, you've got an interview there that was transcribed. Something we tried, but we've never done that...

**Paul:** Who was the interviewee?

**Joanna:** 'The Making of a British Asian', 'You're Different: You're one of Us', an interview by Rob Perks.

[...]

**Rob:** {...] We were quite keen, weren't we, on different formats of publication, so it wasn't just... I don't know who, who came up with that idea of having an interview I did a couple of them early on. I did another one with a printmaker or something didn't I, I seem to remember.

[...]

**Joanna:** I think we've thought about doing it now and again, just to show an interview in a sense.

[...]

**Rob:** I mean we have had times when we've been short of copy. But, my memory was that we've generally had enough. We've never missed an issue for lack of copy, have we, really? [...] I mean it has expanded, you know, year on year... I mean 128 pages is our sort of maximum now for financial reasons, but, for a long time it was, it was around 100 wasn't it, actually.

[...]

**Sean:** So what was your feedback to the images then appearing? Did you get positive feedback?

**Rob:** I mean when we used to go to conferences and have back issues out for sale, I mean that just jumped out at that time, because it was such a startling image. And I was always keen to try and have more images with the articles where we could. Because I think it differentiated us from many other academic articles. And I could never understand why it wasn't possible for academics to have illustrations with their pieces. But there was still a sense, then, still now to some degree, in which academics don't think visually. Do you think that's still, do you think that's true now Sean?

**Sean:** Oh I mean definitely. I mean the majority of journals... It's quite difficult to find a journal that will accept illustrations, you know. Particularly, you know, we're in the twenty-first century, and some of them are still saying, 'We don't do colour illustrations,' or, 'We don't do illustrations at all,' you know. Which does seem bizarre. And some of, even when a lot of the stuff's being read online now, so, they're not even having to go through the production costs in that respect of printing lots of colour illustrations or whatever.

**Rob:** I mean we have had exceptions haven't we? We've had June Freeman (Cultural history and domestic violence researcher and author – eds), who guest-edited the 'Crafts issue', and I remember her being very enthusiastic about having images, because, for obviously reasons. So we did a colour four-page spread, didn't we, of colour images. Which was about, I think that was the only time we ever included colour images. It cost us a lot of money, I seem to remember, at the time.

**Joanna:** I thought she raised a bit of money for that.

[...]

**Rob:** And we have gone increasingly over to colour covers of course, which, you know, I still think look great if you can get the image and, and pay the permissions fee and so on.

**Joanna:** And partly it's to do with quality, isn't it? Because, I mean if you look in this one, some of these are archive images, and they're not great. But you kind of accept that because, they're historical objects aren't they?

**Paul:** Yes, I think so.

**Joanna:** But then, one other step forward I can't quite place in time is, when did we start working with a designer? Because the designer now is very fussy about the quality of the images.

**Rob:** Yes. Well I mean, I thought at that time when I was going across to see all these, these chaps in Manchester, there didn't seem to me to be any design; they just literally laid it out. I mean there was no design element as such, was there?

[...]

**Rob:** I'm just going to grab the next couple of issues, because they do indicate the next move I think in terms of design, which is when Andy Smith gets involved. And that's 1999. So Andy Smith comes on board as a designer, and... [...] This is the first issue that he worked on, which is spring of '99, on Migration. So he developed a new logo, and a completely new look for the journal. Which I think just, it just seemed to step up into a different sort of realm somehow, in terms of appearance and quality and... And I can't remember who was printing it at this time. [...] So we found Andy Smith through the British Library. Because he was working as a freelancer for the British Library's Design Office, and we thought we needed to improve the design. So we approached him, as a freelancer, and he took it on really, and he's remained our designer ever since. And what we see here I think with this issue is, it looks even closer, doesn't it, to, to what we, what we see now. I mean we've tweaked the design a few times since, but...

**Paul:** Mm. Yeah. No, it's good. Good.

**Rob:** And I think the, the new banner headline, a lot more images, a lot more attention I think to the quality of the, of the printing and so on.

**Joanna:** White space, he's very keen on white space isn't he?

**Rob:** Yes, giving, allow it to breathe a bit really. But also having three columns for the news, two columns for the article. So you're visually... You know, I don't think any of us were really aware of those sort of visual changes, were they? And I think he did bring a really fresh look to it. How do you think we thought about the content, Joanna, during this period?

**Joanna:** Well [...] we'd give a title to something and then say it was a theme, but as it happens, this one is mostly on migration. So, maybe we were working deliberately on a theme for this one. I mean, just looking at the people, a lot of those people we knew because we were working with them: Alistair Thomson (later Professor of History, Monash University – eds), Sheena Rolph (then Senior Research Fellow in the oral historian of learning disability, Open University – eds), Michelle Winslow (University Teacher in Adult Palliative and End of Life Care, University of Sheffield

— eds), Allan Redfern (then a school teacher — eds). But then there are other people who, obviously we had heard about their work and we had invited them to write, like Olivia Bennett and Katy Gardner. Fani Keramida I don't know, but, this...

**Rob:** So who were the editors on this issue then Joanna?

**Joanna:** It's, you, me, Wendy Rickard (health researcher — eds), and Al Thomson. So Al had come in by now. And that, that was another change really wasn't it.

**Rob:** I think Al's, Al's involvement was very important, wasn't it? Because, for a time there was the three of us consistently, and then we had different people joining the team to make a fourth didn't we? And we worked in pairs, didn't we.

**Joanna:** Yes.

**Rob:** So you and Al always worked together, did you? And then I worked with, with the fourth person. That's how I remember it. Because, I certainly worked with Wendy; I certainly worked with Teresa (Teresa Watkins, later television documentary producer — eds), who also, came later I think. Is that your memory as well?

**Joanna:** Yes, I think it, it probably was, that we did it that way. I mean we'd all obviously be talking about all the articles. But when it came to seeing a journal issue through, we paired off. What I'm wondering about is, printing technology, and how that's changed as well.

**Paul:** Well actually, before you go on to that, can I ask about Al? I mean what do you think he brought in, and what was sort of new in his perspective?

**Rob:** An internationalism, certainly I mean as an Australian, and I think he had a lot of interest in international work, and international articles. And like all of us really, we were travelling to international conferences, so talking to people around the world, and encouraging them to submit articles. I think, because he was involved in adult education, although he was an oral historian at Sussex, he was within the Department of Adult Education. That meant he was involved in a lot of community activity. And of course, previous to working at Sussex he had been the worker at the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers. So he was very connected to community publishing and community activity. So I think that also brought more of the community facing material, as well as him having a very solid academic background.

**Joanna:** I think you're right, he was very keen on bringing people up in various ways, encouraging people to write and... I think he also... I mean I, this isn't to say that it isn't true of anybody else round this table. He was very exacting in his dealings. I always felt he was very demanding: well not demanding, but he, he had high standards. I mean, and there was, there was only us. We didn't have an administrator. Andy was the only other person who we worked with really.

**Rob:** There was the four of us plus Andy. And Joanna would

take the notes in the editorial meetings in a notebook, so, which was really our only record of stuff that was coming in. At one point we came up with a circulation sheet, I can't remember whose exciting idea that was, but...

**Joanna:** I think that was yours. It was, that was a big step forward actually.

**Rob:** So, you would, you would basically have one copy of the article. You would tick when you had read it, and you'd send it on to the next person. I mean that seems, so basic. [laughs]

**Paul:** And by this point it's on email?

[...]

**Rob:** No, I think we're still physically sending articles round. But we're appending our comments.

**Joanna:** I mean we trusted a lot to the post. [laughs] Handing over...

**Rob:** Well not just that, but we trusted not to read each other's comments before we read the article and added our own comments. Whereas we, I mean we, it wasn't really anonymised then was it?

**Joanna:** No it wasn't. But that is still something we do. We are quite fussy about not reading each other's comments until we've made a final, or getting to near, make a decision. And I still think that's a good principle. And also not writing on the article. If it's something you had to, perhaps sometimes introduce that as an idea to people when they're editing, don't touch the article. No corrections on the... Which is very tempting to do isn't it?

**Rob:** So, I think this was a period where we were learning a lot from each other, the three of us, really, about how to make the journal better, that difficult balance between the community, representing community oral history, and the academic. This was the time I think when publishing articles became an important part of what academics were supposed to do for Research Assessment Exercises of various kinds. So we

were all becoming much more aware, weren't we, of the, of the importance of publishing particular moments for people in the, in that research assessment trajectory and so on.

**Joanna:** But I don't think, research assessment wasn't, wasn't around at all then.

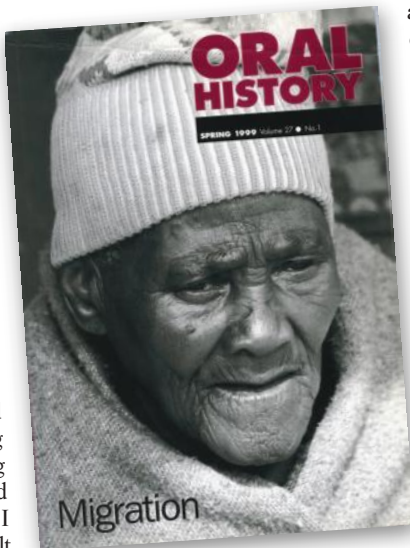
**Rob:** When did that start?

**Sean:** It was, it started in the nineties.

[...]

**Rob:** Can we talk a bit about that? Because, I mean I, as a non-academic in this, I've obviously been aware of this, but I've not been embedded in this point system that emerged. And in many ways oral history was a casualty of that, wasn't it, because certain history journals are favoured... [...] and therefore targeted. And we began to have people saying, 'Well I don't want to publish in *Oral History* because it doesn't give me the RAE points,' and so on.

[...]





**Sean:** Yeah, I don't think that's a factor for most historians. It's a factor for those in universities who are managing this process, who keep telling all their academics that you've got to publish in the top journals. And then they got out and they somehow create a list of top journals, you know, which is, I've seen lists where there are journals that no longer exist are in the top history journals, you know. So these lists are often very inaccurate, even if they can be relied upon to demonstrate something around topness, whatever that means, you know? [...] But, most historians know that, and people who have been on the RAE panels themselves, REF panels, have come back and said, 'We are just as likely to read and score something highly that's in the *Journal of Mediocre History* (This is an imaginary journal – eds) as something that's in *American Historical Review*, or something which is deemed to be top by university managers,' you know. [...] So we would always argue that to university managers, but you can see that, particularly for younger researchers, the pressure is probably going to be on to, can you get into *Past & Present*? [...] Can you get into *English Historical Review*, or, or whatever it might be, you know. Because they might look at *Oral History* and say who publishes that? And has it got the various citation ratings and citation ratings measured in this journal, whatever. And we don't fit that kind of criteria, we don't fit that, those patterns, we're not measurable in those ways. But the people on the panels will say, this is a good article, or it's not a good article, because they'll read it. It's just that the university managers will sometimes push people in certain directions and some university researchers might cave to that kind of pressure. Others would be more resistant, you know. [...] But it does give journals like *Oral History* a problem... [...] in the modern world.

**Joanna:** Yes, I think Graham Smith's (Professor of Oral History, Newcastle University – eds) done quite a lot to shift... the History panel hasn't he... And now, oral history is accepted, isn't it, where it wasn't before. And I think there's an oral historian on the History panel this time, is that right? Well there was last time, Penny Summerfield (Professor Emerita of Modern History at the University of Manchester – eds) was, wasn't she.

**Rob:** Well, and Lynn Abrams (Professor of History at the University of Glasgow – eds) is, I think, now on one of the panels as well.  
[...]

**Rob:** But I mean, are you suggesting, because we're not a commercial journal, that we lose out?  
[...]

**Joanna:** I would absolutely say that. I mean I actually would... George Monbiot wrote an excellent piece in the *Guardian* about ten years ago, or, not so long, saying the REF, or the RAE as it then was, is a tie-up between commercial publishing and universities. It is.  
[...]

**Joanna:** So if you're not commercial, at that point, you couldn't get in. Well we, we've managed to beat that back. But it was hard, and... And it did mean we had issues which we weren't certain we were going to get articles for. Because we were being squeezed out.

**Paul:** But you feel that it's all right now?

**Joanna:** I think it's got better. Although, we've been told recently that we have to accept articles up to 8,000 words long, because those are... That was from St Andrews apparently, will only submit publications or articles (to the REF – eds) that are of that length. Well, you know, we've always said, five to seven, haven't we. In order not to terrify people who haven't got a lot to say but might have quality to say in a short number of words.

**Sean:** It's like all these things, I mean I think people see what they want in the kind of regulations, and they go for the safe position, the safest position in case this happens. But I mean, we all know that you can have a 5,000-word article that's absolutely excellent, and it's world-leading. You can say in 5,000 words something which is going to be defined as world-leading, four star, in the REF. You can spend, you put another 3,000 words on it, and not make it any better. You might just repeat yourself, or, just add a few more examples or whatever, it's still going to be rated in the same way you know. So, you know, people do sometimes tie themselves up in knots I think, you know, around REF.

**Paul:** The situation in Essex is just awful. I mean they're like you are saying, but I mean they're, they're really being tough about forcing people to write for these old journals, which tend to be the most conventional ones. So it really stifles innovative writing.

**Rob:** Well is this going to have a long-term impact on *Oral History*? I mean we've, we've fought off commercialism to the degree to which we've been approached by a number of publishers, I mean two or three times. And we've decided on each occasion that we want to carry on as an, you know, independently publishing. But I mean how long can we sustain that, financially and in terms of, of academic profile? Or, we're not interested in academic profile.  
[laughs]

**Joanna:** I think the academic profile side of it is OK. I mean the tension is between people who say, 'I can't read *Oral History* because it's too academic. You know, where's all your community history? I think that's OK. I think the problem is, how can we actually survive financially? Because we're embedded in the finances of the society, so the society comes back as an issue.

**Sean:** There are also opportunities in the REF I think for the journal, REF now has a section on REF impact. And that's about, outreach, and who you're working with as part of your research. So, oral historians are very well placed to engage with REF Impact. And that's where the journal perhaps needs to be potentially smarter in selling itself to potential, people who might publish. You know, let's talk about your REF impact; let's talk about the community groups that you work with, or the museum that you work with. What was new about that, what was innovative about that? How did oral history, how was it central to that? [...] I think we can do all that, and, and make oral history a kind of, a bit of a flagship for REF Impact in that respect, if we want to defend ourselves, if you like, from potential negative consequences of REF.

[...]

**Rob:** I'm also wondering about the competition. Because, I mean since we started, we've talked a bit about *History Workshop Journal*, but there have been other journals that have emerged. Is it the journal, *Memory Studies*, *Journal of Narrative studies* and so on.

**Paul:** *Memory Studies*, yes.

**Rob:** I mean, what's your sense of the... Are these, you know, aggressive competitors? Are they working in a similar area? I mean what do we feel about these?

**Joanna:** Well there's also the US journal. I'm always very sad when I see good oral historians in the UK choosing to publish there, and not publishing with us. Because, obviously they see that as somehow more powerful, more kudos, US. But, yeah, I mean, I think *Memory Studies* was a bit, when it first began, I think we were all worried about it. But I don't feel quite so much. Again, I've seen people publish there which I think they should have published with us, but... I don't know. What do you think Sean?

**Sean:** Mm. It's not a journal that I look at a lot. I mean I might dive into it for particular articles. I've not followed it and seen its development that closely. Again, we have a strong niche, we have a strong loyal readership, and the conference is great help to us as well. And I think that we, increasingly now we're making good networks with European oral historians as well. So I think that's strengthened things in the last few years, maybe in the last ten years in particular.

[...]

**Rob:** But we still have the problem, though, we never really exceeded 1,000 in terms of subscriber/members. You know, we've never gone higher than that. I mean obviously that, I think last time we did a check on how many readers that represented, it's nearer 5,000 active readers, if you count up people who are looking at it in libraries and so on. But I mean, it's not a mass-circulation journal this, is it?

**Joanna:** Well I think, we do have a problem, and that is getting on the Web in various ways, and getting seen. And we've got the JSTOR deal, but I don't actually think that's so brilliant. I think that's where the commercial side I think can do things for us. But, we've got to find a way of working round that.

**Rob:** I'm just aware that we're coming to the end of our time. And I think we've covered quite a few of the, the sort of areas that we wanted to talk about. Sean, what was your perception when you first joined as an editor? You were one of a new tranche of editors that came in what, two or three years ago.

[...]

**Sean:** Well that you were quite a democratic bunch. The impulse still seemed to be there, you know, the way that things were handed out. What strikes me is that you're very fair I think with articles that come in. Things that other journals might immediately dispatch to the waste bin of history, the waste bin of oral history, you tend to think, can we work with this person, can we make this better, can we improve it. So I've seen a lot of very pleasant experiences I think for the people who have submitted, maybe stuff that wasn't immediately publishable. I think that's very praiseworthy in the modern era of REF and every-

thing else, you know, where everything is kind of cutthroat. You know, that, that was a strong sense I got. And I suppose because, a number of you at least, not least the three people in this room who have been so long-associated with the journal, there is a very strong sense of identity and loyalty to the purposes of the journal, the tradition of the journal I think, which is not necessarily present in other journals. I think of people coming in and do a job for two or three years and get it on their CV and then they move on to do something else. So those would be my two big impressions, you know. And, you know, the range of work that gets submitted I suppose as well, it's very diverse isn't it, it's very interesting I think, and, it does make each, each issue of the journal slightly different, and I think the readers must experience... You know, I never thought I'd end up reading about, I don't know, Finnish oral history, or Cuban oral history, but, learning a lot from doing those things.

**Joanna:** I think it's meant that we've had an editorial group that's quite diverse. We're not very focused on one aspect of history, or even on history. And that's because we have to bring in different areas of expertise, because of what we get submitted, as, you're right, they could come from anywhere really, as long as it's oral history. So that's been interesting, learning from the other editors.

[...]

**Rob:** Well you two have just done a new version of *The Voice of the Past*, which sort of, surveyed the, the territory over the last fifty years. I mean, has the journal, does the journal, is the journal a mirror for those developments?

**Paul:** You mean, internationally, or just in British terms?

**Rob:** Both. Both I think.

**Paul:** There's certainly an enormous lot of information in the American journal which, if you really want to know what's going on, you have to read that, and the Australian one as well and so on. But I mean we can't hope to cover all those places, can we? But, do you think in terms of really star books, do we manage to get them reviewed? I'm not sure that we do.

[...]

**Rob:** But I was thinking more in terms of the articles. Are we getting the top people still writing, are we covering the, the key shifts in thinking and theoretical changes within the field? What do we think?

**Sean:** I mean we could maybe, work a little bit more on that in terms of targeting particular individuals. And, you know, one is inviting people to the conference to do the keynotes, and then ensuring that the keynotes appear in the journal I guess. You know, that's, that's quite important, and it doesn't always happen for whatever reason, you know, and there are various reasons. That's probably the best way to do that, isn't it. Because then you're getting a double package, aren't you, you're getting them at the conference, the membership are seeing them, and then, others, people can read what they had to say and what their key thoughts are in the journal itself.

**Joanna:** I think that's interesting. Because it's almost reminding us where the journal began. That tie-up between conferences and the journal.

[...]

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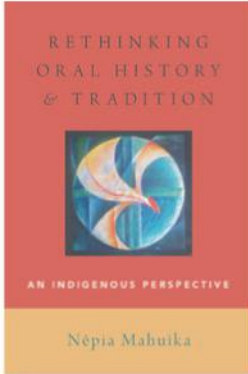
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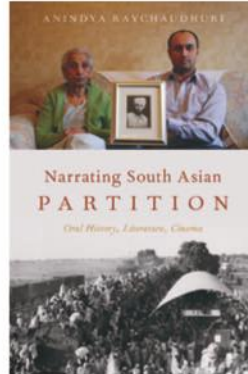
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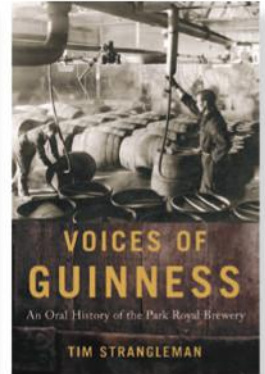
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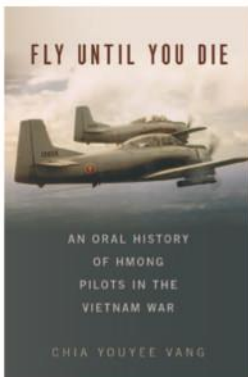
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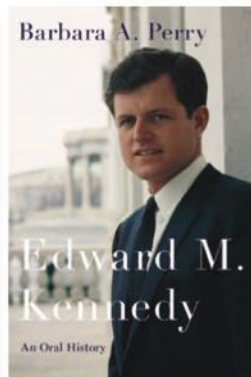
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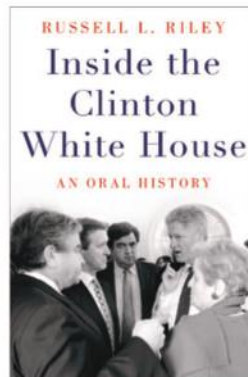
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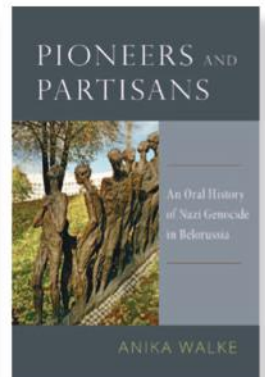
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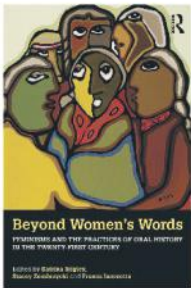
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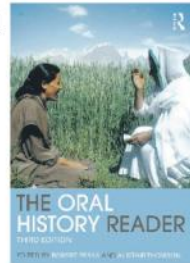
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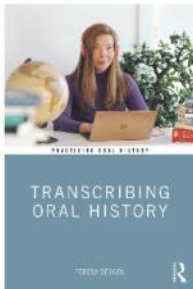


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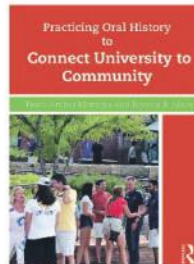


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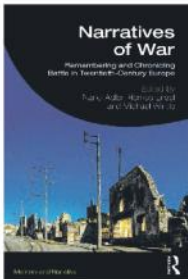


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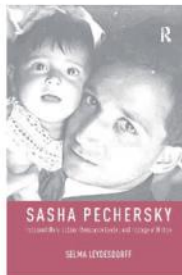


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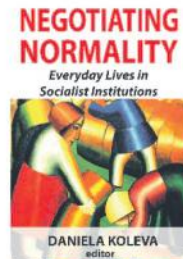
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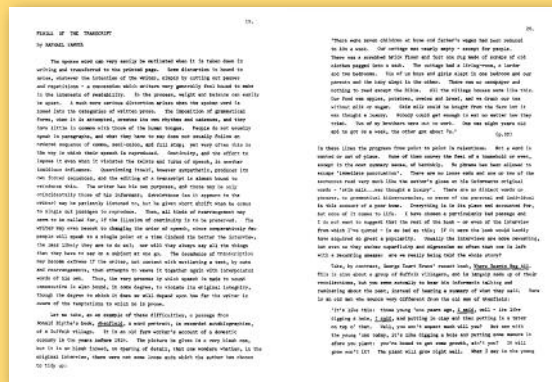
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# Perils of the transcript

by Raphael Samuel

Vol 1, no 2, 1972, pp 19-22



Raphael Samuel's article, from the second ever issue of *Oral History* (1972), became important to me after encountering oral history ten or so years ago, having gained some work summarising interviews. My recently completed PhD was a cultural history of vibration, exploring the physicality of sound

through a range of literary and scientific texts, and at first sight had nothing to do with oral history. And yet, at the end of the nineteenth century, sound vibrations had made their impressions on wax: the first recordings by Edison, who began to dream of a kind of oral history archive, of 'the sayings,

the voices' of family members 'as of great men' (*The Phonograph and Its Future*, 1878). Edison, understandably, made a great deal of the differences between written documents and sound recordings. Samuel's essay, published just over a century later, is a powerful reminder of the sonorous qualities

of oral history, and of how written versions of interviews can turn them into something very different. I've returned again and again to this essay, which has encouraged me also to consider transcription not just as a 'peril' but a creative opportunity. In recent years with the use of digital technologies, the voice has become

significant again in new ways, and this article is worth revisiting.

It also has some great advice about growing potatoes, a hobby my younger self

would never have suspected me of taking up. Samuel quotes from George Ewart Evans' book *Where Beards Wag All*, to illustrate how written words can make

'you seem actually to hear his informants talking and ruminating about the past, instead of hearing a summary of what they said'. In summary: use manure.

**Shelley Trower,**  
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The spoken word can very easily be mutilated when it is taken down in writing and transferred to the printed page. Some distortion is bound to arise, whatever the intention of the writer, simply by cutting out pauses and repetitions – a concession which writers very generally feel bound to make in the interests of readability. In the process, weight and balance can easily be upset. A much more serious distortion arises when the spoken word is boxed into the categories of written prose. The imposition of grammatical forms, when it is attempted, creates its own rhythms and cadences, and they have little in common with those of the human tongue. People do not usually speak in paragraphs, and what they have to say does not usually follow an ordered sequence of comma, semi-colon, and full stop; yet very often this is the way in which their speech is reproduced. Continuity, and the effort to impose it even when it violates the twists and turns of speech, is another insidious influence. Questioning itself, however sympathetic, produces its own forced sequences, and the editing of a transcript is almost bound to reinforce this. The writer has his own purposes, and these may be only coincidentally those of his informant; irrelevance (as it appears to the writer) may be patiently listened to, but be given short shrift when he comes to single out passages to reproduce. Then, all kinds of rearrangement may seem to be called for, if the illusion of continuity is to be preserved. The writer may even resort to changing the order of speech, since comparatively few people will speak to a single point at a time (indeed the better the interview, the less likely they are to do so); nor will they always say all the things that they have to say on a subject at one go. The decadence of transcription may become extreme if the writer, not content with mutilating a text, by cuts and rearrangements, then attempts to weave it together again with interpolated words of his own. Thus, the very process by which speech is made to sound consecutive is also bound, in some degree, to violate its original integrity, though the degree to which it does so will depend upon how far the writer is aware of the temptations to which he is prone.

Let me take, as an example of these difficulties, a passage from Ronald Blythe's book, *Akenfield*, a word portrait, in recorded autobiographies, of a Suffolk village. It is an old farm worker's account of a domestic economy in the years before 1914. The picture he gives is a very bleak one, but it is so bleak indeed, so sparing of detail, that one wonders whether, in the original interview, there were not some loose ends which the author has chosen to tidy 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.

In these lines the progress from point to point is relentless. Not a word is wasted or out of place. None of them convey the feel of a household or even, except in the most summary sense, of hardship. No phrase has been allowed to escape 'immediate punctuation'. There are no loose ends and one or two of the sentences read very much like the author's gloss on his informants' original words – 'skim milk... was thought a luxury'. There are no dialect words or phrases, no grammatical idiosyncrasies, no sense of the personal and individual in this account of a poor home. Everything is in its place and accounted for, but none of it comes to life. I have chosen a particularly bad passage and I do not want to suggest that the rest of the book – or even of the interview from which I've quoted – is as bad as this; if it were the book would hardly have acquired so great a popularity. Usually the interviews are more rewarding, but even so they eschew superfluity and digression so often that one is left with a recurring unease: are we really being told the whole story?

Take, by contrast, George Ewart Evans' recent book, *Where Beards Wag All*. This is also about a group of Suffolk villagers, and is largely made up of their recollections, but you seem actually to hear his informants talking and ruminating about the past, instead of hearing a summary of what they said. Here is an old man who sounds very different from the old man of *Akenfield*:

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 make the boon [bone] and the boon make the frame (p 212).

Although both Blythe and Ewart Evans are recording old Suffolk labourers, the voices seem worlds apart. Perhaps this can be explained by differences in method on the part of the writers – either in recording or in transcription or (quite possibly) both. In the one passage we are given mere information; in the other meanings ebb and flow. The speech is ragged at the edges; it twists and turns, gnaws away at meanings and coils itself up. There is a sense of a speaker thinking, wondering, and trying to answer the questions in his own mind rather than those of the reader. Syntax is difficult, but the final effect is memorable.

George Ewart Evans is using as much artistry as Ronald Blythe. He has probably eliminated some hesitations, pauses or repetitions from his quotation, and he has put in punctuation, but he has done this in a way which preserves the texture of the speech. Italics are used to indicate unexpected emphasis, punctuation to bring the phrases together rather than separate them, and occasional phonetic spellings to suggest the sound of the dialect. In other words, the artistry in his transcription is to convey in words the quality of the original speech.

Now that work in oral history is well under way, it would be helpful if there could be some exchange of difficulties and some discussion of method. It is possible that certain conventions can be established, at least among those who recognise each other as fellow-workers in the field, and in time these would begin to exert their effect. It would be helpful if historians could be dissuaded from transcribing speech according to the conventions and constrictions of written prose, if they could make some attempt to convey the cadences of speech as well as its content, even if they do not aim to be phonetically exact.

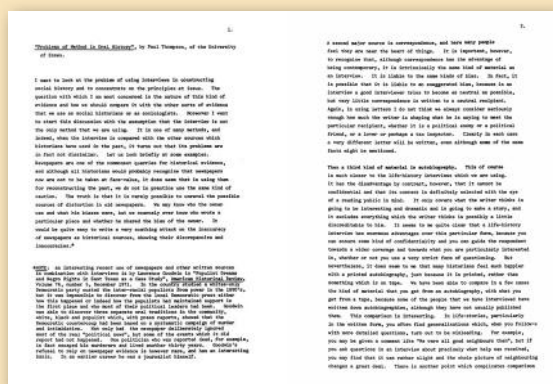
There is no reason why sentences should make an orderly progression from beginning to end, with verbs and adjectives and nouns each in their grammatically allotted place. If the speaker allows his sentences to tail off, or remain incomplete, why should not the transcript reflect this? If his meanings emerge through digression, the transcript ought not to convey the sense of a forced inarch. The historian ought not to impose his own order on the speech of his informants. He retains the privilege of selection, but he should use this as scrupulously as he would when working from printed sources or MSS, indicating any cuts he has made. Within a quoted text – a long passage such as those I have taken from *Akenfield* and *Where Beards Wag All* – he should stick to the speaker's own order, otherwise he will be in danger of providing a gloss of his own instead of the original text.

The collector of the spoken word – of oral memory and tradition – is in a privileged position. He is the creator, in some sort, of his own archives, and he ought to interpret his duties accordingly. His role, properly conceived, is that of archivist, as well as historian, retrieving and storing priceless information which would otherwise be lost. At present the archive in which his material could be copied or stored does not exist; nevertheless, his greatest contribution may well be in the collecting and safe preservation of his material rather than in the use he can immediately find for it, or the way he writes it up. However intelligent and well thought out his work, it is inconceivable that his will be the only selection of texts that could be made. The information which he brushes aside as irrelevant may be just the thing upon which a future researcher will seize – if he is given the chance. Research can never be a once-and-for-all affair, nor is there ever a single use to which evidence can be put. Historians in the future will bring fresh interests to bear upon the materials we collect; they will be asking different questions and seeking different answers. And the more successful we are in executing our own research tasks, the more likely it is that their work will diverge from our own. Unless recordings can be preserved in their original integrity, and made freely available for other researchers to consult, they will remain locked forever in the preoccupations of the collector, immune to criticism, and incapable of serving as a base for a continuing enquiry.

## Problems of method in oral history

by Paul Thompson

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This article was one of the set of papers published by *Oral History* from the March 1972 Leicester conference on 'The interview in Social History', which was a key moment in the professional recognition by social researchers of the potential of oral

history. It was printed alongside other more ethnographic articles by, for example, Raphael Samuel and George Ewart Evans. I was also strongly influenced by colleagues in Sociology at Essex. The Social Science Research Council, who funded the conference, were

already supporting my national project of over 400 interviews for The Edwardians which were still in progress. I had been combing the existing literature on the memory process, forms of interviewing and sampling, etc, and I set this against very long extracts from

some of the interviews. The key professional issue of the time was positivist, how far memory could be a reliable source in comparison with traditional historical sources. But as the Shetland funeral story on page 6 indicates, we were already becoming



aware that memories did not have to be true to be significant – which was by the late 1970s to become the next key issue for oral history. So

this article represents a step in a learning process. For all of us, the feel of the conference was of explorers afoot in a new world. As Jim Dyos

summed up at the end, 'we have landed on the iceberg, but at least we know we are on the iceberg and not on solid land'.

**Paul Thompson,  
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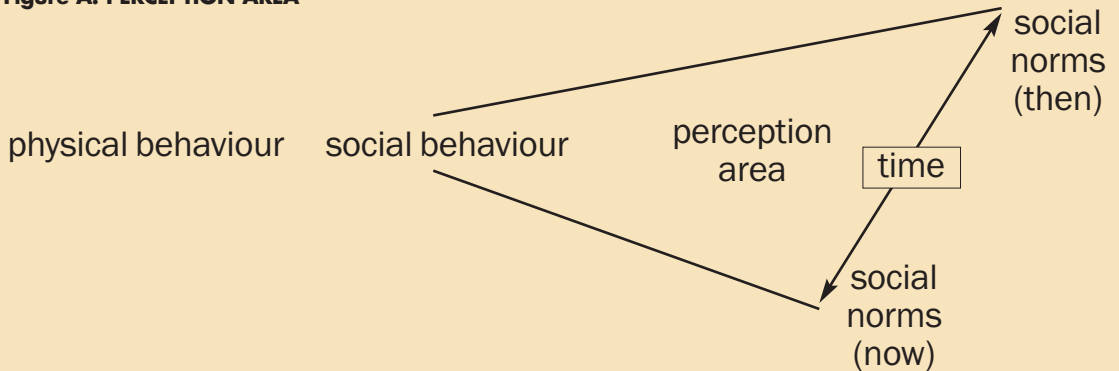
I want to look at the problem of using interviews in constructing social history and to concentrate on the principles at issue. The question with which I am most concerned is the nature of this kind of evidence and how we should compare it with the other sorts of evidence that we use as social historians or as sociologists. Moreover I want to start this discussion with the assumption that the interview is not the only method that we are using. It is one of many methods, and indeed, when the interview is compared with the other sources which historians have used in the past, it turns out that its problems are in fact not dissimilar. Let us look briefly at some examples. Newspapers are one of the commonest quarries for historical evidence, and although all historians would probably recognise that newspapers now are not to be taken at face-value, it does seem that in using them for reconstructing the past, we do not in practice use the same kind of caution. The truth is that it is rarely possible to unravel the possible sources of distortion in old newspapers. We may know who the owner was and what his biases were, but we scarcely ever know who wrote a particular piece and whether he shared the bias of the owner. It would be quite easy to write a very scathing attack on the inaccuracy of newspapers as historical sources, showing their discrepancies and inaccuracies.<sup>1</sup>

A second major source is correspondence, and here many people feel they are near the heart of things. It is important, however, to recognise that, although correspondence has the advantage of being contemporary, it is intrinsically the same kind of material as an interview. It is liable to the same kinds of bias. In fact, it is possible that it is liable to an exaggerated bias, because in an interview a good interviewer tries to become as neutral as possible, but very little correspondence is written to a neutral recipient. Again, in using letters I do not think we always consider seriously enough how much the writer is shaping what he is saying to meet the particular recipient, whether it is a political enemy or a political friend, or a lover or perhaps a tax inspector. Clearly in each case a very different letter will be written, even although some of the same facts might be mentioned.

Then a third kind of material is autobiography. This of course is much closer to the life-history interviews which we are using. It has the disadvantage by contrast, however, that it cannot be confidential and that its content is definitely selected with the eye of a reading public in mind. It only covers what the writer thinks is going to be interesting and dramatic and is going to make a story, and it excludes everything which the writer thinks is possibly a little discreditable to him. It seems to me quite clear that a life-

history interview has enormous advantages over this particular form, because you can ensure some kind of confidentiality and you can guide the respondent towards a wider coverage and towards what you are particularly interested in, whether or not you use a very strict form of questioning. But nevertheless, it does seem to me that many historians feel much happier with a printed autobiography, just because it is printed, rather than something which is on tape. We have been able to compare in a few cases the kind of material that you get from an autobiography, with what you get from a tape, because some of the people that we have interviewed have written down autobiographies, although they have not usually published them. This comparison is interesting. In life-stories, particularly in the written form, you often find generalisations which, when you follow with more detailed questions, turn out to be misleading. For example, you may be given a comment like, "We were all good neighbours then", but if you ask questions in an interview about precisely what help was received, you may find that it was rather slight and the whole picture of neighbouring changes a great deal. There is another point which complicates comparison between a written autobiography and a tape recording. When you switch off the tape recorder, there may be a third kind of contact because you may be told things that the respondent does not want either written or on a tape, which are especially confidential, but which they are prepared to tell you 'off the cuff' at the end, I think we should aim to collect all these different kinds of material.

Returning now to historians' sources, I would like to emphasise that Royal Commissions, which we use a great deal, are principally interviews. They are contemporary interviews and again subject to the same kind of bias. But we do not usually look at them in that way. If you turn to statistics again it seems to me important to point out that statistics are not so different from the kind of material that you get in these human exchanges. Things like statistics rarely record pure physical facts. For example, housing statistics are based on social definitions, on what is overcrowding or what is a room, whether a scullery is a room or whether a room divided by sack cloth is two rooms or one. This sort of distinction is based on social perception, not a physical fact. In the presentation of statistics this is concealed but nevertheless what we are getting is aggregated social definitions very much like those that we get in detail in an interview. This is equally true of official records of food consumption. If you want to find out what sort of fish people were eating in the early 20th century from contemporary statistics, you cannot do it because shops were not able to sell fish to the working classes under their

**Figure A: PERCEPTION AREA**

proper names. For example, a whole series of fish, like cat fish and weaver and tusk and gurnett and so on, had to masquerade as haddock or filleted haddock and so they go into the statistics as haddock. So you could be completely deceived by these contemporary statistics. Whether or not one could get useful information on food consumption from interviewing is another question, although we do get occasionally interesting stories about margarine. A family is using margarine, and they try it out on a man who says he would "never taste the rotten stuff", they say, "Would you like a piece of bread and butter", and he eats it, and says, "What a nice piece of bread and butter that was", when he has been eating margarine. Or the same kind of story with home and foreign meat. The man who says he'd be absolutely sick if he "ever ate any of this foreign meat" and he's given some and then he is told afterwards. Incidents like this help one to see how changes in taste happened, as well as why the statistics were distorted.

And even birth and death certificates are liable to such distortions. After reading JD Douglas' *The Social Meaning of Suicide*, which is a devastating criticism of Durkheim's masterpiece, one realises how even the recording of these absolutely basic facts reflect social conventions and social meanings. I want to emphasise that there is not a sharp dichotomy between two kinds of evidence, one personal, subject to value judgements and bias, the other hard and pure. There is at most a continuum; and no evidence should be treated as uncontaminated fact.

In comparing interviews with other sources it is equally important to recognise that all information is retrospective and the only extra problem that we have in historical interviews is that the time span is longer. I have drawn a little diagram actually, to try to illustrate how I see the problem. It seems to me that evidence of physical behaviour, that is the objective fact, is not what is collected from any of our methods

What we are really collecting information about is social behaviour, and when you ask people about this, you get a statement somewhere between the social behaviour and the norms of the time. With retrospective interviews we have the additional problem of deciding whether they are being influenced by recent changes in values and norms and so re-interpreting their perceptions. This seems to me to be

one of the major problems that we have to face. The essential difficulty is how to work out what kind of bias you should expect in different kinds of information in different contexts. Now one of the great advantages of using interviews is that they raise this basic problem of method and bias in information, which is not usually recognised in other material, and this is itself one very good reason why we should in fact be exploring the interview method.

In order to answer this question, or at least to produce some sort of steps towards an understanding, I want to glance first at the literature of social psychology of memory, particularly Bartlett and Hunter,<sup>2</sup> and also gerontology, to see what this can tell us.

It seems, first of all, to be generally accepted that the memory process depends on perception. In other words, in order to learn material you have to comprehend it. You learn it in categories, seeing how the information fits together, and this enables you to reconstruct it on a future occasion, or to reconstruct some approximation of what you comprehended. As Bartlett argues, this in fact is the basic device by which the human mind has overcome the tyranny of being subject to chronological sensory perception because, if you could not organise your perceptions you would only be aware of what had happened to you most recently. Now immediately after an event it seems that we are able to remember a great deal more than later on. For a very short time we have something approximating to a photographic memory, but this only lasts a matter of minutes. I think it is very important to grasp that this particular phase is very very brief, and that then the selection process organises the memory and establishes some kind of durable traces by a chemical process. Unfortunately although the bio-chemistry of the brain has been making rapid advances recently, it has not reached the stage of answering the kind of questions a social scientist would like to ask about the memory process. However a change takes place in the micro-structure of the brain which is certainly capable of resisting gross suppressions of mental activity like anaesthetics. Then, when the material is recovered, you have a kind of reverse process, in that there is a recognition of a further situation and then the brain picks out the material and to a certain extent reconstructs it.

Now, the discarding process does go on and this of

**Figure B**

Dallenbach's picture experiment 1913: 15 students asked to scrutinise, and answer 60 questions on picture details:

Days since saw picture	0	5	15	45
Number questions answered (av)	59	57	57	57
Number wrong answers (av)	8	10	12	13

(See Ian Hunter, *Memory*, p 175)

course is one of our problems. But the initial discarding is by far the most drastic and violent. There are very few systematic inquiries into this question but the results of one experiment are shown in Figure B. This is an old experiment by Dallenbach with pictures in 1913, which shows that the number of errors remains surprisingly stable after the first five days. I should emphasise, however, that this kind of experiment is one which is open to basic criticism as an index of reliability. It just shows the kind of curve, as it were, by which people forget things. There is also some Norwegian and American research on patterns of child rearing, in which mothers have been re-interviewed over periods of up to six years.<sup>3</sup> In each of these studies it was found memory was least reliable when respondents were asked about attitudes to past events, and best about practical matters such as feeding methods (95% accurate after three years). Even after a few months, interviewing a mother about childbirth and early infancy will produce a different picture from interviewing her at the time. But when the time span is increased to six years, the inaccuracies show no significant increase. Thus it seems very possible that for many purposes interviewing over a forty year gap would not present worse unreliabilities than retrospection over less than a year. Unfortunately, it is still not clear whether these memory traces need to be kept alive by being every now and then prodded. Of course, if they are prodded you can say that they have been distorted everytime they are prodded. This is a very important problem, which one hopes may be eventually solved by the bio-chemists.

The memory process thus depends, firstly, upon individual comprehension, comprehension in turn rests upon individual interest. It has been clearly shown that you have to be interested in what you are remembering, once you have comprehended it. Secondly, it has been established that memory is influenced by social interest and need. For instance, 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 list of prices and descriptions of cows sold a year before, they can recite this while the European who bought the cattle and noted the prices in his accounts cannot. Similarly, an 80 year old Welshman in 1960 was asked for the names of the occupiers in 1900 of 108 holdings in his parish, and when his answers were checked against the parish electoral list, 106 proved correct.<sup>4</sup> It is a matter of what the informant is really interested in. This question of interest is one which

I think vitiates a great number of the early experiments to do with memory. Some of these are quite entertaining. For example, Hunter cites the experiment of the meeting of the Cambridge Psychological Society which was secretly taped. A fortnight later all the participants were written to, to ask whether they would record what they remembered happening. On average they remembered only 8% of the specific points and of those points that they recalled, nearly half were actually incorrect! They incorporated things which had been said at other meetings of the Society and on other occasions elsewhere. The experimenters said that this was evidence of how unreliable people's memories were and so it was in this case. But it also showed quite clearly that this particular group, which for its normal scholarly activities relied on written material, was really meeting together for purposes other than intellectual debate: principally for social interaction and self exhibition.

Recalling is an active process. Bartlett puts this, I think, in a rather exaggerated way, but it is useful to quote what he says. "In a world of constantly changing environment literary recall is extraordinarily unimportant. It is with remembering as it is with the stroke in a still game. Every time you make it it has its own characteristics".<sup>5</sup> He is talking particularly about stories here, and how a story may differ with different audiences and in different places and how recall can be stimulated by an incident like meeting an old acquaintance which feeds in ideas that you thought you'd forgotten, or by revisiting a scene where something happened in the past. You also have to be willing to remember. For interviewing it is extremely important to realise that willingness is essential. Linked to this is the problem of avoidance: a conscious avoidance of distasteful facts and also, rather less commonly, unconscious repression. Repression is, of course, a particular interest of psychologists and concerns memories which are stored in the mind and can be revived by drugs or therapy, although the person is unaware that he has such memories.

One of the problems with material from social psychology, is that it is built up from laboratory experiments which are quite successful in establishing memory processes, but because they take place in a situation in which the memorisers are not usually interested in what they are recalling, it seems to me that the unreliability of memory is exaggerated. The laboratory situation in fact presents exceptional obstacles to recall. For example, one of the classic experiments was Bartlett's with "The War of the Ghosts" story. This was a Red Indian tale, which he asked a group of Cambridge students to relay, so that a series of ten students told the story one after each other in sequence, and in the end the tale came out very differently indeed – it had one or two scraps of the original left but that was about all. I do not think that you should expect very much if you try telling a story in a totally different culture to people who had no particular social interest, apart from the experiment, in passing it on, one might maintain that these students had an interest in seeing how false the reproduction was, as they were psychology students.

You can compare this sort of laboratory experiment with the Opies' material on children.<sup>6</sup> Because of the very

rapid turn-over of school children you get a far larger number of series of tellers, than with adult oral traditions, so that a school jingle in 130 years will pass down 20 generations of children, perhaps 300 tellers, which is equivalent to about 500 years among adults. It is quite extraordinary how much oral material nevertheless survives with school children. For example, in Norman Douglas *London Street Games of 1916*, 137 child chants were reported, and 108 of them were still being chanted when the Opies did their work 40 years later. There are cases of extraordinary survivals like the 'truce terms' used by children, words like barley and fains which go back to the middle ages. They were then part of adult vocabulary but are now only preserved among children. The Opies have many nice examples of both survival and change. For instance, there is a rhyme about a grenadier which is first recorded in 1725 as part of a ballad:

"Now he acts the Grenadier,  
Calling for a pot of beer  
Where's his money? He's forgot  
Get him gone, a drunken sot"

In 1907 in Edinburgh, schoolchildren used a version like this for counting out:

"Eenty, teenty tuppenny bun,  
Pitching tatties doon the lum;  
Who's there? John Blair  
What does he want? A bottle of beer.  
Where's your money? I forgot  
Go downstairs, you drunken sot"

Then there is another in London, where a pocket and forgot it rhyme is introduced, which is recorded in 1916 in the *London Street Games* and again in almost identical form in 1954. In York it goes:

"I had a little beer shop, A man walked in.  
I asked him what he wanted. A bottle of Gin  
Where's your money? In my pocket.  
Where is your pocket? I forgot it. Please walk out"

So these jingles can persist in a remarkable way. There are other musical rhymes like Tiddly Winks the Barber, which was composed in 1878 and is still being used by children in the original form.

In our interviews we also sometimes find remarkable snatches of accuracy. One London woman described how her mother used to go out drinking and she emphasised the Monday drinking. "Well it might be on a Monday, she had a few coppers, so her and a lot of women used to go out "Mother's Day" they used to call Monday. And they danced down in the ground in the buildings, you know. They did enjoy themselves. My mother used to play a mouth organ. We always knew Monday. My mother always had something sweet for me when I came home from school. We always knew when Monday came what to expect". And so on and so on. Then by a coincidence a

little while later, I came across in Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* a note from a clergyman on working class women in the East End asserting that "nearly all get drunk on Monday. They say 'We have our fling; we like to have a little fuddle on Monday'". So that the two kinds of evidence together show that the woman was right in her specific but surprising assertion that her mother's drinking took place on Monday in a kind of mothers' "Monday Club".

A particularly striking example of confirmed accuracy comes from one of the first of our interviews. This was with an Essex farm worker born in 1882, who started work in 1894 on a 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 money 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 I was reading Rider Haggard's *Rural England*, which is about his journey in 1901, and he happened to go to the same village of Ardeleigh, and he found a man, Mr T Smith, farming 240 acres, who had been there for the last 51 years. Mr Smith used an argument which appears nowhere else in the book. "How can farmers get on", he asked, "when each man took the value of a sack of wheat; that is, 14/6d. per week?" Seventy years after Haggard's visit it was still possible to record the Ardeleigh farmer's grumble – in an earlier version, when wages were 18 pence less. So one should remember, in considering the inaccuracies, that some experiments have found the uncanny patches of detailed accuracy which one can also show. In any case, even if the story that you record can be shown to be untrue, that does not mean to say that it cannot be of value to social history. For example, I recorded a fisherman in Brightlingsea, who was a classic yarn teller, and retold the same stories with different endings. He was impossible for a normal interview, because he would always get onto his stories and he was slightly deaf. You cannot interview this kind of man systematically. But the picture he conjures up of this small Essex town is extraordinary. It is almost 18th century in quality. There was an apprentice mob of boys from the ships that burned boats on Guy Fawkes night; a kind of cage where the policeman put drunks, and people threw things at them; constables to keep order in the church where all the lads went to make a row and get their girls. At the end of the service they would rush out of church and try to capture the nearest style. Later on this fisherman was on the town's Tory Committee, and when asked what his political activities as a Conservative were, he said, mainly throwing tomatoes! Quite clearly there was



a great deal of exaggeration in this picture but it made me re-examine my previous impression of this rather staid, small provincial town and realise that perhaps an earlier urban quality had survived here, almost as if it had remained an "unreformed borough". In this case the interview stimulates a search for other evidence.

A second example is from an interview with a Shetlander. I was asking him about class consciousness and specifically about what relationships they had with the lairds. He told me, as a true story, what in fact is apparently quite a widespread Scottish folk tale, about the burial of a laird. "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 mile 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 down 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."

Now my informant believed that story was true. He told me the name of the laird who was buried in that way. But the value of this story for social history, particularly if you hear the way it is told, is what it conveys about the narrator's consciousness, how he was drawing both on a folk tradition and on his own political and religious ideas. As he tells it, the story has some of the 'Good Samaritan' in it and it also has a flavour of Marxist class consciousness. And the surprising thing is that this man, although an Elder of the kirk, was also a member of the Social Democratic Federation, so that you can see the two currents of his ideas converging on this particular story. We should never dismiss information because we know that it is not literally accurate. The problem is how to interpret it. This is a particularly important question with folklore material, which social historians have too generally ignored because they find it perplexing.

This is, however, a diversion from the typical problems of historical interviewing. We have outlined the process of perception, selection and recall in memory. But how far is this memory process different for different age groups? I shall describe briefly some of the evidence on this critical question. One of the first points to note is that, proceeding through the whole age span, from birth up to the age of four, children have very little memory of what happens at all. You then get a stage from four to eleven which seems to be transitional. A lot of children, over half, have a kind

of photographic memory, and a great capacity for rote learning of the type which is very unusual later in life, although it is kept by a small proportion of adults. Some psychologists suggest that there is some link between the disappearance of photographic memory and the onset of what is called logical thinking, but of course what is logical thinking is itself rather a difficult question and it is very difficult to show the time link between the two changes. Then after the age of about eleven, and especially after the age of thirty, you get a progressive decline in the immediate memory, that is to say much less ability, for example, to retain a whole set of complex numerals in the head, but an increase in the total memory store, as if one is pushing out the other. It is very important to recognise that this process affects all adults, and not just the elderly. There have been studies of the retention of vocabulary and they show that there is very little decline at all for the most intelligent groups, but that for the average groups tested memory decline sets in by the age of thirty and continues very slowly, but is never drastic until either terminal illness or senility is reached. In other words, the problem is not intrinsically much worse if you are interviewing old people who are in normal health than it is with younger adults.

With this process of decline in all adults, including people in early middle age, the loss of memory appears to affect the recent memory first. Hunter writes: "If there is, in the elderly person, an impairment of the central nervous functioning, this favours recall of earlier as opposed to more recent events. With progressive impairment of a general neurological kind, recalling activities undergo progressive disorganisation. That is, recall of recent events is impaired first."<sup>7</sup> "This is very important for us. There have indeed been some memory tests, statistical tests of a slightly dubious kind, but which showed that if you analyse word associations nearly half of these go back to boyhood or youth and only a very tiny proportion are recent ones."<sup>8</sup>

The final stage in memory development frequently follows retirement from work, or some other kind of traumatic experience like widowhood. At this stage you can find what is widely recognised by psychologists as the phenomenon of 'life review': a sudden emergence of memories and a desire to bring these memories out, a special candour which goes with a feeling that active life is over. So that you get a kind of compensation at this stage for some of the problems created by the longer time span and the selectivity of the memory process, because willingness to remember increases. There are also reasons for believing that bias at this stage is a rather lesser problem.

So to sum up at this point: the problems of memory are inseparable from those of perception, and interviewing the old does not introduce major methodological issues separate from the normal problems of the interview. And that is what I now want to turn to.

An interview should be seen as a social relationship which generates its own expectations. Violation of these expectations may indeed completely destroy the interview. The interviewer is expected to be interested in the respondent, and to allow him to express himself and not to interrupt him all the time, and at the same time to provide some

kind of programme for discussion if needed to fall back on. There is also a fiction of equality between the two. These expectations are described in many of the sociological books on interviewing, I do not want to go into them further here. But even if we are aware of such basic conventions, and can master them sufficiently to produce a model interview, it is important to understand that we are still generating a social relationship which will inevitably affect the material produced. In carrying out a survey, the key problem is how to introduce some kind of standardisation without breaking up the expectations of the interview situation by over-inhibiting the self expression. There is quite a lot of literature on comparability between interviewers and there are various ways of handling this problem. One of the solutions is to begin with a freer form of interviewing in order to test the variety of responses obtainable, and to follow this with a standardised survey. An alternative technique which we have tried to use in our own survey is to combine the two methods in each interview, giving a very free run as far as possible at the beginning, and then gradually introducing the standard questions insofar as these have not already been answered. It is much easier, however, to achieve a standard coverage without damaging the interview situation than it is to maintain a standard way of asking the questions.

At this point I should like to play an example, because I have here in fact some brief extracts of recordings with a person who by coincidence has been interviewed by three people who are all here in this room. (I do not know whether they want to be identified.) The respondent is a Londoner born in 1880 and her father was a post office blacksmith. She herself was in service, as she says "till they chucked me out", and then she went into factory work. I think this example shows how, even on some of the more difficult questions which are to do with emotions, and one might assume would be most liable to variation depending on the technique of the interviewer, remarkably similar answers can be given to different questioners. In these extracts she is talking about her relations with her parents to three different interviewers.

(First Interview)

*Was your mother an easy person to talk to? Could you share your worries with her?*

Well not very much. I didn't get on with her very well at all.

*This was while you were a child was it?*

Yes. I never did get on with her.

*Was she an affectionate sort of woman?*

Oh, she had no love for us two girls, only for her four boys. She loved her boys and they couldn't do wrong. She had no time – I was happy-go-lucky and couldn't care less, but you know all her love went on her four boys.

*Now how about your father?*

Well she had a vile temper and she – I can't exactly tell you that much.

*Oh no – but, as a child, could you share your worries with your father?*

I loved him, yes. And when he died I did break my heart. I was about nineteen when he died. He was a dear. He was a country – well, Newport Pagnell that is the country? He was a countryman.

*Was he an affectionate –*

He was a dear, yes. Come in and kiss and say, "Good

(Second Interview)

*Can you remember any other thing you particularly enjoyed? What did you like doing?*

Well my dad bought us a nanny goat, and we used to love to go up to Queen's Crescent and get about twelve pound of potatoes, and he made a wheelbarrow, you know, because he was pretty handylike, made a wheelbarrow and then the kids used to drive up and down the – used to take it up Queen's Crescent, and come back with twelve pound of potatoes, and last us a week.

*And the nannygoat pulled the barrow along did it?*

Yes, yes.

*That was a good idea then, that was real fun.*

Oh, dad liked us kids, you know like, he was really – he had been a sailor but he fell overboard and broke his leg and he was a bit of a cripple. Then he got a big lot of money but he must have spent that before he ever got married. He spent the lot in case he was going to die.

*I see, yes, he thought he couldn't take it with him.*

Yes. But he was really a dear.

(Third Interview)

*What did you do when you were given the two and six by your mother?*

Spent it.

*What on?*

Ice cream. Packet of fags. I remember buying a packet of fags and I didn't see my mother coming along and I puffed in her face, and I ran home. So my dad – you know, he was a dear – and I jumped in the bed as quick as I could. So mum might have got the cane to go up, but

my dad said, "You might as well beat carpets", he said, "as beat the bed when she's in it". You know, because – that was before I was married of course.

*Did they ever strike you much, your parents?*

No, no. My dad was a dear. I think he was a Welshman but he was really a dear. When I lost him I lost my best friend. My mother had a vile temper and her four boys were her idols. Us girls didn't get a look it.

*Your dad came from Wales did he?*

I think Monmouthshire, yes. That is in Wales isn't it?

It is curious that the most obvious discrepancy between these three recordings is on a point which is normally reliable. In one case she says that her father was a Welshman and in another one she says she thinks he came from Newport Pagnell. Apparently she has confused the Newport, Monmouthshire, with Newport Pagnell, and she does make it clear each time that she is slightly vague about where he came from. On the emotional side the three recordings tally perfectly and some of the same phrases, like 'My dad was a dear' come out each time. She has an interpretation which she volunteers, whoever the interviewer is. Perhaps you could destroy it by interviewing her very badly, but these were all perfectly acceptable relationships, although rather different in emphasis. The story about puffing the cigarette also occurs in two of the recordings, quite spontaneously in each case, so that this is again something that she wanted to tell.

I have begun with this reassuring example simply because a lot of the information on the interviewer variability is very depressing. It is mainly for contemporary material but it obviously could apply to historical work. For example, in one survey the interviewers were asking women whether their husbands helped in purchasing house furnishings and the results were extraordinarily different depending on whether the interviewers' own husbands helped or not. One set of interviewers found that 60% of husbands helped, the other set (whose own husbands did

not help) found only 45%.<sup>9</sup> In this experiment interviews were recorded in questionnaire form and therefore there was possibly distortion by the interviewer of what was said. One of the great advantages of tape recording is that we eliminate one of the major sources of bias in social science work, because you can always find out exactly what was said. I do not propose to elaborate this point, but it does seem almost certain that a great deal of the reliability of predictive social sciences is due less to its scientific procedures than to the informal workings of the interviewers, who try to make sure that their results show what they as a group expect is going to happen. When the interviewers are as a whole mistaken about what is going to happen, they produce completely inaccurate forecasts. The most famous occasion was the 1948 Truman election victory. Investigation afterwards showed that it was not so much that different interviewers were producing different results depending on their political bias, and that the wrong balance of interviews had been chosen, but that they all expected the wrong man to win. They were very dissatisfied by their own work when they found that they were getting disconcerting predictions and they tried wherever possible to slant the results in the direction which they thought was more credible. This clearly is the normal pattern in social science interviewing, because of its reliance on questionnaires. By recording we at least eliminate that form of distortion. What we cannot eliminate is the impact that the interviewer has on the respondent, because you have got to have some kind of relationship to make an interview work, and as soon as you have a relationship it creates expectations.

There appears to be a widely held social stereotype of the interviewer as a middle-class woman so that the interviewee normally thinks he has some idea of what her opinions are likely to be. As a result, unless the interviewer actually presents unexpected opinions, to employ socialist women as opposed to conservative women does not have much effect on the results because the respondents will assume them to have typical middle-class views. But if with a more drastic change you get some very interesting consequences. For example, Figure C shows the results of using black interviewers in an American survey instead of white

**Figure C**

NORC survey 1942: 1,000 interviews with black respondents, half interviewers black, half white

Question	Response	Percentage when interviewer	
		black	white
Is enough being done in your neighbourhood to protect the people in case of air raid?	Yes	21	40
Who would a negro go to, to get his rights?	To Police	2	15
	To Law Courts	3	12
What negro newspaper do you usually read?	None	3	51
Who do you think should lead negro troops?	Negro Officers	43	22

(see HM Hyman, *Interviewing in Social Research*, p 159-161)

interviewers. The answers to some of the questions are start lingly different. Employing men rather than women may also sometimes produce important differences. For our own survey we have used men to a certain extent, but mostly women, and it will be interesting to see if there is any systematic difference between the two, and still more in a few cases, where we have been able to find an interviewer who is very different from the stereotype of the middle-class interviewer was a man who had himself been a labourer before the First World War, in Liverpool. We also had a middle-class woman interviewer, very well trained and sensitive. The man interviews people in a different style. He understands innuendos which a middle class person would not. He cuts down on a good deal of some of the exaggeration but he also feeds back a lot of expectations from his own memories. Here is a snatch of one of his interviews. It is with a woman born in 1893 whose father was a stevedore for most of his life, and later a publican. When he died, her mother lived partly through taking in washing and partly through poor relief. The respondent worked part-time while at school and then went into service for two years. After that she worked in restaurants and did charring\*. She was one of a family of eight. This story comes out of part of the interview schedule when she is asked about her life after school. She married at 19, so this was when she is 17 or 18, and the story concerns the degree of control exerted by her mother over her courting activities.

*Did your mother expect to know where you were?*

Yes. (she laughs)

*Did you have to be home by a certain –*

Oo – oh, I'll say

*Did you have to be home by a certain –*

Yes.

*What time would that be?*

Ten minutes late, and she was behind the door and give you a nice little whack as you stepped in. (both laugh)

*What time – did she have any time for various ages?*

Well, I remember the first dance I went to, she said I had to be home at ten o1 clock. It was a military affair – oh what did they call them? The Red Jack Militias.

*The Militias – yes, yes, yes*

Yes, at St. George's Hall. And I had to wait until I went out before I could put a bit of powder on (both laugh). And I hate to be home at ten o'clock. Anyway, I think a lot of us hired a cab –

*Oh did you?*

Yes, and we came home in this cab. We didn't pay of course. The chappies paid.

*Ah yes, the lads did.*

And, oooh, when she saw me getting out of a cab (both laugh) I thought I'd never last to the next morning – "Ooh, no more outs for you, no more dances. I'll dance you. Get up those stairs". (both laugh)

I think that there is a kind of innuendo going on about the significance of the cab.

This example raises the question of how friendly one should become when interviewing somebody. It is often assumed that because you have got to establish some kind of rapport, the more rapport you establish the better. But if you go beyond the kind of rapport needed to establish confidence, the danger is that you increase the tendency to social conformity in the replies. It is not true that you always get more uninhibited replies from people when you become more intimate with them.

If anything the truth may be the reverse. Actually Mass Observation, for instance, were able to stop people in the street and ask them questions about sex which I do not think would have been possible to ask in a more intimate home interview. Certainly such questions would in many cases end the 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.<sup>10</sup> It is equally noticeable, when talking to old people in a group, that they will emphasise a common view of the past, yet if one subsequently interviews them individually a different picture may emerge.

Another social effect is produced by the place in which the interview takes place. 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 interview in the workplace will introduce the influence of work conventions and attitudes. Linked to these changes in emphasis will be changes in language. A recording in a pub, for example, will often be festooned with swearwords; cross the home threshold, and the vocabulary will be transformed. Ideally, we should be trying to record the same people in different places so that we can compare them, although, of course, this would require more time and resources.

These are the main sources of distortion in the interview situation. But how serious are they? Are they so serious that they make this kind of collecting almost useless? Unfortunately we don't yet know.

For the moment the essential step is to recognise the difficulty and introduce strategies for checking and correcting distortions and for obtaining comparative evidence of different kinds. There are very few published estimates of inaccuracy, largely, I fear because those that exist are so horrifying. They are mostly from contemporary



sociological studies. There are many scholars who provide long methodological appendices, which could include information on the accuracy of retrospective information since they have re-interviewed people, but they rarely include this information. A recent book which might have had very good tables of this kind is Butler and Stokes's *Political Change in Britain*.

Most of their panel were re-interviewed, but you cannot work out how much they changed their statements on, for instance, what their first vote was. One example of survey inaccuracy which is available, the GL Palmer Study of 1943, shows the results of a canvass in Philadelphia. After only ten days 10% of respondents reported their age differently by one year.<sup>11</sup> Again, the Opinion Research Centre in 1949 made a comparison in Denver between interview survey material and local official records. It was found that again 10% of the answers were incompatible on age, 10 – 15% on the possession of objects like library cards, cars, and the make of the car, and 5% even on the possession of a telephone.<sup>12</sup> This study, of course, also raises the question of the reliability of the official statistics, and may have equally serious implications for historians using that kind of material. But it suggests the degree of error involved. There has also been an experiment in New York of which the results are less disturbing for our purposes. The survey was about race attitudes and of the 50 respondents eight were 'planted', and their interviews were secretly tape recorded. Fifteen interviewers were employed, none of them full-time professionals. When the recorded interviews were analysed it was found that, out of the fifty questions supposed to be asked, on average each interviewer committed fourteen asking errors – that is changing or omitting the questions; thirteen probing errors; eight errors when recording the answers on the sheets; and then four simple 'cheats' (that is putting down an answer when none was given). One planted respondent acted as a 'hostile bigot', a type who could be expected to occur in most random samples. When faced by the bigot half the interviewers invented half of what they put down on the questionnaire. So this is the kind of raw material which probably makes up the typical random sample questionnaire survey. At least we have our tapes as a record. The hostile bigot would perhaps refuse to go on tape but, one might think this was no loss if the alternative is something invented by the interviewer.

I have been able to find only two examples of the accuracy of retrospective material in large scale surveys. One is the sociological study by PM Blau and OD Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure* (1967). The authors carried out a pre-test of 570 men in Chicago and tried to match their names against the census. In fact they were only able to match 137, but when they examined these, they found that less than half were in complete agreement, that is in the same occupation and the same industry, from both sources. Blau and Duncan go on regardless, using their material, despite this distorting evidence about its quality which is tucked away in an appendix at the end of the book. Their study of social mobility is one of the most methodologically sophisticated pieces of statistical work in this field, yet this is the kind of raw material on which it is

based. They attempt to discount the discrepancies by arguing that there is a high labour mobility in each year in America and that in a year of exceptional mobility, 1945-6, 12% of workers changed their jobs. They also assert (scarce comfort to historians) that the census is anyway unreliable, so that if you combine these two sources of error it is not surprising that less than half of the evidence is in complete agreement and one third completely wrong. On the extent of census unreliability, he cites the report of a postenumeration survey carried out by the Bureau of the Census to check up on their results. It was discovered that 17% of the men had been classified in a different major occupational group in this postenumeration survey from their classification in the census. Historians who are prepared to take statistical information on trust might ponder the implications of a 17% inaccuracy rate in census raw material. Blau and Duncan also looked at the distribution of inaccuracies and found that they were systematic. There was a tendency for labourers who appeared in the census to appear as craftsmen or technicians in the questionnaire, but there was not a comparable error in the opposite direction. But it is reassuring, on the other hand, to read that when they looked at the gross distributions rather than looking at each individual, and compared their survey results obtained by interviewing people with what they would have expected from a census, the discrepancies were much less serious. It is particularly striking, making this comparison for father's occupations, that as you go further back in time the divergence does not get worse, but gets better. A likely explanation for this is that distortions due to social pressures decrease with information from the remote past. If you ask a respondent about his father's occupation, an older man has less reason for actually distorting the truth than a younger man has. In short, on some subjects we may be able to get more reliable historical information from interviews than contemporary sociological material.

My other example is taken from Butler and Stokes. As I mentioned, they have not published the kind of methodological appendix that one would like but the study includes some gross distributions which can be compared with other historical information. At least one can say, looking at these tables, that if you knew nothing whatsoever about the past except what you could get from Butler and Stokes, you would learn that before the First World War the Labour Party was rising very rapidly in that period, and that earlier still that the political battle was principally between the Conservatives and the Liberals. You could also discover that the Conservatives consisted largely of middle class, Church of England people, that their opponents depended particularly on Nonconformist and the working classes. So that the retrospective information obtained from interviews does broadly fit with what we know from historical sources. It is reassuring that on the evidence of these gross distributions the change of social values due to the disappearance of the Liberal party has not so distorted people's memories that they produce a completely inaccurate report of the past.

It may be that more people report themselves as Labour than could have voted Labour at that time, but we should

**Figure D**

P Blau and OD Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure*, Appendices D and E:

Chicago pre-test matching study:

570 males in target sample; 485 completed; 342 names searched in census;

29	matched to 1920	census
46	"	1930
62	"	1940
137	"	

Of these, classified by 3 digit occupation and industry codes:

60	same occupation and industry from both sources
15	same occupation but different industry
16	different occupation but same industry
46	different occupation and industry
137	

ie only 44% complete agreement, 23% partial agreement.

Comparison of 137 cases:

- only 8 white collar /manual confusions;
- but of 20 census labourers, only 8 thus recorded in survey –
- 10 as craftsmen or technicians; while of 43 census craftsmen and technicians, only 4 recorded as labourers in survey.

The authors argue that this is partly due to high annual occupational mobility in US (eg 1945-6 12%), and also partly to inaccuracy of census.

(*Bureau of Census post-enumeration survey* showed 17% of males classified in both census and post-enumeration survey were in different major occupation groups in the two sources.)

Comparison of *general distribution* of results with census:

White male respondents:

Father's occupation	Blau-Duncan survey cohort	national 1910 census	Blau-Duncan survey cohort	national 1940 survey
Professional/and Managerial	14.5	11.8	20.4	12
Sales and clerical	7.0	7.5	13.0	10
Craftsmen and foremen	16.8	14.8	20.8	15
Operatives	13.1	9.2	19.8	22
Service	3.8	2.1	5.4	3
Labourers	6.3	14.5	6.8	19
Farmers	38.5	40.1	1.5	4
	100%	100%	100%	100%

also remember that there were many people who saw themselves as Labour men at that time, who had no opportunity to vote Labour. Even granting the existence of a general distortion, it is not so serious that one could not work out quite interesting relationships, such as the social basis of support for the Liberals in the late 19th Century, on the basis of interviewing. And there are other historical fields in which through systematic interviewing of this kind one could hope to obtain information broadly reliable in its quantitative distribution.

If we accept that memory is not so subject to error to invalidate the usefulness of a retrospective interviewing, how far can we use methods in the choice of respondents

to make our material representative? The two last studies which I have quoted are surveys based on elaborate statistical samples, in which every attempt has been made to get an exactly representative group. Such examples present social historians with a very serious problem. In a large scale social science survey it is not possible to select the most interesting respondents or to interview with much flexibility. The quality of the material obtained is inevitably less satisfactory. On the other hand, if we are going to record life histories, one of their principal advantages is that it can be used to counteract the bias from the way in which written historical material has accumulated. The documents which have survived are a chosen rather than

**Figure E**

D Butler and D Stokes, *Political Change in Britain*, p 273: recollections of father's political allegiance:

cohort	pre-1885	pre-1900	pre-1918
Conservative	43	46	45
Liberal	38	27	11
Labour	12	20	39
None	7	7	5
	100%	100%	100%

p 130: partisan self-image of pre-1918 cohort by class and religion:

	Middle Class	Working Class	Middle Class	Working Class
Conservative	82%	50%	46%	19%
Other	18%	50%	54%	81%
	Church of England		Nonconformist	

a random selection from the past. Autobiographies are normally from the articulate middle class group, or by Labour leaders rather than the Labour rank and file; and so on. Because of this, it is important to consider how far we can push in the direction of representative sampling. Some of the problems will remain insoluble, unless a stage is eventually reached when through the whole cohort of people has been studied from youth to old age, we know the exact effects of differential mortality in terms not just of occupation but also factors like personality. It may be, for example, when the group that have been studied in JWD Douglas' educational work<sup>13</sup> reach the age of being interviewed for oral history, that we will at last be able to analyse systematically the extent to which surviving old people can be taken to represent the experience of their generation as a whole. In the meantime, differential mortality alone makes it inappropriate to use random sampling to obtain an accurate picture of the past, because we already know that the group which has survived is unrepresentative as regards its occupations. Moreover, since the peculiar value of the life history interview is that it links up the experience of a single person in a way that documents and abstract survey material cannot, we jeopardise the essential quality of the method if we do not have willing respondents. Nothing can be gained by forcing this kind of interview on unwilling people, because it will simply produce false material. It is more difficult to decide on the extent to which we should interview inarticulate people. Certainly we need to experiment. In our own research we attempted some interviews in a very depressing LCC lodging house for men, where the inmates are so desocialised that they normally do not want to communicate at all, and particularly they do not want to communicate with women because many of them have no real experience of

women since childhood. In the event we got useless material. It turned out that the backgrounds of these men (where it could be elucidated at all) did not differ from that of the old people we had been generally interviewing in any significant way, and so that we were not able to get, as we had hoped, any picture of the casual homeless poor of the 1900s. It may be that this is something which is already practically lost to us, because so few children from such backgrounds now survive.<sup>14</sup> So this experiment was only useful in suggesting that even if you spent hours recording homeless old men about their childhoods, you would obtain information that you get from willing respondents, but in a fragmented and uninteresting form.

Another less extreme example points in a similar direction. This is an interview with a person who is literally inarticulate in that he finds it difficult to speak. This is not because he is poor or desocialised, but more probably because he is so dominated by his wife that he is not used to speaking in the home. It may be that if he had been interviewed in the British Legion where apparently he is quite active, he would have been much more articulate! He is the son of a Cornish fisherman, born in 1897, and himself a fisherman. He came from a small family. The interviewer here made a marvellous attempt to draw him out. She was tremendously patient. You will notice that there is a very long pause at one point, after which eventually some comment comes. She did persist right through the questions and finished a complete interview. The answers are there and they make sense, but one wonders after hearing it, or reading it, whether one would like to have very much of this kind of thing. It is very useful to have for comparison but I would suggest that, if you can establish it is not basically rather different from interviews with more articulate respondents, you do not want to collect a lot of material like this:

*Did your mother or father mend the family's clothes?*

No; Mother did.

*Your father never mended things like boots or shoes?*

Oh no (FAINT)

*Did you have new clothes or secondhand clothes?*

Oh, new clothes

*You always had new clothes?*

Yes

*You never had hand-me-downs from relatives or that sort of thing?*

Oh no no no.

*Where were your clothes bought, can you remember?*

Penzance (PAUSE)

*Do you know how often you had new clothes?*

No (FAINT)

*Can you remember any instances when you had new clothes, perhaps for a birthday or for Christmas or something like that?*

(PAUSE) No

*Did your father help your mother with any of the jobs round the house?*

Well he must have, I suppose?

*Can you remember him doing anything like cleaning or washing up?*

No.

*You can't? I mean he might have been doing decorating or some repairs or perhaps he made the fires up, that sort of thing?*

He did that every morning.

*What – he laid the fires every morning?*

Yes, he laid the fire.

*In which room would this be?*

In the living room, I suppose.

*Fine. Do you remember him ever dressing you or undressing you... or bathing you?*

(COUGH. LONG PAUSE)

*or perhaps he would read to you? or tell you stories?*

(PAUSE)

*Do you remember any of them?*

No – tell me about fishing and all of that.

*Did he? Real stories about fishing?*

Yes. He used to go up to Whitby in the boat, you know, up to Yorkshire you know, Scarborough.

*So you didn't see very much of him then?*

Yes, he wasn't there all the time you know.

*But when he came home?*

He would tell me the story of it up there.

I produce this example essentially as a question: how far is it worth securing examples of this kind of respondent? We really need to know more about the relationship between the different personalities of old people and the kind of experience that they had when they were young. There is very little material on this, for the simple reason that few old people, except the persistently disturbed, have been followed by psychologists throughout their lives. There is however some American research, the *Kansas City Study of Adult Life* by BL Neugarten, which provides some information on the progressive development of the personalities of the aged before and after retirement. It does suggest that you can represent the basic types of earlier social experience by interviewing willing respondents. The 'well integrated' would present no difficulties. Two of the other personality-groups are subdivided, so that one sub-group would be interviewable and the other not. The 'defensive' personalities, for example, divide into the majority who hold on in some way, and a minority who close up completely and would be almost impossible to interview; but there is no evidence that they were always different from those who hold on. In this case you would not lose anything by not interviewing the closed up sub-group. Similarly there is a 'passive-dependent' group, some of whom are liable to collapse after a traumatic experience like bereavement and

## Figure F

BL Neugarten, RJ Havinghurst and SS Tobin, "Personality Patterns of Aging", in BL Neugarten, *Middle Age and Aging*.

Kansas City Study of Adult Life: followed several hundred people aged 50 to 80 over a period of six years; personality rated on 45 variables; social activity in 11 roles, etc. Followed up after retiring age. 59 respondents grouped as follows:

- |   |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| (a) 19 well integrated –<br>16 socially active<br>3 socially disengaged,<br>but calm, self-directed,<br>contented | (b) 16 of "armored",<br>"defended" personality<br>type, ambitious, with high<br>defences –<br>11 holding on –<br>"I'll work until I drop"<br>5 constricted, closing<br>themselves off from<br>experience | (c) 13 of passive-<br>dependent type; rely on<br>one or two people for<br>emotional support –<br>8 satisfactory<br>5 apathetic, collapsed<br>(widowhood etc) | (d) 11 of unintegrated<br>type – including senile<br>– include<br>7 dissatisfied<br>isolates |
|---|--|--|--|

then would be un-interviewable, but because widowhood strikes haphazardly from the point of oral history, it would not be particularly worrying to be restricted to interviewing those who had not suffered such an experience. Moreover, even if the un-interviewables would have presented a significantly different set of life experiences, this is likely only to apply to their adult life unless they are a type confined to small families, because the families of their childhoods will be represented through other more articulate siblings. Nevertheless, we need to know much more about personality types and how far you can represent one group through another. It is one of the most serious unsolved questions for our purposes.

I believe that in any case we shall need to develop some kind of strategic sampling rather than the random method; a much more tactical method such as the "theoretical sampling" described in Glaser and Strauss's recent book *Grounded Theory* (1967). They argue for an approach which social historians should also find appropriate. There are several different kinds of sample worth using. One approach is to work through personal groups, for example interviewing members of the same family; or interviewing married couples and "snowballing" by following up with their neighbours or friends. You could thus build up a composite picture of their social life. This is more of an anthropologist's technique but I think it would be extremely worth while for social history. Another approach is the "community stratified sample" in which you would first obtain the basic information about your community and then try to represent all the different social layers in it in your selection of respondents. We have fortuitously achieved this with some of our own interviews. We have a group of interviews for a smallish town in Yorkshire which present a spectrum of view points on social class and I think interlink very interestingly. Sometimes you find the same people referred to in different interviews, as in the examples I have selected. The first is a man born in 1892 of one of a family of eight. His father was a mechanic and a Labour man. His mother worked in a woollen mill. They were occasional Wesleyans. The man went to work as a half-timer in the mill and then became a Co-op assistant. He has a point of view on social class which I think is very characteristic of the 'middle' working class, emphasising the equality among working people.

*Many people divide society into different social classes or groups. In that time before 1918 did you think of some people belonging to one and some to another?*

No, I don't know. Well – there would be: as I explained about me brother being missing and one of the Jowett girls came. Well they were mill owners you see, and of course they never bothered till war broke out. Of course, after the war broke out they felt they were doing their bit by going round to see them. That was their idea. I told you about me brother being missing, and it were in the paper, and we heard nothing; and she came to commiserate with me mother and she said how proud she should be. Me mother said, "Well, it's my son". Now, their nephew were a captain in the Bradford Pow-

ells and he were killed on the Somme, First of July '16. Well she came up after and she said to me mother, she said, "I can see – I know what you meant". Because it came to them you see, came back to them. Of course me brother turned up. Turned up in hospital at Newcastle at the finish.

*But she'd been coming to tell your mother that she should be proud that she'd lost a son for his country?*

Aye. But – bit awkward when it were one of her own.

*Could you tell me what the different social groups were at that time? Could you give them a name?*

No. No. No.

*You just felt that your class was different than theirs?*

Well you see, Jowetts – in those days the Jowett ladies, course they were older than me. Aye, a lot older than me. They used to ride about. They had horses; they used to ride about, they used to jump in a field up on the top there, you see, in those days. There were three or four Jowett daughters. Well of course they were mill owners and they thought themselves the better than we were. But I'd say they aren't.

*So you wouldn't like to classify the different groups?*

No. No. No.

*Which group in society would you say that you belonged to yourself, could you give that a name?*

Only a working class, that's all. Aye.

*What sort of people belonged to the same class as yourself?*

Well – workers.

*What sort of people belonged to the other classes?*

Well, the mill owners and – and suchlike. Aye, Jowetts and Fieldens, mill owners. I remember – that is afterwards but it can go in. I remember being with my wife's father one Sunday morning down Halifax Road; and James Ellis Jowett, he was one of the big pots, and he came up in his trap. He were coming to church, St Johns. And, her father tipped his cap to him. So – well, I wouldn't.

*But your wife's father did this?*

Yes, because he were joiner there. He were the joiner there.

*He worked for him?*

Yes. And as he passed he tipped his cap to him. And he went down in my estimation right off. Me father wouldn't have done that you know. Aye.



*Can you remember being brought up to treat of people of one sort differently from people of another?*

No. I'll give you an illustration – when I worked at Hebden Bank Co-op shop. I'd be about seventeen or eighteen. And there were a chap lived up...Bainworth Lane... He were retired gentleman. He were a gentleman. He were decent sort you know. And he came in one day. Of course in those days they'd come in a branch shop more, so they'll call a bit. And he come in and he'd been down South to a village somewhere. Anyway, he were telling me and the manager about this village and he said, when the Squire went round, he said, the women curtsied to him. And when the Squire's wife were walking round the village the men tipped their caps. And of course I was cheeky and I turned and I said, "Did the Squire lift his cap to the people – to the women? He said, "How do you mean?" I said, "Well", I said, "One's entitled to lift a cap as well as another". Then I walked away.

*Where you lived they were all working class people – did they all have the same standard of living or would you say that there were different groups within the district?*

Well, there'd be some poorer than others, like, to a certain extent. There'd be some better than others. Some'd have more coming in than others, in fact, same as us. As we got working our folk got better off. You know, they were bringing four or five up. You see, some would like a drink or two. That didn't help a little. But they were no worse as neighbours. But there was some would like a drink or two perhaps sometimes go further than what they could afford, in that sense. There were one or two that way but – nevertheless they were good neighbours you know.

*You couldn't describe a family within each group could you?*

Well I wouldn't like to do. No, I wouldn't like to do.

*Do you think that one group felt itself superior to the rest?*

No. No. No.

Next is another working class man but of Church of he has a more hierarchical kind of approach.

*Would you describe it as a working class district? What sort of people were they, were they all much alike?*

Very much. Oh very much.

*Or were there wide variations in standards of living?*

Well perhaps we should be – well with a crowd like ours, you know what I mean. We were worse off than most of them you know. You'd often see these fellows that you play with and at Easter or Whitsun time, if that was the day for a new suit, they'd have a new suit. I couldn't. Hadn't one.

*Were some of the families thought of as rough and some as respectable?*

Oh yes. Yes, but we didn't get many of them where we were. No, they weren't too bad. Weren't too much – they went on much as we did.

*Would any group feel itself superior to the rest?*

I don't think – only that could fight better, that was all. But if you were going to be a fitter they thought they was top-notchers.

*Can you remember being brought up to treat people of one sort differently from another? Were there some people that you had to be specially respectful to?*

No, just one or two old lady spinsters there about. It were only just to say Miss Butt and Miss So-and-So. And you always respected Miss Butt. She'd say, "Good morning". That was all, that'd be about it.

*Was there anybody that you called sir or madam?*

No. Your teachers at school you had to do. And when you went to a factory or anything like that if the boss or his son came through, it was "sir" you know, – or Mr Frank perhaps or Mr So-and-so.

Lastly, we have the viewpoint of Mr Frank Jowett himself. His father was the mill owner. He was born in 1893, and later became the director of the firm himself. He was brought up in the town in a fourteen-room house with a billiard room, seven servants and a governess and then sent to public school and Cambridge. His responses show an attempt to project back onto the working class some of his own attitudes to class.

*Many people divide society into different social classes or groups. In that time before 1918 did you think of some people as belonging to one and some to another?*

Group? Of course. Oh yes.

*Could you tell me what the different ones were at that time?*

Ah ha, now then, you've put me onto something. I can tell you the classification – which was the biggest one of all – of our work people. Spinners the lowest grade. Twisters the next grade. Minders probably the next grade. Weavers the next grade. And menders the top grade. They were very rigid, and I remember once we were going away on a trip, you see. And they came up to me and they said, "Mr Frank, there's been a great mistake". I said, "What in the world?" "There's some spinners in our coach. In our bus".

*And they wanted it for themselves?*

Yes, they didn't want to associate with the spinners. Oh no. And if the daughter of a weaver wanted to marry a spinner – it was a misalliance. Yes. Oh the class things were like India. Fifty times worse than they were between us and them.

*And that's just in a mill?*

That's in a mill.

*Outside of the mill how would you classify people? Would you say there were classes at that time?*

Yes.

*What would you call them?*

Professional and working.

*And then the working class was divided up yet again?*

Into all sorts, yes.

*Would you say the professional class was divided up?*

Oh yes. I would say that dentists were a lower grade than doctors. And things like that you see.

*Where would your family fit in this?*

Well they'd fit into the upper middle. A lot of people wouldn't have anything to do with anybody who had anything to do with a mill, or who was in trade. But we were in trade of course so –

*So you wouldn't say you were upper?*

Upper middle, yes. County wouldn't have anything to do with –

*Were county the fringe of aristocracy?*

Well, it was a very – thin fringe. Oh they thought themselves a cut above us. Oh yes.

*I suppose you would call yourselves self-made?*

Well if – if you call self-made at the end of six generations. Hardly self-made. Self- inherited, yes. We worked for the money, yes.

*What sort of people belonged to the same class as yourself would you say?*

Well all the people who owned mills. Very similar, yes.

*What sort of people belonged to the other classes? They were county people? Were these county people landowners?*

Oh yes.

*And that's how they came by their money?*

Yes. They weren't all rich. Some of them were poor. But they had this position, or thought they had, yes.

*And they shunned the other people?*

No, they didn't shun 'em, but they didn't associate with them.

*They would never invite you to their houses?*

Not as a rule, because they loved hunting and shooting and fishing and dogs and things like that – country life which frankly –

*And you wouldn't participate in that?*

Well we didn't know anything about it. We talked another language.

*You couldn't really say you were between the working class and them because as you say you probably had more money than many of them?*

No, we were much nearer them than the working class. In way of life, yes.

*Was there anyone you called sir or madam?*

Not – not specifically, no. But if somebody came to stay and he was Asquith or somebody like that I would probably call him sir. My father didn't like it.

*He didn't tell you to?*

No, he told me not to.

*Do you remember anyone showing respect to your parents in these ways?*

Oh they called him sir, yes.

*At the mill?*

No. Never called them sir at the mill. They called them – Mr Henry, which was my father; Mr Frank, me; and my grandfather was called Mr Luke. They were called Mr and their Christian names. And when we were little they called us by Christian names. I was called Frank and that was all. Then eventually, after a very long time, was it Mr Frank. I'd be a Director by that time. And then, the old ones, who I'd been brought up with, would still call me Frank. They didn't change. And I used to like it like that, I would have hated it if they'd done anything else.

The last method for selecting respondents which I want to suggest is the quota method. The situation in which I think that this is particularly appropriate is when one wants to do exploratory work on a large scale and does not know

what particular relationships are going to be theoretically critical. In our own research, for example, we did not know whether the divisions of roles in the family might differ in a regional pattern, or whether it was related to occupation or to some other factor. We have used a quota based on occupation and geographically distributed. We could have introduced other elements in the quota, like family size. With a representative quota sample it is possible to discern broad patterns. In this case it seems likely that there is a regional difference in the roles within the family which is itself related to the dominant industries of the particular areas. In other words, where you have very heavy work, characteristically mining and metal industries, you find much sharper division of roles. This is carried to an extraordinary extent in some cases. For example, in South Wales the men seem to have been treated almost as machines to be serviced by the women and the women were expected to serve the neighbouring men as well as their own. The way in which the respondent refers to her own brothers as 'the colliers', as if they are again abstract machines, indicates the relationship. The respondent was born in 1893 in Glamorgan and her father was first an overman and then went to another pit where he was a repair worker.

Of course the boys were in the colliery, and then they were not finishing till five or six was it? They didn't have much time.

*Well after you left school then, did you do a lot of jobs round the house?*

Oh yes. I used to get up at half past five in the morning to put four colliers out... When we came older – when I was at home then – we had to clean even the colliers' shoes, on a Saturday afternoon, and oil them ready for Monday. That was a big job. Of course we had to do it, not the boys. The girls, yes.

*And how many pairs of shoes?*

Oh, there were four or five colliers then.

*What did you do?*

Well get all the coal off you see, and then oil them ready for Monday to keep soft.

*Any other particular jobs you had to do?*

Well we had to wait. They were working then on a Saturday and they'd come home to bath. Well you'd have to clean up after that. You know if they'd be working on Saturday, it'd be a long day on Saturday. I remember one day. My mother had gone on holiday I think. And my brother Tom, he was bathing, and I wanted to go somewhere, and he tipped the tub with the water so I had to clean all that up...

*What about the boys when they came home from the colliery – what was the bath in?*

A tub. A tub in front of the fire. And there'd be two bathing in the same water. They'd take their clothes off out in the glasshouse we had then, that's what I remember. And then they'd come in, and one would wash the top part like first. Then while he was wiping, my other brother then would wash his top and wipe. And then we'd change the water then after two.

*Where was the bathtub?*

In front of the fire.

*And you just walked in and out – all the boys were with nothing on?*

Well, of course, we had to then. We had to wash their backs anyway... There was a family next door but one to us, and if their mother or the daughter wasn't there, they'd shout to me, "Gwennie! Come and wash my back!" And I'd go in and wash their backs. Yes, men. Two brothers they were. And if the sister was out or something like that they'd call me over the wall.

*I suppose they couldn't reach their backs themselves?*

No. And it was quicker, especially if they wanted to go somewhere. You know they'd call you in to wash them. And you'd see me going to a house with a message or wanting something, and perhaps the man would be bathing at the time, and he'd say, "Gwennie! Come in and wash my back will you!"

Even in a mining district, however, an unusual family situation can result in very different roles. In the next example the father was a crippled miner so that a totally different relationship was forced on the family. This interview comes from Stoke-on-Trent and the respondent was born in 1894. Her parent's family was a small family of three children, but she had twelve children herself. I think that her relationship with her own husband and children probably derived partly from her unusual relationship with her father, the fact that there was more helping, and the father was around the house more. She seems to have a similar relationship with her own husband. Her first child was born in 1912 and in her answers about this there is an interesting piece of evidence of the extraordinary ignorance of sex, or at least of the facts of life of women at that time. She speaks first about her father:

*Would he read to you or anything like that?*

Oh he'd read. He was paralysed from the waist down. Oh yes, he read and talked to us. And I remember ever so well, we had two of those little old-fashioned steel stools, we used to sit by his bedside and he'd read to us and – we loved our father – talked to us.

*Did you have any tasks you had to carry out regularly at home to help your mother and father? You were going out collecting the washing? and delivering it?*

Oh yes. And the district nurse used to come from Shell Street, She came every day, and she gave me father a big long wheelchair, and you know me sister and I and me cousin Elizabeth, we used to go out on Saturday and we used to stand by Tibbucks and people used to put money in the box. Yes, put money in the box. I wasn't ashamed of it, I wasn't ashamed of it at all. I didn't like doing it – bit selfconscious – but I did it for me mother's sake you see, my mother's sake.

Later on she speaks of when she was herself a mother:

*Did you know what to expect in childbirth – how did you get on?*

No, I was – I don't think (we) really were as intelligent... I remember saying to the midwife when mother fetched her – we didn't have nurses in those days, there was an old midwife you know – mother fetched the midwife and this time I think I said to her, "Mrs Morris, where will it come from?" Mrs Morris answered back and said, "Well where it went in, that's where your baby will come out". And you can tell how I was.

*Did your husband help?*

Well he did in a way, but with him being the only one – his mother left me when I was having the first one. She let me get out of bed and I'd been in labour – I did these things, I didn't know it was labour – from twelve o'clock at night and when it got to six o'clock the next morning it got so heavy that I couldn't stand it so I says to her, "I want to go home to me mother". And she let me go right from Hanley to Northwood, through the park, in labour, and I sat on a seat there and the Park man as sees to the park, he came through and he says, "Nellie whatever 's the matter with you". I said, "I don't know". I said, "I can't walk, I'm in ever such pain". He says, "Come on, I'm taking you to your mother". And he took me to me mother. And then of course mother played hallelujah because it hadn't come by night before, and then she fetched the midwife.

*How did you feed your first baby?*

Oh – everyone of 'em been breastfed. I never had a bottle over any of them. And I've never bought one of those in me life. No.

*Was this because you thought breast feeding was best for the baby or did you just not think about doing it any other way?*

Well I think we all took it as a matter of course then. Then I thought it was a cheaper line.

*When did you wean the baby?*

Oh, they had it until they were two. Me mother used to say to me, "You'll be having those children at the breast until they bring their young man with them". Oh yes. They'd be quite nearly two before I finished...

*Did you punish the baby when it was naughty?*

No, I never smacked any of them. I used to shove them in the other room and leave them there until they'd had it. I do him [grandchild]. He gets in terrible tempers because his father's got a very heavy temper, but if James starts to be naughty I just put him in the back room. And he won't be long before he's shouting (to come) out.

*And that's what you did with your own children?*

Oh yes, yes, yes.

*How much did your husband have to do with the children when they were babies under a year old? Would he help with them?*

Oh yes, he was very good in helping and he'd wash nappies or anything like that for you. Oh yes.

*And he'd play with them?*

Oh yes. Yes.

*Would he try and get them to sleep for you?*

Well he'd take them and put them up to bed by seven o'clock. And then when they got older, the oldest one could stop until about nine or half past, but they took turns to stay up.

*While they were still tiny babies would your husband look to them in the night if they cried?*

Yes, he'd go to them, yes.

*When they were babies would he take them out himself?*

Oh he has done, taken them out, yes. Oh yes, he used to be very proud too. I'll give him his due for that.

The most serious difficulty which we have found in an occupational quota is that it is not a very adequate guide to the social classes, that in effect, even if you fulfil all the occupation quotas perfectly, you can get a selection of working class people biased against the less respectable. It remains a very serious problem, even with a quota, to secure expressive respondents from the casual poor, the working class under-dog poor, the self-described 'rough' family, respondents who will describe the life on the streets or are prepared to talk about fiddles and stealing. This kind of respondent is extraordinarily difficult to find, so that if you have a promising subject, you should suspend your ideas about quotas and representativeness and make the recording. You will be collecting the kind of material which by definition would never appear in a random sample and is not susceptible to statistical analysis. We want to be social scientists but we want to use our strategy in a flexible way. I want to conclude with a Stepney man born in 1894. His mother had been a cigar maker and his father was a carter. A

carter's son might often come from a respectable home, but this man is extraordinarily forthcoming about another kind of life. There were twelve children. He says that his parents did not often leave the pub until it was closing time and he was forced out on the streets to earn a living.

I used to go out, right from a kid, bringing in money. In the City, go selling papers and things. And when I was fifteen I was a lord because I told you I found a little gold-mine in that old factory where I was apprenticed. I saw it in the dustbin, old bits of brass, see. And we was always learnt to be what you call jackdaws, find things, see. And as soon as I saw that brass, I knew we could sell it, that old brass. So I said to this boy, he asked me one day what I was doing down there, and I told him, I said, "You want to come partners with me?" We tipped the dustbin right over, we sorted out, and we put all the dirt back. And we keep the metal ourselves and we sell it. And of course he was an East End boy and he knew the tricks as well. So we did that. And then we did that every day. We had a little brush and a shovel and we had what we hid away from the dustmen, they couldn't see it down this courtway. And we used to take this brass, it was brass, and copper. They used to make electrical fittings. And they used to pick these pieces out, screws and bolts and whatever they were, little pieces. And at the end of the week the man used to pay us. We used to take him as much as say fourteen or fifteen pounds of a night, see, as we walked by. We walked all the way from Clerkenwell here to Stepney. Oh that was nothing when we were kids. And we used to put it in that rag shop there in Shoreditch. There was a place in Shoreditch at Church Street. And he used to put it on the wall for us, and on the Friday night when we went in he paid us, that man.

*How much did you get for that?*

Well, I've had nearly a hundredweight in there, a hundred pound odd. You know, in weight. Well we used to get threepence a pound that time. Well if you had say a hundred pound at fourpence a pound you had four hundred pence didn't you? Yes, it was a week's work. See, and we was quite happy. And it cost us nothing. All we had to do was to carry it.

*Did you give any of that money to your mother?*

Oh yes. Definitely. Yes. And then I had to stop money for myself because when I didn't go into work Saturday, Friday night we finished five to eight at that time. When I came home I went straight to Houndsditch and bought different things like matches, or postcards, whatever we wanted. I bought little sparklers, everybody bought those that time, it was a novelty you see, halfpenny sparklers. There was twelve in a box and we used to sell them for sixpence. They used to cost us about two shillings a box, two and ninepence a dozen I think they were. Take them up to the City, specially at Christmas time and firework time. Christmas time they used to show them to the gents, mostly to the gentry not the working class, "Here's a

sparkler, see". And we used to have to hide them from the police, because the police didn't want you to have them in the City you know. Because of fire, see, it was fire prevention. And we'd have newspapers under our arm and the sparklers in our pockets, see. And we'd have matches as well, say to the gentlemen, "Box of matches sir?" If they didn't want sparklers or they didn't want a newspaper. And you used to get a couple now and then. Of course matches that time was very very cheap. I used to buy, you could get good matches seven pence a gross in boxes. You sold them penny a dozen and could earn a profit. Every shop I went to when I was a child you used to say, "Farthing for some matches, please", and you'd get three boxes. Three boxes for a farthing. Now you pay threepence a box for them. We used to go round the Stock Exchange, with all the gentry there. Yes, you had no clothes on hardly and you had no boots or socks on. "Matches sir?" And they wouldn't take usually more than six for a penny. Look at the money we was earning, that time. We sold them six a penny. See, twopence a dozen, that was, wasn't it? But they wouldn't take six, they'd only want one. The others was all profit. Yes, we done all sorts of things, scheming. Carrying a person's luggage. Say we saw a person coming out of Fenchurch Street with a parcel going to London Bridge. They never all went with cabs. You'd say, "Carry your parcel, sir?" And carry their parcel over to London Bridge station or wherever they wanted to go, see? To transfer from the Tilbury railway to the South Eastern railway. They'd give you sixpence or perhaps they'd give you more, and when they'd give you sixpence you thought you'd done a windfall, hadn't you.

*So you really could make as much as your father?*

More, more, more, many times I've done.

He also tells of how they supplemented their incomes when the family went hopping in Kent:

From London, two shillings it was, the fare, from London Bridge to Maidstone. And six out of ten never paid. They were in sacks tied up and the man came – when you left London Bridge, they'd stop a couple of stations up, Spa Road Bermondsey – for tickets. And they'd be all under the seats and lord knows where. And they was dirty old carriages what they sent them away in.

*Were they special hop pickers trains?*

Yes, they was the rough old carriages. All the seats had been taken out and you was 'sitting on boards. But they was all hid underneath, we evaded – after a certain age, you see under age they didn't take no but over a certain age, about twelve, they wanted their two bob. Well then when we got to Maidstone, the barrier 'd be there with the ticket collectors. They were only four men themselves. And then there 'd be a hue and cry, "Oh where's my mum, my mum's got my ticket, she's gone up there, and we'd go through. He couldn't stop us, because while he was trying to stop one he'd lose about fifty...



Oh no, didn't buy vegetables, did you? You'd see the potatoes growing, and you went in between, and you dug up a lot and put the stalks back again in the ground and you covered up. Went out in the middle and took a big cabbage or you took a swede. A swede would last you two – a great big swede – some of them swedes was seven or eight pound, them great big swedes.

*Didn't the farmers know that the hoppers were doing this?*

Well, he might miss one now and then, but we was artful as well as them. We didn't take it right inside of the road-way so if he rode along on his horse he could see it. We took it out in the middle of the field. I looked over with a stick, a little piece of stick with a bit of paper on it, or a twig, and we knew that, we stick that in, and of a night time we'd go along when everything was asleep and we'd fetch that. And we went to the town, we went to Faversham, walking down that mile road. There was all different stuff growing. You could have left a piece of paper, or a stone on it, a bit of paper would mark it, see, put a stone on a bit of paper, and that was the one we wanted, and we fetched that home. Fruit, yes, we took that in the daytime. Course one could go in the night but it was mostly in the daytime. There was nobody about watching the stuff. They couldn't watch everything. We used to climb in. I remember there was a five bar gate, big gate, and it used to open out up against the hedge of an orchard, and we used to push this gate right up to the hedge and climb up on top of the gate, had the gate held, and pick off all the plums and fruit what was growing near that gate, see. It covered a couple of trees. Yes, but we had plenty of fruit there. They planted there a hop-field full of young fruit trees, and you had had to do like, go like that, shake it, and down come the plums. So you

shook the trees and they fell down, them young trees with the fruit on.

*Would all the children be helping picking the hops?*

Oh yes, all picked hops, we was all working. We loved picking. Used to race one another. Course it was all the better for mum wasn't it? The more hops you picked, when it come to measuring out – and of course that time, now I recall, you had to pick about seven bushels for a shilling – six bushels or seven bushels before you got a shilling. See, they used to sing a song, "A tally it's seven a shilling, so how can a poor girl get a living?" That was the song they used to sing. That's true, though, six a shilling, seven a shilling, they didn't get twopence a bushel did they?

*Did your father go with you?*

Never, he never, no, no. Mother always took us whenever I went hopping.

*And how much do you think you'd earn?*

Well, if we earnt a couple of bob for mum a day, or three bob, or half a crown. Sometimes we might have earnt more.

*Did you go for the money or for the holiday?*

We never had no money, in fact mother took all the money. She'd give us a penny now and then. We had other ways of making money, like I told you with fruit. We'd pinch the fruit and sell it to somebody. You couldn't eat all what you took.

## NOTES

1. An interesting recent use of newspapers and other written sources in combination with interviews is by Lawrence Goodwin in "Populist Dreams and Negro Rights in East Texas as a Case Study", *American Historical Review*, vol 76, no 5, December 1971. In the country studied a whites-only Democratic party ousted the inter-racial populists from power in the 1890s, but it was impossible to discover 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 in the community, white, black and populist which, 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 ignored most of the real "political news", but some of the events which it did report had not happened. One politician who was reported dead, for example, in fact escaped his murderers and lived another thirty years. Goodwin's refusal to rely on newspaper evidence is however rare, and has an interesting basis. In an earlier career he was a journalist himself.

2. FC Bartlett, *Remembering*, 1932; Ian Hunter, *Memory*, 1957.

3. David F Musto and Saul Benison, "Studies on the Accuracy of Oral Interviews", *Fourth National Colloquium on Oral History*, Oral History Association, 1969.

4. David Jenkins, *The Agricultural Community in South West Wales at the turn*

*of the 20th Century*, 1971, pp 4-5.

5. Jenkins, *op cit*, p 204.

6. I and P Opie, *The Law and Language of School Children*, 1959.

7. Opie, *op cit*, p 227.

8. A T Welford *Ageing and Human Skill*, 1958, p 233.

9. Herbert H Hyman, *Interviewing in Social Research*, 1954, p 115.

10. Norman Denzin (ed) *Sociological Methods*, Berkeley, 1970, pp 199-203.

11. Denzin, *op cit*, p 324.

12. Hyman, *op cit*, p 233.

13. *Children under Five*, 1958; *The Home and the School*, 1964; *All Our Future*, 1968.

14. Charles Booth's 'Lower class of occasional labourers, loafers and semi-criminals' constituted only 0.9% of the whole population of London.

## Approaches to interviewing

by George Ewart Evans

Vol 1, no 4, 1972, pp 56-71

"Approaches to Journalism": by Susan Scott Fox

Mr. Chairman, friends, it looks as if it is finally all over up in the land. With John Samille up at the end uttering up under the short, but I will try to keep my throat down and cut my teeth by about 15 minutes, or if there are any gaps you will all have got the invisible witness to wait.

Short a decade ago a well-known anthropologist said that an anthropologist studies people on their land, and the Museum in documents. That proposition is already out of date, or at least it needs some modification; but it does remind us that the following of oral tradition has been the backbone of anthropology for many years, as we heard from Professor Haskins. Some of these here, Haskins Phillips, our friends from the School of Scottish Studies and from Leeds, have been using this for forty years in the field that is

...and, of course, the fact that the survey papers in the *Journal* have been essentially the field of oral history, although it was not called that at that time. Now an anthropologist, whatever he is before - biologically patterned, language structures, funeral rites - is bound to acquire a good understanding of the material culture of the people he is studying before he begins. By culture I mean the word in its root sense, the way people plough, the way they build their houses, how they make their artifacts. I've found this approach invaluable in working on folklore.

[illegible]

at least 10% of it); everything was not all and graduation was  
missing the hills as I was, to a pump. Near the stairs were  
crowded, just as I was and to meet them on the hills, sitting  
on the lawnside of my very small, they waited and I was  
on the way from New Brunswick, Virginia, Pittsburgh, and some  
then had actually read them. But I was particularly interested  
in the background of their work: the old Rye Hotel again below the  
main entrance and the courtyard area introduced. And by last night, as  
I say, I went down a small side with a neighbor and upon some time, a  
very, or two down there. Though I was more interested, as a story-teller  
in the cultural aspect of things, I know I'd have to return on the ground -  
or under the ground in this case.

[illegible]

This article comes from an issue of *Oral History* that includes pieces by Paul Thompson, Raphael Samuel and John Saville, key names in the development of oral history in the UK. Writer and oral historian George Ewart Evans – widely regarded as the ‘grandfather’ of British oral history – in many

ways came from a different generation and background from the others. He always said that 'oral history' reminded him of 'the filing cabinet of a well-equipped dentist'. His preference was for 'spoken history', the title of his last book published shortly before his death in 1988. By then,

although it was the term 'oral history' that had prevailed, his place within its canon was secure.

Born in the pit village of Abercynon in Glamorgan in 1909, Evans struggled to make his way as a writer during the depression, working as a PE teacher in Cambridgeshire before national service during

the war. He eventually moved in 1948 to Blaxhall in Suffolk where his wife Florence had become the village teacher. George stayed at home to look after their children. It was whilst chatting to his neighbour, a retired shepherd, that he stumbled upon the rich vein of oral testimony and folklore amongst the

villagers that was to be at the heart of his books about East Anglian rural life and work, evocative of what George called 'an unbroken continuity... the last generation of a line that had extended from Biblical times.' His first major work, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, appeared in 1956 and was followed by nine further books over the next thirty years, many of them illustrated by David Gentleman, together establishing Evans as a chronicler of ordinary working people in their own words.

Although we know George began interviewing his neighbours in 1952, the earliest sound recordings we have date from 1956 (when he borrowed his first Midget portable open-reel tape-recorder from the BBC in Norwich), the last from 1977. Around 200 are in the care of the British Library and available online at <https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/George-Ewart-Evans-collection>.

George was one of fifteen people who, on 13 December 1969 at the British Institute of Recorded Sound in Exhibition Road in London (BIRS later became the National Sound Archive and now the BL Sound Archive), attended the first oral history conference to be held in Britain. And he agreed to join Theo Barker from Kent University, Stewart Sanderson from the Institute of Dialect and Folklife Studies at Leeds University, and Paul Thompson from Essex University in forming a committee which published the first issue of *Oral History: an occasional news sheet* and went on in 1973 to establish the Oral History Society.

By the time this article was published in 1972 George had been interviewing people for his non-fiction books for

twenty years, and even longer for his fiction: he remembers talking to miners during the depression of the 1930s. Here he expounds his approach to interviewing and it still amounts to good sound advice for any budding oral historian: the importance not of asking a lot of questions of your interviewee but of listening; the value of preparation but of not allowing this knowledge to intervene in an interview; the benefits of quickly establishing a rapport in a relaxed and unhurried manner (perhaps by taking along an object); of avoiding audible interjections; the importance of following digression; and of making a high quality audio recording so that accent and dialect might be heard.

Paul Thompson has always credited Evans as a key influence, particularly on his groundbreaking project 'Family Life and Work

Experience before 1918', but early issues of *Oral History* reveal that George's freewheeling open-ended approach to interviewing was slightly frowned upon by some social historians and sociologists who regarded more structured questioning and quota sampling techniques as more 'scientific'. At an early oral history conference on 'the problems of oral history' at Leicester University in 1972, the question of how structured an interview should be was hotly debated, Evans insisting that 'we cannot make a monolithic structure of the interviewing technique'. By the mid-1970s Evans was feeling increasingly out of step with the direction in which the Oral History Society was moving.

**Rob Perks, Lead Curator of Oral History & Director of National Life Stories, British Library**

Mr Chairman, friends, it looks as if it is family all move up in the bed! With John Saville up at the end tottering up under the sheet, but I will try to keep my knees down and cut my talk by about 15 minutes, or if there are any gaps you will all have got the invisible scissors to work.

About a decade ago a well-known anthropologist said that an anthropologist studies people at first hand, and the historian in documents. That pronouncement is already out of date, or at least it needs some modification; but it does remind us that the collecting of oral evidence has been the technique of anthropology for many many years, as we heard from Professor Hedblom. Some of those here, Vincent Phillips, our friends from the School of Scottish Studies and from Leeds, have been doing this for forty years in the field that is essentially the field of oral history, although it was not called that at that time. Now an anthropologist, whatever he is after – kinship patterns, language

structure, funeral rites – is bound to acquire a good understanding of the material culture of the people he is studying before he begins. By culture I mean the word in its root sense, the way people plough, the way they build their houses, how they make their artifacts. I've found this approach invaluable in meeting an informant – it is a very formal word for a human person – but I have found this approach extraordinarily useful. That is, before I go to him I have a fair idea of his background and I know what his work was, the chief thing in his life, and I take along a material object connected with his work which I think will light him up. 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 tommy-box. As a matter of fact I started off with this method just over forty years ago, with a luck that is born out of ignorance. I had no idea of any technique at all. I was writing fiction at the time in the mining valleys of Glamorgan and I'd just graduated. This was 1931, and some of you will remember that the bottom dropped out of our world in 1931 – at least 10% of it; everything was cut 10% and graduates were walking the hills as I was, two a penny. Most of the miners were unemployed, just as I was and I used to meet them on the hills, sitting on the lee-side of a dry stone wall; they talked about everything under the sun from Marx, Feuerbach, Engels, Plekhanov, and some of them had actually read them. But I was particularly interested in the background of their work: the old Barry stall system before the coal-cutters and the conveyors were introduced. And by instinct, as I say, I went down a coal mine with a neighbour and spent some time, a shift or two down there. Though I was more interested, as a story-writer, in the cultural super-structure, I knew I'd have to start on the ground – or under the ground in this case.

But it was not until coming to East Anglia about twenty-two years ago after the war, that the value of oral evidence as an historical source came home to me. Our neighbours were an old retired shepherd and his wife and I used to talk to them more or less out of neighbourliness. It struck me that they were using words that had come out of the best period of English literature – Chaucer, Spencer, Shakespeare. They used them quite naturally and their language and knowledge of the old farming ways were all a whole. I found that they were books that walked and the whole village was living history. But I realised that although the old survivors were walking books, I could not just leaf them over. They were persons and I had to be very very careful. I was a student, not an interviewer. At first I did not make notes; I memorised points and wrote them up as soon as I got home. I listened while they talked, not literally at their feet, but I was in the position of being a neutral person. They had the information about this culture and I was quite ignorant and I had to defer to them, just as Levi Strauss says he has to defer to the primitives. A student may have the idea of PhD and a step up the academic hierarchy, but he has to get down as an equal with his informants. I was a neighbour, and if I missed something I went back, so there was no question of a single interview. And that is the advantage with old people, retired people; you can go when you like. They have plenty of time and they like somebody to talk to. I used a notebook when I got to know them without any tension coming into the talk. Later, when I came out of the hand-tool stage myself, and became mechanised, I got myself an engine, as one of my informants calls my Uher! I did have a little difficulty at first, because an engine means something mechanised. It is out of their ken. But I found often that if I had difficulty with an informant, I could say, "Well, shall we try it? Let's have a go! If you don't like it, I can scrub it out and there is no harm done". And that often worked, because once a man has heard his own voice on a tape recorder, he has persuaded himself, "I can do it", and then you are away. One often finds that it is the reluctant person who is the one who eventually becomes the better informant.

I'd like to play you now a part of a tape to illustrate a few of the points which I have discovered about interviewing. The tape is about a seasonal migration from East Anglia to the maltings of Burton on Trent, starting about 1860. Young men who were thrown off onto the scrapheap after the harvest and remained unemployed during the winter without any dole had to seek out work, and they followed the barley to Burton on Trent. They spent six months there and came back in time for the haysel or hay harvest the following June. My informant is James Knights: he was born in 1880 and he is still hale and hearty as ever. You will find at the beginning of this interview, the catholic answer to an importunate interviewer – "Cock a doodle doo"!

*You are nearly 88, Mr. Knights?*

Yes, yes.

*And you were born in?*

1880.

*What village?*

Debach.

*That's not very far from Woodbridge?*

Four miles from Woodbridge.

*When you were a young man, you went to Burton on Trent?*

I went to Burton on Trent, yes.

*Why did you go?*

Well (background crowing!), because I thought there was bigger wages. That's what I went for. I was ploughman at Thistleton Hall, Burgh; and the farmer says, "You've got a pair of good horses, and you're a good man", he said, "and I give you a shilling a week more than I give anyone else", and he says, "I don't see what you want to leave for".

So I said, "I'm a-leaving because I want more money. And then we have a job for somebody else to take my place". I said, "The money is nothing", I said. "The work is pretty hard", I said. "There's lots about here that haven't got a job, so I'm a-giving them a chance to have a job. I said, "I'm going, I'm going to Burton and perhaps I can save a little money".

*How much were you getting on the farm, eleven shillings?*

Eleven shillings a week. I was getting twelve. Yes, I was getting twelve. Ke give me twelve because he thought a lot of me and I could do my work all right, look after my horses all right of course. Bet I could hoe a row yet!

*You went –*

I went up to Burton and the first job I done, I went barley-carrying. Store-room trot – and that was about 100 yards carrying a sack of barley. I only had that two days and then I went into the malthouse. And I was making malt all the time I was there.

*That carrying barley, punishing work wasn't it?*

Oh, very hard work it was, yes. Lots of fellows, lots of young fellows, went out there and that killed them. Four or five died while I was up there – from the hard work.

*Where were they from?*

Well, they were from Suffolk I think. They come from Suffolk really. But of course when we used to go there, there used to be two thousand from Suffolk and two thousand from Norfolk. So there was four thousand of us used to go up every season. In October we used to go – after the harvest.

*These chaps, were they young chaps?*

All young chaps, yes. They wouldn't have old men. They were all young fellers 18, 17, 18, up to 20 and 25.

*And they looked you over before you went up?*

Yes. The man would come and sign us on you see. He could see what sort of a worker we were and thought that we were just the men for him, you see. That's what it was. Of course there wasn't near four thousand Burtonians worked in the malting you see, because they wouldn't go into a malt house because they'd got to stand off all summer, you see. We had to go in October, and then Whitsun Saturday was when they closed the malt houses. They used to be a few of 'em stopped on purpose to clean the malt houses down, while the men were away.

*And then you came back to Suffolk?*

I used to come back to Suffolk then and do the haysel and the harvest.

*Did you like going up there?*

I liked it very much.

*Did you get on with the Burtonians?*

Yes, very well. Yes.

*What did you actually do in the maltings?*

Well, turn the malt. The barley was ... (?) state you see, and then that come out on the floors. And then you had got to turn it every so often.

*So that it could dry and germinate?*

Yes. They had got to grow you see. That had got to be on the floor so many hours and then that'd grow. And then you'd got to be turning it, till that'd grow so much, and then so many days that'd go in the kiln and when that got over hot chamber you see. Of course that'd cook it, bake it. We used to go over the hot chamber. When we were finishing the hot chamber, we'd be on that so many days. When we were finishing the hot kiln, you see, we couldn't stand on the floor, because you'd want to have slippers on, and when I first went on, I don't know how many degrees of heat, that was over 100 a lot, I used to have to go to the window just to have a bit of fresh air and the blood come out of my ears and nose. That was stout work, hard work that was. Course I used to be a wonderful chap – if I should say it – to sing. I was a good man for singing, one time.

*What songs did you used to sing?*

All sorts of songs.

*You must sing one.*

My sister, she used to teach young boys and girls to play the piano, you see. Well if ever a song came out, she used to send to London for it and then she would learn me it you see, I used to learn off the piano.

*Did you remember years ago when the [...]*

*Did you remember that?*

Not really you know. I should think I learnt scores of them, but I can't think of them much now. And when I first went to Burton, I lodged with a woman called Mrs. Oakby; and I didn't get on much there because she'd got only one son and he went to college. So I didn't get on much with him. Two or three doors away there was a couple of other boys came from Halesworth. And I said to them, "What sort of grub are you getting?" They said, "Ours is all right". "Well", I said, "Have you got room for another lodger"? He said, "I should think so". "I'll come around and see the old woman", I said. So I went and see the old woman and she said, "Yes, I could do with another one. There will be three of you". She lived alone. The old woman lived alone. So I went there to live; and it went on, well on, I should think nearly into June and I said, "I should like to play a trick with this old woman". These ones say, "Well, what would you like to do"? "Well", I say, "I'll tell you what I should like to do: I should like to get her to go to bed one night", I say, "and I'll get underneath her bed and lift her out of bed". So the other two, they say, "Well, I don't know how you are going to work that". I say, "I know how to do that well. Tonight I shall get some soot out of the chimney after she's gone to bed", I said, "and put it in paper and I'll take it upstairs with me tonight; and I'll go to bed tomorrow night – early". Which I did. I went to bed and I went upstairs and blacked my face all over, and before she come up I got under her bed. Well, when she come to bed I could hear



she was just going to sleep because she was a tidy old gel for her drink – she'd soon drink a couple or three pints of beer. She always had beer in the house of course. And when she got sort of dozing off, I heaved up, you see; and she began to roll about the bed; and I gave her another heave and she came out on the floor. The other two boys was downstairs, so I said to myself, "What am I going to do now"? She flew at the window and got half-way out of the window: she was going to jump out of the window, and I pulled her back and I jumped out of the window myself. The other two boys come upstairs to want to know what was up with her. She laid on the floor and Bert Freeman, he say, "Well", he say, "We shall have to give some brandy". She was queer. I went out and come down and washed myself and everything; and the old woman say, "Well", she say, "I don't know who it was but it ain't Jimmy because he's in bed". So we carried on with it and she was laid there till one o'clock in the morning, the old gel laying there and they was putting brandy into her. Well, there was some laughing! And the next morning she goes down to the police and she said that there was a black man had broken into her house and had gone underneath her bed and turned her out of bed. That morning the police come out to me at the malthouse and wanted to know if I'd suspicioned anybody. I said, "No, I never knew anybody, but she said it was a black man". Of course that was me all the time. The police went to the other two boys in the malthouse to find out what they could about it, but they never did find nothing out about it. We had some sport over that and the old woman never knew it was me.

That was James Knights. I think that was the first time I met him. If I'd adopted a method I saw used last summer in the interview, I am sure I would not have got that recording. I took a foreign student around to some of my informants in Suffolk. She was interested in the dialect, and I took her to one of my best informants whom I had interviewed many times. She got her microphone and she spoke into the microphone before speaking to the informant, and she said "Lena Helsinki speaking to Sam Friend of Framsdan, 12th August 1971". I can see my informant visibly sitting up as much as to say "She's getting me taped good tidily"! Well that official may be admirable from an archival standpoint, from an administrative standpoint, but in the collecting of oral history you should forget all matters secondary. The informant is the most important man in the situation. Technique and after-storage and all that has to come second. It is much better if you must have that formula, to leave some space at the beginning and speak that little piece when you go home. An interviewer, especially in his approach, should be relaxed, unhurried. The informant should have plenty of time to move about. If he digresses, you should let him digress because you can always come back. If you digress on some subject and you cut him short, that will be the last you will probably hear. This whole complex of going to Burton, I discovered as I digressed from asking a man about his work as a farm horseman. He said "Well that was the year I went to Burton". If I'd followed a classical method, I would have

kept to my questionnaire and gone straight on. But he opened up a whole area of nineteenth century history on migration that had never been recorded in a book, and we found, after a long search, only one written document to confirm what these old men were saying.

And that brings me back to the question of the actual piece he recorded. That is not an historical source as it is. It is only potentially an historical source. One has to sort it out. And in sorting out this piece, one might take the story, the rather lightweight story of bouncing the lady out of the bed, and say "Well, we can dismiss that", but in my view that story is good social history. And as a matter of fact, bouncing out of bed was a common custom practiced by ladies in waiting in Victoria's Court and it may have percolated down (or percolated up, whichever way you like to look at it) from there. The first rate material is not in the figures that he gave. That I think is a good illustration of how you have to use oral evidence with circumspection. You have a picture of your informant, a good picture if possible, before you get to him. You know where he has been from the man who has referred him to you, and you know his strong points of information. As soon as James Knights gave the figures, I asked myself, well where did he get those from? He was working on the malting floor all the time. We put a question mark against the figures; if he was a clerk in the office, I could have accepted them. We discovered the labour books of Bass and Cole. With the help of an historian, Colin Owen in Burton on Trent, who was researching into industrial archaeology and industrial history we found that the number of people going to Burton on Trent from East Anglia was somewhere in the region from 400 to 500 a year. The wheat and the chaff has to be sorted out by the man who does the interview. If he has any doubts he can go back a second time. But my main aim is to be relaxed and 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. I am afraid that we are having bad examples of interviews, especially with microphones on television nightly, and the impression seeps into us, so that the microphone is often used as an aggressive implement. Here it is, "Speak into it" – like a hand grenade! BBC and ITV people have to do that because of time and other factors. But in oral history, if you want to get material in depth, you have to have primarily plenty of time and plenty of tape and few questions. Most of the interviewer's work, in my personal opinion, should be done before he goes to the interview, and afterwards with the tape and the razor blade. He can cut his tape afterwards and if he wants more he can go back a second time. Before we leave James Knights I should like to prove to you his boast that he was a good singer, and one of his songs – I have two or three of them, is probably an Edwardian music hall song:

Now there is a bloke called Dennis Carlew Williams,  
Who never had a penny in his ties,  
He wasn't fond of work because it hurt him,  
If you told the man a job he used to sigh.  
He used to loaf about outside the public houses  
And he'd standing still say – "Anything to eat?"  
He's toes was always nicely ventilated,

And he lived in a little hovel off the street,  
 But he's –  
 Moved in a bigger house now,  
 Living like a great big don,  
 In a great big large five storey house  
 With a real bathroom and the gas laid on,  
 Lovely grounds all round.  
 No longer will he mooch around the pubs  
 For it ain't a villa or a mansion where he's living in –  
 They call it Wormwood Scrubs.

I use a microphone (a D109) which goes around the neck of the informant and just hangs there, so that the microphone does not come as a third presence between you and the informant. Once you know an informant well, the microphone does not matter, but initially if you get it out of the way, it makes the job of the interviewer easier. The D109 microphone is excellent. The only disadvantage is a lack of balance. The interviewers voice is much further back, so that it is a bit faint, but that is exactly how it should be in an interview.

Before going any further, I should like to say a word about the general context of the interview as it effects the discipline of history. "The interview as an historical method" was this morning's session's title. Have we precedence in historiography for this type of source material? We have indeed, and I believe they are all very revealing. The first which comes to my mind comes from the 17th century, Richard Gough's *Human Nature Displayed in the History of Myddle – a small Shropshire parish*. This was written in about 1700 and was re-issued three years ago with a very sensitive introduction by WG Hoskins. Gough recorded gossip, and when you are getting gossip you are getting right inside the head of the people – their attitude, their hopes, their disappointments. If an historian turns his nose up at gossip, and says, "Well gossip is below me", he is not doing his job. It is as simple as that. Gough was writing about the Civil War and some of the vignettes of the Civil War, little scenes that he has recorded in his village and through being told about them by old men, bring the Civil War to life as much as anything written. A contemporary of Richard Gough was of course John Aubrey. He also dealt in historical vignettes as we know in his *Brief Lives*. But Aubrey is much more than an historical gossip writer (I am not using that word "gossip" in a pejorative sense). Oliver Lawson Dick's book on the *Life and Times of John Aubrey* shows that a great deal of the most interesting of Aubrey's writings have not been published, but are still in manuscript. Aubrey's technique is quite clear from what he wrote. He says: "When I was a boy, I did ever love to converse with old men as living histories". Here is a phrase often repeated right throughout his writings, as he wrote about the whole way of life that had disappeared in the convulsion of the Civil Wars: "When I was a little boy before the Civil Warres". This alerted me because I am continually hearing a similar phrase from my informants: "Oh, that was afore the First World War": "that was afore I went into the army". The First World War was as sharp watershed to us as the Civil Wars in the seventeenth century were to Aubrey.

The third figure will, I think, show why these men are

significant for us. He is Sir Walter Scott who used oral material in the writing of his first great six historical novels, the Waverley novels. You will find plenty of evidence of how Scott uses oral material in the notes that he appends to these novels and in some of his novels, at least in some editions, you will find the very often quoted couplet from Burns as a warning to interviewers who scribble in front of the informants:

"A chiel's – a fellow's – amang you taking notes  
 And faith! he'll print it!"

That is a very good hint against flashing the notebook when you do not know your informant.

Professor Hugh Trevor Roper in a recent broadcast lecture, which was printed in the *Listener* of August 1971, put a standpoint which is very relevant to our approach. Trevor Roper believes that Scott started an entirely new approach to history and I quote:

'It may seem odd that a novelist should be credited with a historical revolution. But historical revolutions are not made by historians. Historians are technicians who may refine their tools and dig further and deeper along the channels within which they work; but generally speaking it is not *they* who point the new directions in which those channels shall be dug. Those who have directed the course of history have almost all been non-historians or, at most, amateur historians: Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Herder, Hegel, Marx. And Sir Walter Scott, I shall suggest, was a historical innovator in this sense.'

Scott acquired this new sense of departure by accident. As a lad he contracted polio in Edinburgh and his people sent him to live in the Border country on a farm, where he met the old culture, the material culture and the ballads, the songs and the dialect of the people. Life there was steeped in old traditions. It is interesting that Scott could speak to people who had taken part in the '45 Rebellion and so could write what the '45 rebellion meant. It meant the dispersal, or the destruction of the culture of the Highland Clans, that had lasted uninterrupted since the iron age. Scott's philosophy was "that the spontaneous poetry of a people is the image of a whole culture; and it is out of such evidence that history must be constructed and the past brought back to life".

And if anyone doubts Trevor Roper's enthusiasm, and Scott's historical durability, let him read the book I have just mentioned, *Old Mortality* and place it alongside what is happening in Ireland and Glasgow this very week. He will read that book with enlightenment and a sense of shock as well.

There are two or three other writers who should be mentioned: the reports of Henry Mayhew, the work of George Sturt or George Bourne, and of Rowntree and Charles Booth. My series is probably incomplete. But each of these writers was living in a stress period, when an old society was going under quickly and a new order was beginning. And this process of rapid change seems to evoke a saving counter-movement, automatically or instinctively;

just as an organic body mobilises its forces against too sudden changes either in the internal or external environment. The past has always been with us, but in smoother times we are not so aware of it. Yet now it is slipping away, its values come into the fore, come into perspective, and we seek to record if not to preserve.

I'd like to play two short recordings, to illustrate this continuity in historical attitude implied in this instance from Scott. The topic is regrettably up to date, I am afraid; it is sex. This, as you know, was the sin above all sins in the Victorian mores; but such an attitude did not percolate very deeply into the tight countryside communities. There the attitude to sex is still, now, quite pragmatic and I think oral interviews can show this. The first recording is of a country housewife, – who is 63 now, not very old. The second is of an old stallion leader who is professionally interested in sex, but his attitude was really more typical of the attitude of the countryman. He was nearer to the primitives idea of sex as fertility and increase, and something to be proud about or even to laugh about. This is the housewife:

*There's been a lot of talk recently about morality, girls having babies. Was it any different before the First World War?*

Well, not so much, I shouldn't think so. Because I've always known girls, I mean I've – I had to marry myself but I mean, in my day, when I married, there was a lot of girls in the same village, they did exactly the same thing. And I know when my mother – she was forty when I was born – and I've heard her say about different people in the village, how they had to marry. And when she was working on the fields, there was a crowd of women working in the 1914-18 war, and they were talking about a certain girl in the village who had to marry, some were criticising her and some were sort of pitying on her, and of course my mother didn't have to marry, and she said, "Well, look together, what are you making all the fuss about? Because if you look round, there's all of us here, and I don't suppose there was any – there's you, you and you", and she pointed at several of the different women, and said, "Well you had to marry so what are you making all the fuss around about?" she said, "It's no different now to what it was then". And I honestly don't think there is. The only thing is, the girls know more, they're taught more, I mean, they know more when they leave school than we did when we married. I mean, we were just brought up in ignorance. I mean, girls of today, they know a lot, they know what to do. I mean, if someone were told how to avoid it then naturally enough they don't always manage to do so, and therefore they take the consequences. I mean, its only nature, after all's said and done. I don't think it's any different from what it was. People talk about it more, they hear more, and they say it more. But I mean, years ago, it was kept a secret or a girl was sent away to an adjoining village, which was quite a distance in them days and there – nothing was known about it. It's like this. I honestly think there should be forgiveness for the first child, but not for the second. I mean they know then, what they're letting themselves in for and how to avoid it, that's all that matters.

The next piece reminds me of the Canterbury Tales:

I once met a parson when I was travelling with an entire horse, and he said to me:

"Hullo! Good morning young fellow", he said.

I said, "Good morning, Sir."

"I would love", he said, "to go along with you just to see this horse do the work."

"Well", I said, "there's nothing to stop you. I'm now a-going to Mr. Gooding's, straight to his farm, Redhouse, Witnesham. You can come if you like", I said. "There's nothing wrong about that".

"Well", he said, "I would like to come. Do you drink beer?"

I said, "That I do. That's just one of my main points".

"All right", he said, "I'll go and get a bottle", and he went and got a bottle of ale and brought one out for himself. I thought to myself, "You got good religion in you, and this is better than drinking the tea".

So, he brought my bottle out and poured his out and we tapped glasses together. He says: "Here's good luck."

I said, "Thank you very much, sir".

And he said, "I'll come on with you".

So he came along with me up to the farm, and I had a job for my horse, which he was very interested in. And when I started back, he said:

"Are you coming back past mine?"

I said, "Yes, sir".

"Well, we'll have another drink. Can you drink another?"

"Sure", I said, "that would be just my hobby".

He said he never was so surprised in his life. He never thought anything like that would happen.

"Yes, sir", I said, "That's nature with a horse, just the same as there's nature with the human being".

And what his idea was, in a way I suppose, was just to see the position which I had to get the horse in before that had the job with the mare; and he wondered how the job was done with the harness I'd got on. But I used to take all the harness off, hold the horse back, and I said, "Right!", and the job was done.

To sum up: one could talk for the rest of the day about

the technique of interviewing, but no amount of technique, in my view, can be a substitute for the man-to-man relation with the informant. This is the first essential in my experience. It is from this undoubtedly that the historical empathy which Scott certainly had, is very likely to arise. How is one to get it? It is extremely difficult to will oneself into it, if this is even possible. But I believe that there are two aspects that can give us tremendous confidence in an interview. The first is this: the conviction that you are doing something for your informant as well as for your own purpose. I found that as one stayed with an informant and got to know him very well and he became an active helper, there was a real flow. He became an active helper and I could take him almost anywhere in an interview, and I did not have to think about technique at all. It is not difficult to see why this is so. At this time most of the older generation have been shunted into the scrapyard. They feel they have lost most of their occupational skills. These have become obsolete they can no longer transmit them as they did in former generations. Even to talk at this time about the wisdom of the old would sound like a travesty. As the old people will tell you, "The young uns today, you can't tell them nawthen!" That's what they say in East Anglia. But once the old people have grasped what you are about they realise themselves – although they do not verbalise it – that they have been taken back into the social family, not as temporary superannuated members but as people who can make a real contribution to social tradition. So willy-nilly we are taking part in a social therapy even if we do not realise it. It is in this setting I maintain that you will get your best results.

Secondly, at this time in approaching an interview you can have a full confidence that you are doing something historically worthwhile and even respectable and praiseworthy. This wasn't always so. Even as recently as five years ago, a book that had been gnawed over for six or seven years in the hope that it would be a contribution to oral

history was reviewed in a reputable national journal under *Travel Books* with five or six other books which evidently had a more determined will to go places than this one had. But even since 1967, the crisis in history teaching has deepened; and the conviction that there is at least a partial way-out through oral history has strengthened; and I am sure it will become increasingly recognised that in the age we are living in – a period of cataclysmic change – this approach we are now proposing is on the cards in a sense that it is historically determined, because it is an approach that has already been tried in earlier stress periods. Moreover, it already has a wide spread. Last week I met a group of overseas radio producers at Elwyn Evans' school at the BBC. They came from all parts of Africa, Trinidad, Israel and so on; and it was clear from discussion with them that they were on the brink of awareness of what this approach could mean in some of their countries where they have few or no documents. And whether they call it oral history or not, some of them have already started work.

Therefore, and this is my main and final point, we can now go into an interview with all the assurance that we are working to bring about a new departure. Each of us according to the light he has is helping to bring back *man* into history – not man mediated through trends, movements, distribution maps and statistics, but man himself, men and women in the flesh. And it is this direct contact which I believe works through a kind of osmosis, through your skin so to speak, to give the feel of history, the sense of the past which is such an essential ingredient to the best historical writing. Without it, even if it is impeccably written and researched, it is likely not to be history but merely the material for history. I believe we should go to the interview not only for the historical information, but hoping to be given or to acquire that little bit extra – that enlightenment, a trace element of imagination, a little supererogatory grace, a sense of history – call it what you will.

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WOMEN'S HISTORY ISSUE

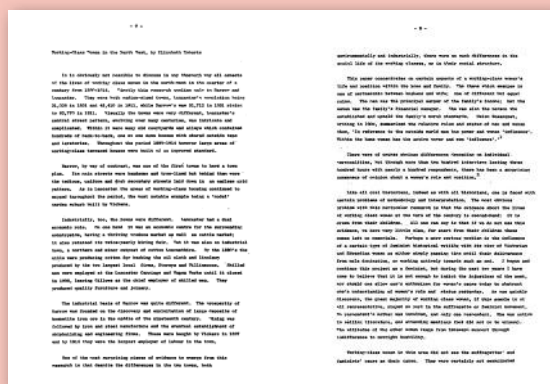
WOMEN'S HISTORY IN THE NORTH WEST - Elizabeth Roberts  
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Volume 5 Number 2

# Working-class women in the north west

by Elizabeth Roberts

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I am pleased that this article has been chosen to be included in the volume celebrating fifty years of *Oral History*. I have not read the piece since it was published forty-two years ago and I began to read with some trepidation. What if my arguments were different to ones I might have reached much later in my

career? I am relieved to say that this has not been the case. Indeed I have enjoyed reading some extracts from the interviews which I had forgotten. However if I was writing the article now there would be some differences. I am uncomfortable about my generalisations about middle-class women

which were based neither on research evidence nor even on any wide reading of secondary sources. I think I began my oral history investigations with some unexamined assumptions. I assumed that all women were downtrodden. It took me some months of interviewing to realise

that the women being described in the interviews could not be described in these terms. I learned a valuable lesson about the need to look closely at the evidence and at how it matched or contradicted my assumptions.

When I later carried out another oral history



research project in Preston I again had to look at my assumptions about the role of working class women in a town dominated by the textile industries and indeed my interpretations of statistics, notably the

apparent but misleading link between high infant mortality rates and high levels of women in full time work which I got wrong in this article about the working class women of Barrow and Lancaster. In the third

research project in Barrow Lancaster and Preston which concentrated on the thirty years post Second World War, the assumptions again had to be abandoned as the role and lives of women

were complex and changing and indeed the very term 'working class' required much unpacking.

**Elizabeth Roberts, Emeritus, North West Regional Studies, Lancaster University**

It is obviously not possible to discuss in any thorough way all aspects of the lives of working class women in the north-west in the quarter of a century from 1890-1914. Firstly this research applies only to Harrow and Lancaster. They were both medium-sized towns, Lancaster's population being 31,038 in 1801 and 45,410 in 1911, while Barrow's was 51,712 in 1891 rising to 63,770 in 1911. Visually the towns were very different, Lancaster's central street pattern, evolving over many centuries, was intricate and complicated. Within it were many old courtyards and alleys which contained hundreds of back-to-back, one up one down houses with shared outside taps and lavatories. Throughout the period 1890-1914 however large areas of working-class terraced houses were built of an improved standard.

Barrow, by way of contrast, was one of the first towns to have a town plan. Its main streets were handsome and tree-lined but behind them were the tedious, uniform and drab secondary streets laid down in an endless grid pattern. As in Lancaster the areas of working-class housing continued to expand throughout the period, the most notable example being a 'model' garden suburb built by Vickers.

Industrially, too, the towns were different. Lancaster had a dual economic role. On one hand it was an economic centre for the surrounding countryside, having a thriving produce market as well as cattle market; it also retained its twice-yearly hiring fair. Yet it was also an industrial town, a northern and minor outpost of cotton Lancashire. By the 1830s the mills were producing cotton for backing the oil cloth and linoleum produced by the two largest local firms, Storeys and Williamsons. Skilled men were employed at the Lancaster Carriage and Wagon Works until it closed in 1908, leaving Gillows as the chief employer of skilled men. They produced quality furniture and joinery.

The industrial basis of Barrow was quite different. The prosperity of Barrow was founded on the discovery and exploitation of large deposits of haemetite iron ore in the middle of the nineteenth century. Mining was followed by iron and steel manufacture and the eventual establishment of shipbuilding and engineering firms. These were bought by Vickers in 1897 and by 1914 they were the largest employer of labour in the town.

One of the most surprising pieces of evidence to emerge from this research is that despite the differences in the two towns, both environmentally and industrially, there were no such differences in the social life of the working classes, or in their social structure.

This paper concentrates on certain aspects of a working-class woman's life and position within the home and family. The theme which emerges is one of partnership between husband and wife; one of different but equal roles. The man was the principal earner of the family's income; but the woman was the family's financial manager. She was also the person who established and upheld the family's moral standards. Helen Bosanquet, writing in 1906, summarised the relative roles and status of men and women thus, 'In reference to the outside world man has power and woman 'influence'. Within the home woman has the active power and men 'influence'.'

There were of course obvious differences depending on individual personalities, but through more than two hundred interviews lasting three hundred hours with nearly a hundred respondents, there has been a surprising<sup>3</sup> consensus of opinion about a woman's role and position.

Like all oral historians, indeed as with all historians, one is faced with certain problems of methodology and interpretation. The most obvious problem with this particular research is that the evidence about the lives of working class women at the turn of the century is second-hand: it is drawn from their children. All one can say is that if we do not use this evidence, we have very little else, for apart from their children these women left no memorials. Perhaps a more serious problem is the influence of a certain type of feminist historical writing with its view of Victorian and Edwardian women as either simply passing time until their deliverance from male domination, or working actively towards such an end. I began and continue this project as a feminist, but during the past two years I have come to believe that it is not enough to indict the injustices of the past, nor should one allow one's enthusiasm for women's cause today to obstruct one's understanding of women's role and status yesterday. As one quickly discovers, the great majority of working class women, if this sample is at all representative, played no part in the suffragette or feminist movement. No respondent's mother was involved, and only one respondent. She was active in selling literature, and attending meetings (but did not go to prison). The attitudes of the other women range from lukewarm support through indifference to outright hostility.

Working-class women in this area did not see the suffragettes' and feminists' cause as their cause. They were certainly not emancipated legally or politically and some certainly believed themselves to be exploited and down-

trodden, but they did not regard their husbands as their oppressors. They saw them rather as fellow victims in a poverty trap created by the middle and upper classes. Class consciousness and resentment of the upper classes, whilst not universal, was not at all unusual:

'You know old Jimmy Williamson was an old pig and that's sneaking. He was a millionaire but he was an old pig.'<sup>3</sup>

'Oh aye, this is it, people don't know. During that depression period... a lot out of work and her mother was helping to run the soup kitchen at the top of the bridge there. Lord Ashton's niece was the big body of this, a big... one at Christ Church, she made this 'ere soup, and when mam's mother went to lift the lid off there was a big rat in it dead. She said, 'Oh look at this!' 'Oh', she says, 'just take it out and they'll know no different', she says, 'lot goes.' This was just what other people thought about working classes, as long as they got anything they'd eat it, see.'<sup>4</sup>

It is significant that whereas only one respondent became a suffragette, one mother and ten women respondents themselves became very active in left-wing political movements. One actually described the Suffragettes as a middle class movement; and they were all more concerned with the rights of all members of the working class whether male or female.

*Did your father feel he was exploited?*

Oh, I'm sure he did. He would occasionally get drunk, not really drunk, but well oiled and he used to grind his teeth when he used to think about them... he had his own teeth and he used to grind them and you could hear them. Sixty years he worked for those people with very little remuneration, very little. Of course it's through that that John Willie Scott who is commonly known as the Duke of Buccleugh, it's through that, that my father's family... the five of us, there was four boys and me of course, made Socialists of us, the Duke. He didn't know he was doing that but that's how it turned out. You see they were pirates these people, the fore-fathers of these, lord this and lord that, and duke this, and duke that, they were pirates. There was no doubt about it that they helped themselves to all these enormous palaces that they live in.'<sup>5</sup>

Any study of working class women must begin in the home, because that was where they spent – indeed from an early age expected to spend – the greater part of their lives. This respondent lost her job after the men returned from the First World War:

*Did you accept that or did it bother you at the time?*

No, well I knew I was engaged to be married and you see in those days as soon as you were going to be married you left a job, you knew you were going to be sort of house-keeper and be at home all the time you see. That's the

only thing we girls had to look forward to, if you understand, getting married and sort of being on our own, and getting – our bottom drawer together and various things like that. Yes, that was the ambition of girls then.'<sup>6</sup>

It is within the confines of the home that the married working class woman's role and status can be most clearly studied. But no discussion of her role or relationships is possible without understanding that her life within the home was one of endless toil. Washing day was a full day's heavy manual work – clothes were boiled, pounded in the dolly tub, rinsed, starched, blueed, mangled and ironed. Baths were tin tubs which had to be filled and emptied by hand. Heating the house and cooking required buckets of coal to be carried in and buckets of ash to be carried out. Floors and staircases were scrubbed, as were front steps, and even pavements. Ranges were black leaded and fire irons polished every week; stones of flour were kneaded into bread; in fact all aspects of housework required a lot of time and even more energy.

The reasons for this endless effort are obvious. Firstly, no technological revolution had taken place in the working class home. There were no labour-saving devices except for the gas stove, which was not universal, and there was no money to pay for servants to do the work. Secondly, while the bulk of the work carried out by the working class woman was necessary if her family was to be maintained with reasonable standards of hygiene and nutrition, there was always some work done because of both internal moral pressures and external social pressures. Working class women (and men too!) were devoted if unthinking believers in the value, indeed the redemptive quality, of work. The Victorian work ethic is a recurring theme in almost every aspect of working class life. Victorians and Edwardians believed that salvation lay through work and damnation through idleness. One respondent's mother used to say rather pithily, "Don't waste what you can't make and you can't make time." Thus social pressures from neighbours ensured that much time was spent in cleaning windows and washing and donkey-stoning the front door step. A dirty exterior to a house was equated with moral laxity.

There was also another reason for working class women's endless toil and her encirclement in the home: her frequent child-bearing and endless child-rearing. The birth rate figures, and census returns,<sup>7</sup> while indicating a steady decline in family size from 1880 onwards also show that the most dramatic fall happened after the end of this period. In Lancaster it came in the decade 1910-20 and in Barrow ten years later. The figures in Table III, admittedly rather crude, indicate a startling change in family size from about the time of the First World War.

Respondents have not been questioned about contraceptive practices used or not used by their parents. The statistics would in general support the thesis put forward by Robert Roberts in his book about Salford, *The Classic Slum*, that working class men and women only began to practise contraception on a widespread scale after the First World War. I initially presumed that the large working class families born before that were the result of ignorance about

contraception; and undoubtedly some women were ignorant. One respondent whose mother had 16 children frequently said to her daughter, with reference to her large number of pregnancies, "Oh we didn't know as much about it as you do."<sup>8</sup> Another said,

'They used to have children pretty quick then because there was no birth control. In fact she used to tell me about her husband who was a stonemason... they went on the booze and she never got pennies for weeks on end. She said that many a night she daren't get into bed with him and sat on the window ledge until he went to sleep. The young ones of today say, 'Serve you right you had a big family', but they hadn't a clue what went on.'

But the problem is considerably more complex than would appear, and the widespread failure to practise contraception cannot be attributed solely to ignorance. Information and help was available if required; for example an advert in the *Barrow Herald* in 1895 read:

'Married ladies who wish to enjoy health and happiness and yet keep their families within the limits of their means should read Nurse Forbes books entitled Prevention Better than Cure. Post Free 7d. from Mrs. Forbes, 144 Sackville Road, Brighton. N.B. Simple, reliable, safe and cheap. Most flattering testimonials received daily.'

One respondent remarked on the subject of family planning:

'Back to that point you see, my mother was a nurse at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary, you see and they talk about birth control and well this is it again. And I dare say talking about m' father, he didn't want a big family owing to the economic conditions of the day. That was all we had, there was only two of us. Yes, two years between us practically.'<sup>9</sup>

This indicates that information was available to those who wanted it.

Another respondent's remarks suggest that in some families, the woman chose to have a large family, finding enjoyment and fulfilment in caring for them. The respondent was asked, "did your mother mind who you played with?" And she replied,

'She was never like that, she loved children did my mother. She minded then for people while they went to work did my mother.

*Even with such a lot of her own?*

Yes, yes, she loved children. Well it was her own fault she had the last boy. M' dad says, "if you love kids that much you might as well have another of your own".<sup>10</sup>

This sense of fulfilment was not the only reason for large pre-First World War families, but it would be wrong to ascribe their existence simply to ignorance.

It is against this background of housework and child rearing, whether undertaken through necessity or choice or both, that the working class woman's relationship with her husband must be placed.

I am uneasy at categorising as personal a relationship as marriage in terms of economic class. Nevertheless there is evidence that, unlike the feminist stereotype of the middle class wife, working-class wives were not subservient to their husbands, but that rather they were partners; and that this relationship of partnership can be partly explained through the economic role and status of the working-class wife within the family. Unlike the middle class wife, the working class wife was an economic necessity to her husband; she was indispensable. If she did not do the housework, he could not afford to pay anyone else to do it. Indeed if a wife died, it was a lucky man who escaped breaking up his home and seeing his children in the workhouse.

'I remember one young woman her mother died, I think it was T.B., and her father had to go out to work, he was on a fam, labouring. Do you know there was six children and the neighbours used to help. But I always remember the School Board coming and what they were going to do with the dad. They explained to it, and they got somebody out of the workhouse, an old lady out of the workhouse, as it was then, to come and house for them, and I think she got about half a crown a week and her food. If you lost your mother, well you broke your home up. My father did.'<sup>11</sup>

A woman's economic value was not confined to her doing tasks which a man could not afford to pay anyone else to do. In every family so far interviewed it was the woman who was the family's financial manager.

'This is how they had to do it, they were schemers and providers in them days but I'm sticking up for the woman. The provider had a little wage and it was the women who were the schemers. There was always something on our table and they always had a supper.'<sup>12</sup>

'I think in those days that the man passed over the money, much more than he does today. I mean today they sit down and talk it out and there's so much for him and so much for the house. But in those days the wages were so poor that really the man didn't get a lot out of it.... It was handed over and the wife did the allotting where it went.

*I think they perhaps gave the husband something back didn't they?*

Yes, but well in some cases I don't think they got an awful lot. I mean some of these that were always drunk must have got a lot back. I think they perhaps didn't treat the wives fairly. I mean I can remember when I was smaller when my father was at Williamsons in the Warehouse Office he got a shilling a week to spend, and he only smoked half an ounce of twist, but it was fourpence. And of course he never went to work on a bus or anything, he walked both ways.'<sup>13</sup>

This tradition of the woman controlling the family's money is a commonly mentioned one. The husband earned the basic income but the woman had the immediate responsibility of seeing that the family was fed, clothed and housed. And there is an immense amount of evidence from both towns to show that working class women exhibited great resourcefulness in making ends meet when their husbands were earning very low wages.<sup>14</sup> In the great majority of cases the husband was only allowed financial control over a small pittance with which to buy his beer and tobacco. In some cases he was not even allowed this, but had to work for his pocket money. One man gave all his basic wages to his wife and what he earned in overtime he was allowed to keep. Another who enjoyed a drink was expected to earn his beer money both by singing in his local and by waiting on. In maintaining this financial arrangement the social treatment of deviant husbands was clearly significant. This is a larger topic which can only be outlined here. The typical deviant husband in this area was the man who drank heavily; he failed to provide for his family and he tended to usurp his wife's position in the home, bullying both her and the children. The majority of women controlled their husbands' drinking by controlling their spending money, but there was always a minority who went straight from work with their wages, to the pub. They could not however be sure of being able to drink away all their money without certain social pressures being exerted upon them, especially by women; for example the landlady in one pub is described as limiting her customers on pay day to a certain amount of drink and then telling them to go home to their wives. Men from "rough areas" who did drink away their wages could be certain of incurring the publicly and loudly expressed condemnation of their female neighbours: and frequently those who ill-treated their wives when drunk found themselves in court, with their wives inevitably winning the case. In the sample there was only one case of a husband completely failing in his role as provider and ill-treating his wife because of heavy drinking. His wife died aged thirty-two, and he was banished from the family, being denied shelter, food and access to his children by his mother-in-law. In view of the widespread and frequently expressed condemnation of men who drank too much, it is perhaps not surprising that in such close-knit communities, the great majority of men, while certainly not giving up their drinking, were deterred from the kind of excesses which occurred in this one family.

There were of course other ways besides financial management through which the working class woman contributed to the family's economic position. Almost one half of the respondents mothers had part-time jobs. Here oral evidence is of particular interest and significance. These casual jobs are not enumerated in census returns, nor are the women's wages accounted for in computations about wage rates and general standard of living indices. There was a great variety of jobs undertaken for a very variable number of hours per week. Thus it is not possible to quantify meaningfully the financial contribution of these casual women workers. But as one respondent remarked when describing her mother baby minding at 1/6d. per child per week, "1/6d. could feed a family then for two days".

Some families had lodgers, although there were difficulties if any standards of decency and modesty were to be maintained. It was often not physically possible to fit extra people into small terraced houses already holding 8-10 members of a family. The very poor could not afford to maintain even the basic decencies:

'My grandma took lodgers in.... they were Germans. It was a German band, two sisters and a brother... I've just forgot where the devil they slept.' (In fact there was already a family of seven in three bedrooms.)<sup>15</sup>

The commonest type of lodger was a member of the extended family, who in some way contributed to the family income. Some women opened shops on their own account in their front parlours, where they sold pies, hams, etc. More usual were the women who ran a shop in partnership with their husbands, the family living behind and above the shop. Four women went out cleaning, and four were cooks or housekeepers (two of whom lived in and had their families with them). Several took in washing and sewing, and one kept pigs. The most hard-working were a group of seven who did various combinations of jobs – baby minding, taking in washing, cleaning, housing lodgers, dressmaking and decorating houses. The most enterprising of ill was this lady in Barrow.

'But m' father was only a labourer at the steelworks and at that period they were in and out, in and out, and there was one period that she used to go to the saleroom and bid on things, and then ... anything she thought going cheap she'd buy it, leave it there, go the following week and let it go up again and she'd bid it and make a bob or two that way.... She would buy anything like that. Well there was four houses for sale in Westmorland Street and they were sold as a block. And she was up there, went to the sale and she was talking to some women and they all said they wanted one, and she got all the people and asked them what they were prepared to pay and she bid for the lot. And she got them, and I think it was two hundred and twenty pound the other paid, and they let her have it for two hundred and ten for hers. And that's how m' sister come to live in Westmorland Street.

.....And do you know she couldn't write her own name but she could reckon up money and that, funny... she knew a bargain, and she used to knock about, had a good friend as well, worked between them like, but she was good. You only had to think of anything in our house. You'd be talking here, and it was here the next day.'<sup>16</sup>

The respondents and their parents display an interesting attitude to women working outside the home. Part-time work was an acceptable activity; full-time was not. Out of all the respondents' mothers, only eight worked full-time at some point in their married life. Of these three were widows, three worked full time only intermittently in times of particular family economic difficulties, and only two worked consistently. These were both Lancaster mill workers. The smallness of the total of women going out to work full-time

is reflected in the census figures for married women at work. Before the First World War this figure never passed 10% in Lancaster and was rather lower in Barrow.<sup>17</sup>

There were many individual reasons for this low percentage of women in full-time work and it is not easy or perhaps possible to generalise about them. The contemporary liberal view would be that a woman is more emancipated if she has a career outside the home, but this assumes a background of small families and widely used domestic appliances, in contrast to the normal conditions in the working class before 1914. Working class married women who had full time jobs at the turn of the century cannot be regarded as emancipated in any meaningful sense of the word. Fifty-five hours in the mill or factory, followed by exhausting domestic toil, forced these women to struggle to maintain an incessant and almost unattainable pace of physical labour. And the main alternative to factory work, shop work, meant even longer hours of work.

*How long was your apprenticeship as a cook?*

Oh, I was there about two years then, and then I left there and I went to the Maloray Restaurant, and I went there as a cook. And m' father used to get up and take me about half past four because the shipyard went in at six, and I had to have all the urns on because the men used to come in for cups of tea and a bun. And the night men used to be coming off at six and the day men going in at six so we had to have all the urns on and the tea made for them coming in.

*How many hours would you work, when did you finish?*

We worked there till about half past seven or eight at night.

*How much time would you have off during the day?*

None. We got our bit of dinner there.

*How much a week would you get for all that?*

Twelve and six.

*Did you work Saturdays as well?*

Yes. But not Sundays.

*And no half day in the week?*

No.<sup>18</sup>

Women at home did not envy their neighbours in full-time work. Rather they pitied them. In some cases the image of the full-time working mother was one of a down-trodden exploited being, forced to work by unfortunate circumstances such as widowhood. One old lady told how her own mother, whose husband was a chronic drunkard, was finally forced to work at the mill after the bailiffs had twice taken all her furniture to settle the family's debts. Her

sisters used to bring the baby to the mill gates to be breast-fed. This particular woman died at the age of 32.<sup>19</sup>

Other families had different objections to the wife working full-time. Among the most aspiring members of the working class, there were men who took a particular pride in being seen as prosperous enough to support a family without the wife having (again this idea of being forced) to pro out to work.

*What sort of work did your mother do before she was married?*

(Mrs S1L) A weaver. She was a weaver.... She was at Storeys Mill, because all our family worked for Storeys, four and twopence a week tenting, and then when she had two looms, two narrow looms, she'd twelve shillings.

*Did she work after she was married?*

I couldn't say, no I couldn't say, I wouldn't think so, she was married at High Street Chapel 1897. I was born 1898 and my sister was born 1901, so she'd have enough with two children wouldn't she.

*Yes, and there wasn't much work really.*

(Miss S2L) – Then tradesmen were very proud of being able to keep their wives you see.

(Mrs S1L) – M' father was nicely brought up and I think he wouldn't want her to go to work. I can't remember mother ever working.<sup>20</sup>

This respondent makes the point that "there wasn't much work", but this does not appear to have been true of women's work before 1914. Although the range of jobs was very restricted, no cases are known of mothers seeking employment and being unable to find it (whereas this was not true of fathers), and the number of women who had to be brought into both towns during the First World War to work on munitions would suggest that there was *not* a large nool of married women seeking a job before the war but unable to find one.

The other point this respondent made was that "she'd have enough with two children". This is an echo of the widely and strongly felt sense of duty which pervades so much of the respondents evidence in both towns. A woman's perceived duty was to her family. It is interesting to note that in the two cases in Lancaster where the woman chose to continue to work full-time after marriage (and was *not* forced to do so by adverse conditions), two related preconditions were fulfilled. Both women had one child only, and both had living nearby an able-bodied grandmother willing and able to cook, clean and generally act as a surrogate mother. There was a general consensus of opinion in both towns that unless these two conditions were fulfilled, it was not possible for a woman to care adequately for her home and family.

*'Did your mother ever work after she was married?'*



No, they didn't in those days. They didn't in my days, if I'd have worked after I was married I'd have been condemned. No, it's only later after that that they started working you see. No, you stayed at home when you were married in my days you know.'<sup>21</sup>

There is some evidence to suggest that this widely held opinion had some factual basis. In her book *Wives and Mothers in Victorian Industry* Margaret Hewitt examines the effects of women working full-time in cotton Lancashire. She concluded that *in general* working class standards of housewifery were so low that women going out to work made very little difference. She wrote, "The truth of the matter was that amongst the working classes in general the standards of domestic accomplishment were deplorably low". Robert Roberts writing of Salford explained succinctly why this was so. "Many working women among our 3,000 engaged as they were all day in weaving, spinning and dyeing trades, they had little time to cook or indeed to learn how to since their mothers before them had often been similarly occupied in the mills. This I think contributed to the low culinary standards which existed in the Lancashire cotton towns before the First World War."<sup>22</sup> It is possible that Margaret Hewitt, anxious to be fair to the working women of the cotton towns, has been as a result less than just to housewives of other Lancashire towns like Barrow and Lancaster, who were quite able to feed their families on a very varied, inventive, economical and nutritious diet. And virtually all the women respondents speak of learning the skills of cooking from their mothers, who in turn had learned it from their mothers.

Margaret Hewitt does concede that in another sphere, married women working full time outside the home were less adequate than their counterparts who either stayed at home or who worked part time. Table V gives infant mortality figures and percentages of married women at work, indicating that there was a significant correlation between high infant mortality rates and high percentages of married women at work.<sup>23</sup> Some historians still tend to group together infant mortality rate and the general death rate and discuss them as indicators of standards of living, a high infant mortality rate being; presumed to indicate a low standard of income, but this was not always the case, family incomes in cotton Lancashire were higher than those in North Lancashire but it was cotton Lancashire which had the higher infant mortality rate. Oral evidence and that of the Medical Officers of Health, in both towns, would suggest that one of the major causes of infant deaths was bottle feeding with inadequately sterilised equipment – bottles with long rubber tubes. And of course it was in families where there was a surrogate mother that the baby was most likely to be bottle fed. It is not of course argued that the respondents or their mothers had studies of infant mortality figures, but one can suggest that there is some statistical evidence to support them in their view that children were on the whole better cared for if their mother was at home the majority of the time.

It appears from the sample interviewed that in the working class families of Barrow and Lancaster there was thus a system of separate but equal roles for men and

women. A woman could not compete equally in a man's world of work, especially if she wished to maintain the level of her domestic achievement. But within the home she tended very frequently to be the dominant personality. She was the partner who made the important decisions.

Families in both towns were fairly mobile. Almost inevitably it was the wife who decided why, when and where to move. and, indeed whether to buy or rent a house:

*Was it your mother who wanted to move to Newsham Road or was it your father's choice?*

Oh, I think m' mother's, oh yes m' mother. I don't think he would object but m' mother had all the push, definitely. You know she took the initiative in that sort of way. Oh, she had to push m' father to get him going you know to get one. He was.... a very contented man really, he could be too contented really. You know he hadn't enough push.'<sup>24</sup>

*'Who decided to come here, was it your mother or dad to this house? (ie a new house)*

M' mother. M' father wouldn't put his name to anything. He was one of them fellows that said he didn't like anything round his neck.

*A debt you mean?*

A debt, yes. No, the house was never in m' father's name. When m' mother died she left the house for him to live in as long as he did but when he died it had to be divided between the children.'<sup>25</sup>

In the sphere of moral and ethical standards the woman was more often the creator and upholder of familial mores. She not only controlled her children's behaviour, but frequently that of her husband too.

'She wasn't bossy, but she was the prevailing spirit in the house you know. We knew that and we were brought up that way, if mother said it you did it, and it wasn't a case of I'll ask m' dad, and he would say ask your mother. And if he said anything to us m' mother never interfered, and if she said anything he never interfered, but if they didn't agree on that matter they talked about it when we weren't there, but not in front of us, never. They never fell out in front of us, never. I dare say they had their ups and downs you know because m' father did some things, like he liked a drink now and again which m' mother didn't agree. And once they were going to move house. She wanted to move house anyway, and they were living in a house belonging to a friend of his and he didn't want to move. And he said, well all that upheaval and so on and so on, and made a thing about it and mother said, 'well that extra ninepence a week would shoe the children'. We went!'<sup>26</sup>

*Who was the strictest in the family your mum or your dad?*

M' mother. Father has his strict way, we'd be in at cer-

tain times. He wanted to know the reason why if we weren't. He was strict in a way but m' mother was far more strict, far more strict.

*You felt she ran the house did you?*

Yes. Oh, she did, because father used to go to church greatly against his grain because she made him go. I never heard her swear m' mother, never, neither damn nor nothing. And she used to go to church and she used to make m' dad go and she got him to join the Church of England Men's Society and the poor old soul must have been in agony. I don't know. But anyway he went to church, took us to church.<sup>27</sup>

*Was she stricter than your father?*

Well m' father, he didn't have a lot to do with us really. I mean he was at work all day. He was strict, strict to a certain extent but it was mother really that brought us up. M' father was at work and when he used to come home it was bed time nearly for us you see, and we didn't see a right lot of him. He was a grand old man though.

And in those days, I always remember a young man, he was a fisherman at Morecambe... and I met him like. I mean to say we were very friendly, and there wasn't a right lot in it you know, but he brought me home and I was at the corner of the street... Just having a few words with him. My mother came to the corner of the street, she said, 'come on, get yourself in. He's no better than he ought to be to keep you out after nine o'clock'. Nine o'clock! And when I was going to be married, and how old was I, I was twenty-three and my husband and I went up to see his brother to tell them that we were going to be married and invite them to the wedding. I was rather late, and my mother was sick in bed. You know she died a month after I was married. I came in opened the door and he came in with me, and m' father was there you see. He came in with me and my mother shouted downstairs, 'What time do you call this coming in? You know he's no better than he ought to be for keeping you out in hours like this'. You know, very, very strict.<sup>28</sup>

This last extract is interesting because of the emphasis on the young male being 'no better' than he should be. This leads to a final point. As has already been indicated, it is not always easy to discuss with old people questions of sex and sexual morality. But what evidence is volunteered tends to support the thesis of equality and partnership between working class men and women. The onus for not having premarital sexual relationships, which were regarded as sinful, was placed more or less equally on both sexes, boys as well as girls being expected to behave themselves:

'My mother didn't bother who I married so long as I didn't bring any trouble home, get any girl into trouble and that was the only thing she was bothered about.'<sup>29</sup>

'I've seven brothers and there wasn't one had to be married. I mean they'd know you know. He'd (i.e. her father) have killed them. No, I mustn't say that, he must have told them and he would have seen there 'd have been no shennakins. There wouldn't have been no flying their kites and then changing their minds. They'd have had to marry the girl, if she'd been good enough to do that with, she'd have been good enough to marry and that would have been dad's lot.'<sup>30</sup>

Other respondents have emphasised that there was no question of a man getting off 'scotfree' if he did get a girl pregnant. If he couldn't marry her, then the least he could do was to emigrate. One respondent recounted an incident which occurred during his grandfather's childhood – an effigy of a young man who'd got a girl 'into trouble' was burned in the streets, but the girl was not subjected to any public shame. This is an Interesting Incident, because it suggests that the importance of males accepting their responsibilities was not a late nineteenth century development, but had been a matter of social concern much earlier.

Perhaps not surprisingly, few examples of pre-marital sex were admitted by the respondents. One old lady did tell me that she was pregnant when she was married in 1910. The family made some conventional sounds of regret and surprise and then provided her with a sumptuous (and untypical) wedding breakfast. But the only other case was the pregnant sister of a Lancaster respondent who drowned herself in the River Lune. The available figures do not however suggest that there was, numerically, a serious problem of illegitimacy<sup>31</sup> – although it would be very interesting to know why the Lancaster figure is higher than that for Barrow. One is left to conclude that in the majority of cases where the girls did become pregnant before marriage, then the fathers did accept their responsibilities and marry them. Here of course research is needed on births and marriage certificates.

This article raises some questions for both historians and sociologists. Helen Bosanquet's description in *The Family* (1906) of the structure of a working-class family is surprisingly similar to the one presented by the respondents quoted in this article. Unfortunately she gives no indication of her sources. One would like to know to what extent there were regional differences in the role-relationships in working-class marriages. Oral testimony is obviously the most fruitful source of evidence on this subject, and I would welcome information from oral historians who have investigated other regions during this period.

There are sociological questions about how and why working-class men and women adopted such segregated conjugal roles. Elizabeth Bott in *Family and Social Network* (1971), while describing an investigation into families in the 1950s, postulates a theory which has a wider application. She argues that the degree of segregation of conjugal roles is related to the degree of connectedness in the total network of the family; those families which had a high degree of segregation in the role-relationship of husband and wife also having a close-knit network, many of their friends, neighbours and relatives knowing one another.

Certainly the great majority of families in the sample in Barrow and Lancaster had these close-knit networks, and this is possibly one reason for the clearly segregated roles of working class husbands and wives in both towns. One of the most interesting points made (but not developed) by Bott was that in marriages where there was a considerable degree of segregation in roles there was not only a clear division of labour but also a basic division of responsibilities as well. This is a very important point, because it could be argued in the case of the women of Barrow and Lancaster that their responsibility for such matters as budgeting, housing, and familial mores, could be taken to imply that the husband did not shoulder enough of those responsibilities rather than as an indication of the woman's dominance within the home. The extent to which men adopted this rather passive role within the home depended to some extent on individual characteristics; but it was also influenced by the ways in which working-class men and women perceived their role-relationship in marriage. There is considerable evidence to suggest that they saw the man as the 'provider' and the woman as responsible for the practical organisation and moral standards of the family. If in fact the women had had these responsibilities taken from them by their husbands then they would presumably have displayed, as did some middle-class women, significantly more discontent with their lot. Without such responsibilities they would have been reduced to the status of domestic servants. It is clear that their assumption of domestic responsibilities was not due to their husbands' dereliction of duty. When there was a conflict of opinion on domestic matters, as some of the extracts indicate, it tended to be the woman whose decision was final because these were within her sphere of responsibility.

It is hoped that in no sense have the lives of working-class women been over-glamourised here. They carried a burden of physical work which would be quite insupportable to most modern women; they lived culturally sterile lives and were rarely seen with a book or even a newspaper. Yet there is little – in fact, as yet, no – evidence to suggest

that working-class women felt any resentment with their lot; even if their health broke down.

'It must have been hard work and then her health cracked up when we were younger and there was four years when she didn't put a hat on or go out of the house at all. ... I never knew such a patient person, sweet. Other people have always said what a wonderful person she was. She'd five children, her father living with her, a brother a bachelor, then she had dad's mother to live with her and another niece. She kept going on, was quite happy and never a grumble. She was a wonderful patient person.'<sup>32</sup>

Outside the home, one receives the overwhelming impression that few working class women questioned the subordinate role played in general by women at work and in politics. They were not apparently troubled by feeling the need for self-expression or self-determination; they were indeed astonishingly lacking in self-awareness. Possibly the cynical could argue that they had neither time nor energy for such feelings; but more positively it can be argued that working class women did have some compensations in their lives. Within the home they either worked in partnership, with their husbands, or in some cases ruled supreme.

There was the triumph of feeding and clothing a family on a small budget and one to which they might add their own small but significant wage. There was the satisfaction of rearing a large family to adulthood and the realisation of one's immense value to one's family. All these feelings must have contributed to the apparently low incidence of mental illness among working class women before the First World War. Unlike some of their modern counterparts they did not suffer from what psychiatrist Victor Frankel has called "an existentialist vacuum". Victorian and Edwardian working class women in North Lancashire could see all round them the purpose of their lives. They enjoyed a certainty about the rightness of their role which perhaps succeeding generations have lost.

## NOTES

1. Helen Bosanquet, *The Family*, p 277.
2. This research has been supported by an SSRC grant for the period 1974-76. Previously it was a pilot study assisted by a Nuffield Small grant. The work has been carried out under the aegis of the Centre for North-West Regional Studies in the University of Lancaster.
3. Mrs S4L. Details of respondents are at the end of this article. James Williamson, later Lord Ashton was the dominant figure in Lancaster's industrial and political life during the whole period 1890-1914.
4. Mr R3L. This extract refers to the depression in 1909 which followed the closure of the Lancaster Carriage and Wagon Works.
5. Mrs H3B. Her father was clerk to Wad haras, the Agent of the Duke of Buccleugh.

- The Duke was an important landowner in Furness and one of the most important investors in the industrial development of Barrow.
6. Mrs P1L
  7. See Tables I and II.
  8. Mrs M6B
  9. Mr R3L.
  10. Mrs H3L.
  11. Mrs S1L She was in fact brought up by her grandparents after her mother's death.
  12. Mr R3L.
  13. Mrs W2L.
  14. See Elizabeth Roberts, *Working Class Standards of Living in Barrow and Lancaster*, to be published in *Economic History Review*, 1977.
  15. Mrs B1L.
  16. Mr P1B.
  17. See Table IV.

18. Mrs A3B.
19. Mrs B1L.
20. Mrs S1L and Miss S2L.
21. Mrs C2B.
22. Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum*, p 107.
23. It should be emphasised that these figures relate to women at work in factories. Agricultural areas where working women had their babies with them tended to have lower infant mortality rates.
24. Mrs A2L.
25. Mr P1B.
26. Mrs H2B.
27. Mrs W1B.
28. Mrs S4L.
29. Mr K1L.
30. Mrs M3L.
31. See Table VI.
32. Mrs P1L.

## A SUMMARY OF RESPONDENTS

**Mrs A3B** b. 1893. Third of seven children. Father a maintenance man, wages about 25s. Mother before marriage shop assistant, after marriage went out washing, took washing in and also kept pigs. Mrs A3B became a domestic servant and later a cook.

**Mrs A2L** b. 1907. Elder of two children. Father a gardener, wages 25s. Mother before marriage a mill worker, after marriage worked on munitions for a short time. Mrs A2L became a confectioner.

**Mrs B1L** b. 1888. Youngest of five children. Father a labourer, wages £1.0s.3d. Mother before and after marriage (but intermittently), a weaver. Mother died when Mrs B1L was very young and she and her brother and sisters were brought up by grandparents. Mrs B1L became a weaver.

**Mrs C2B** b. 1887. Youngest of eight children. Father a moulder, wages 30s. Mother's job before marriage unknown, none after marriage. Mrs C2B became a shop assistant.

**Mrs H2B** b. 1885. Youngest of four children. Father a carter on the railway, wages £1. Mother domestic work before marriage and taking in lodgers and sewing after marriage. Mrs H2B became a dressmaker.

**Mrs H3B** b. 1887. Eldest of six children. Father a clerk at Wadhams, the agents for the Duke of Buccleugh's Furness Estate,

wages 30s. Mother before marriage was an untrained teacher, eventually after marriage opened a shop. Mrs H3B became an untrained teacher.

**Mrs H3L** b. 1903. Eighth of ten children. Father was a weaver in a matting mill, wage unknown. Mother before marriage a domestic servant, after marriage did baby minding and took in washing and sewing. Mrs H3L became a weaver.

**Mr K1L** b. 1907. Third of four children. Father a baker, later a mill labourer, wages £1.0s.3d. Mother a weaver before marriage, after marriage various jobs as a cook and munitions worker, also took in lodgers. Mr K1L became a baker.

**Mrs M6B** b. 1896. Youngest of sixteen children. Father a labourer, wages 18s. Mother a dressmaker before marriage, after marriage took in sewing and went out painting and decorating. Mrs M6B became a professional drummer.

**Mrs M3L** b. 1917. Sixth out of eight children. Father a fitter but frequently a labourer, wages unknown. Mother and step-mother both died when Mrs M3L was a child and little is known of them. Mrs M3L stayed at home to look after the family.

**Mr P1B** b. 1900. Fourth of six children. Father a labourer in the steelworks, wages 18s. Mother before marriage a labourer in the jute works, after marriage buying and selling in the auction rooms. Mr P1B became a fitter and turner.

**Mrs P1L** b. 1898. Second of five children. Father a foreman in linoleum works, wages 25s to 28s. Mother before and after marriage stayed at home. Mrs P1L became a weaver then a clerk.

**Mr R3L** b. 1890. Elder of two children. Father a wood-carver and turner at Gillows, wages 30s to £2. Mother before marriage, a nurse, no job after marriage. Mr R3L became a cabinet maker.

**Mrs S1L** b. 1898. Elder of two children. Father a tinsmith, wages £2. Mother before marriage a weaver, no job after marriage, Mrs S1L became a shop assistant.

**Miss S2L** b. 1894. Miss S.2.L. came to Lancaster in 1920 from Halifax. She worked as a weaver.

**Mrs S4L** b. 1896. Eighth of nine children. Father a grave digger, wages 18s to £1. Mother both before and after marriage took in washing. Both parents were illiterate. Mrs S4L became a weaver.

**Mrs W1B** b. 1900. Fourth of ten children. Father a moulder, wages 25s to 30b. a week. Mother before marriage a fancy box maker, after marriage none. Mrs W1B became a domestic servant and a shop assistant.

**Mrs W2L** b. 1910. Second of three children. Father a grocer's assistant, later a clerk, wages unknown. Mother before marriage a domestic servant, after marriage took in sewing. Mrs W2L became a shop assistant.

**Figure I**

### BIRTH-RATES

Number of births per 1,000 population

	Barrow	Lancaster	England & Wales
1880-89	37.9	33.6	32.89
1890-99	30.85	27.3	30.02
1900-09	28.16	26.05	27.50
1910-19	26.15	19.70	21.80
1920-30 (11 years)	18.74	16.61	18.98

**Figure II**

### AVERAGE SIZE OF FAMILY FROM CENSUS RETURNS

	Barrow	Lancaster
1891	5.61	5.58
1901	5.58	5.35
1911	5.02	5.01
1921	4.46	4.66
1931	4.04	4.34

**Figure III**

### FAMILY SIZES BASED ON RESPONDENTS' EVIDENCE

(a) Respondents Families (all the respondents except one were born before 1910 but some of their siblings were born afterwards).

Lancaster – 6.23 children per family

Barrow – 8.25 children per family

(b) Respondents Own Children (all respondents except two were married after 1910).

Lancaster – 2.30 children per family

Barrow – 1.75 children per family

These figures are based on the number of children born not those surviving infancy.

**Figure IV**

## EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN

	Total number of women employed	As percentage of total female population	Percentage of married women employed	Percentage of 15-35 married women employed	Percentage of widows employed
1891 –					
Barrow	5,425	32.6%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Lancaster	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1901 –					
Barrow	4,116	21.4%	5.8%	2.9%	N/A
Lancaster	4,989	30.5%	10.2%	N/A	N/A
1911 –					
Barrow	4,886	20.9%	4.5%	N/A	29%
Lancaster	4,991	23.2%	8.7%	N/A	23%
1921 –					
Barrow	6,111	22.4%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Lancaster	5,241	30.2%	N/A	N/A	N/A

**Figure V**

The Infant Mortality of Registration Districts where the employment of women and married and widowed women was extensive compared with the infant mortality of districts where such employment was small. (1)

## (a) DISTRICTS WHERE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN LARGE

	Infant mortality 1896-1905	Percentage of Women Occupied (2)	
		Total	Married and widowed
Burnley	208	75.4	33.8
Preston	208	73.8	30.5
Blackburn	183	76.5	37.9
Oldham	170	70.4	20.0
Bolton	166	71.7	15.1
Bury	164	73.7	25.6
Average	183	72.3	25.6

## (b) DISTRICTS WHERE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN SMALL

	Infant mortality 1896-1905	Percentage of Women Occupied	
		Total	Married and widowed
Sunderland	166	38.2	7.7
Swansea	160	42.1	8.7
Lincoln	157	47.2	7.8
South Shields	155	34.9	7.4
Lancaster	155	30.5	10.2
Newport	153	44.4	7.0
Cardiff	147	43.6	8.4
Barrow- in-Furness	144	40.7	5.8
Burton	119	41.8	6.9
Average	150	41.6	7.4

1. George Newman, *Infant Mortality – A social Problem*, Methuen, 1906, pp 103-10. 2. Figures taken from 1901 Census.



**Figure VI****ILLEGITIMACY FIGURES**

These figures are taken from the Medical Officer of Health Reports. They do not appear every year and are presented differently, the ones for Lancaster being given in 1912 as a retrospective summary in the form of the number of illegitimate births over 1,000 of the population.

	Year	Legitimate births	Illegitimate births	Illegitimate births as percentage of legitimate ones
BARROW	1895	1,625	32	1.96
	1906	1,886	56	2.96
	1916	2,266	58	2.55
LANCASTER	1901	1,061	52	4.90

Illegitimate births per 1,000 of population

Average for 1901-12 = 1.04

Birth rate average for 1901-12 = 25.08

# ORAL HISTORY

THE JOURNAL OF THE ORAL HISTORY SOCIETY

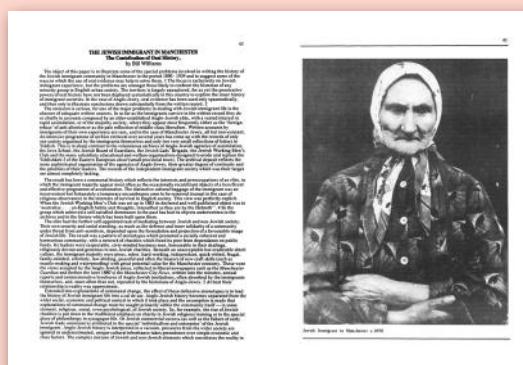


Vol 7 Number 1

## The Jewish immigrant in Manchester: the contribution of oral history

by Bill Williams

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I have been researching the social history of British Jewry for over a decade, but I might never have become interested in applying oral history to my research had it not been for the pioneering work of the late Welsh oral historian Bill Williams (1931-2018), 'Manchester's honorary

Jew'. A well-known figure in the world of British oral history, the article I have nominated for inclusion in this special anniversary edition of *Oral History* was one of the first articles I ever read on oral history, and Williams's work on gleaning 'the inner history of immigrant

societies' has served as an inspiring model ever since.

While elite versus non-elite history is a long-familiar concept to oral historians, with the former often equated to the history of 'great white men' and the latter to 'ordinary people', Williams's article dismantles this

simple binary by reminding us that 'elite history' can also be applied to anyone who holds power, regardless of their ethnic, gender or racial affiliations. Indeed, underrepresented groups can lay claim to an elite/non-elite divide, and to this end, Williams writes that in the 1970s most sources on

Manchester Jewry, a community with roots stretching back to the eighteenth century but composed of various waves of immigration, relate not to the history of the 'immigrant majority' but to long-established community leaders and their

institutions – 'a communal history which reflects the interests and preoccupation of an elite' he writes. As Williams stresses throughout the article, 'Oral evidence serves as a powerful corrective' in this instance (by 1984 he and his team had

successfully recorded and deposited over 400 oral history interviews with Jewish immigrants in the city), leading us 'to more balanced explanations' of Jewish life in Manchester and to challenge myths of 'communal solidarity'

and homogeneity within minority communities more generally.  
**Cai Parry-Jones, Digital Collections Manager, Royal Horticultural Society, and author of 'The Jews of Wales: A History' (2017)**

The object of this paper is to illustrate some of the special problems involved in writing the history of the Jewish immigrant community in Manchester in the period 1890-1939 and to suggest some of the ways in which the use of oral evidence may help to solve them.<sup>1</sup> The focus is exclusively on Jewish immigrant experience, but the problems are amongst those likely to confront the historian of any minority group in English urban society. The territory is largely unexplored, for as yet the penetrative powers of oral history have not been deployed systematically in this country to explore the inner history of immigrant societies. In the case of Anglo-Jewry, oral evidence has been used only spasmodically, and then only to illustrate conclusions drawn substantially from the written record.<sup>2</sup> The omission is serious, for one of the major problems in dealing with Jewish immigrant life is the absence of adequate written sources. In so far as the immigrants survive in the written record they do so chiefly in accounts composed by an older-established Anglo-Jewish elite, with a vested interest in rapid assimilation, or of the majority society, where they appear most frequently either as the 'foreign refuse' of anti-alienism or as the pale reflection of middle-class liberalism. Written accounts by immigrants of their own experience are rare, and in the case of Manchester Jewry, all but non-existent. An intensive programme of archive retrieval over several years has come up with the records of only one society organised by the immigrants themselves and only two very small collections of letters in Yiddish. This is in sharp contrast to the voluminous archives of Anglo-Jewish agencies of assimilation, the Jews School, the Jewish Board of Guardians, the Jewish Lads' Brigade, the Jewish Working Men's Club and the many subsidiary educational and welfare organisations designed to erode and replace the Yiddishkeit<sup>3</sup> of the Eastern European *shtetl* (small provincial town). The archival deposit reflects the more sophisticated organisation of the agencies of Anglo-Jewry, their greater degree of continuity and the priorities of their leaders. The records of the independent immigrant society which was their target are almost completely lacking.

The result has been a communal history which reflects the interests and preoccupations of an elite, in which the immigrant majority appear most often as the occasionally recalcitrant objects of a beneficent and effective programme of acculturation. The distinctive cultural baggage of the immigrant was an inconvenient but fortunately a temporary

encumbrance soon to be removed (except in the case of religious observance) in the interests of survival in English society. This view was perfectly explicit. When the Jewish Working Men's Club was set up in 1883 its declared and well-publicised object was to 'neutralise... un-English habits and thoughts, intensified as they are by the Hebroth'.<sup>4</sup> So the group which achieved a self-satisfied dominance in the past has had its objects underwritten in the archives and in the history which has been built upon them. The elite had the further self-appointed task of mediating between Jewish and non-Jewish society. Their own security and social standing, as much as the defence and inner solidarity of a community under threat from anti-semitism, depended upon the formulation and projection of a favourable image of Jewish life. The result was a pattern of stereotypes which promoted a socially coherent and harmonious community, with a network of charities which freed its poor from dependence on public funds. Its leaders were respectable, civic-minded business men, honourable in their dealings, religiously devout and generous to non-Jewish charities. Beneath an unacceptable but eradicable *shtetl* culture, the immigrant majority were pious, sober, hard-working, independent, quick-witted, frugal, family-minded, scholarly, law-abiding, peaceful and often the bearers of new craft skills (such as mantle-making and waterproofing) with great potential value for the Manchester economy. These were the views accepted by the Anglo-Jewish press, reflected in liberal newspapers such as the *Manchester Guardian* and (before the later 1880s) the *Manchester City News*, written into the minutes, annual reports and commemorative brochures of Anglo-Jewish institutions, often absorbed by the immigrants themselves, and, more often than not, repeated by the historians of Anglo-Jewry.<sup>5</sup> At best their relationship to reality was approximate.

Extended into explanations of communal change, the effect of these defensive stereotypes is to lead the history of Jewish immigrant life into a cul de sac. Anglo-Jewish history becomes separated from the wider social, economic and political context in which it took place and the assumption is made that explanations of communal change must be sought primarily within the community itself – in some element, religious, social, even psychological, of Jewish society. So, for example, the rise of Jewish charities is put down to the traditional emphasis on charity in Jewish religious training or to the special place of philanthropy in

synagogue life. Or Jewish commercial success (as well as the failure of early Jewish trade unionism) is attributed to the special individualism and enterprise' of the Jewish immigrant. Anglo-Jewish history is interpreted in a vacuum, pressures from the wider society are ignored or underestimated, unique cultural inheritance takes precedence over simple economic and class factors. The complex mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish elements which constitutes the reality in which Jewish lives are led is dispensed with for the spurious model of an insular community. Jewish history becomes a ghetto.

Oral evidence serves as a powerful corrective. In personal life histories, Jewish and non-Jewish influences are closely interwoven, the pressures from the wider society are seen at work on the individual and the family, personal experience and the generalised message of communal tradition co-exist. The 'processes' of settlement and acculturation are seen as patterns of individual choice between alternatives which lie on both sides of the shadowy boundary between the Jewish community and the wider urban society. Oral testimony also offsets and complements the viewpoint of the elite as this is reflected in the documentary record. The realities of individual lives are set against the collective myth. Access is also provided to largely undocumented areas of immigrant life: the departure from Russia, the journey across Europe, the search for lodgings and work in Manchester, the experiences of the workplace, the home, the *cheder* (small unofficial school) and the *chevra* (small workshop). Most of all, perhaps, oral history leads away from an insular Jewish history towards more balanced explanations of such ordinary immigrant experiences as the process of finding work.

The question of occupational choice is particularly relevant in this context, since it is one in which Jewish immigrants might appear at first sight to have acted very differently from members of the English working-class society. For one thing, their range of chosen occupations was far more limited. Although individual immigrants were to be found in a great many occupations, the vast majority were concentrated in a few trades. In Manchester these were typically tailoring, waterproof garment making, shoe and slipper-making, cabinet-making, glaziers, petty shop-keeping and hawking. Until well into the 1920s garment and furniture workshops, small shops and small-scale travelling commerce accounted for over 90% of the employed immigrant Jewish population, both male and female. Substantial sectors of the Manchester economy – notably cotton mills and engineering works – attracted no Jewish workers until the 1930s, and then only a handful. Why?

Most of the answers provided by contemporaries and historians are rooted in the distinctive characteristics of Jewish life. It is argued, for example, that strictly observant immigrants – and most of the immigrants were strictly observant – sought trades in which they might retain their religious practises intact, and particularly the fundamental practise of Sabbath observance.<sup>6</sup> This would have been difficult in, say, an engineering plant or a cotton mill. Therefore immigrants chose occupations which either gave them Jewish bosses (in the many workshops set up by their predecessors) or which, like the various forms of itinerant

commerce, gave them the freedom to organise their own time. Or it is claimed that the workshop trades and travelling commerce were particularly appropriate to the 'temperament' of the immigrants – what Gartner calls their 'taste for entrepreneurship'.<sup>7</sup> John Garrard has written of the immigrant Jewish worker: 'He was intensely competitive, and his great ambition, and, frequently his crowning achievement in life, was to become a small master with a minimum of delay,'<sup>8</sup> an analysis underwritten not only by a great weight of testimony to government enquiries but also by so sympathetic an observer as Beatrice Webb. The Jewish immigrant worker was typically regarded as in some special way individualistic, enterprising, independent and daring. Finally, it is argued that Jewish immigrants were 'driven back' (Bill Fishman's phrase) on a narrow range of occupations by the prejudice of English workers in such trades as engineering.<sup>9</sup> What all these explanations have in common is that they rest on the unique traditions, character and situation of the Jewish immigrant minority.

Such explanations do not stand up well to the test of oral evidence. It is clear for example, that Sabbath observance, far from being sacrosanct, soon gave way before the necessity of earning a living. Nor was it by any means certain that Jewish immigrants would find the Sabbath observed in workshops owned or managed by their co-religionists. The pressure of contract work more often made a Saturday opening essential. One respondent remembers that the owner himself left the workshop in time to bring in the Sabbath, while expecting his Jewish workforce to remain.<sup>10</sup> Another spoke about his earliest days in the Manchester garment trade, in the 1890s:

I just put up with it, but ... I hated it.

*Can you tell me why you hated it?*

Because I didn't like it. I didn't like it to tell you the truth. I remember the first day, it's a *Shabbos* (Sabbath). I had to go to work – never forget that.

*Can you tell me about it?*

I didn't like it, I was broken hearted. I had to go on the *Shabbos* to work, the first *Shabbos*. Still till I got used to it ...

*Did Jewish tailors work every Sabbath?*

Yes they used to work *Shabbos* them days, tailors .<sup>11</sup>

The respondent did not belong to an untypical, irreligious minority for whom the Sabbath was dispensable. On the contrary, he was clearly close to the heart of the religious community. Sabbath work was a painful concession to the necessity of survival in England. A Rabbi remembers with some sympathy immigrant tailors who came to his Saturday morning service with the shears from their Friday night's work still in their waistcoat pockets.<sup>12</sup>

A similar situation is revealed in the case of shopkeeping and the itinerant trades. For the credit draper – a traveller



A Jewish immigrant to Manchester c 1890.



selling domestic textiles and clothing on the basis of small weekly payments – Saturday was the most important day of the week, an essential collecting day if the week's wages of his customers were not to be drunk away in the pubs. The daughter of an Austrian immigrant described the work of her father, who became a credit draper in 1906 and built up a profitable 'round' in the Stockport area:

*But they (the Jewish credit drapers) used to work on the Saturday?*

Yes, yes. But we didn't do things... We were told what dad had to do for the business. That was our living and our bread and butter, it couldn't be helped. But we weren't allowed to do anything... We had a fire *goy* (gentile) who came in to do the fires and mother didn't do any cooking on the Sabbath and we didn't ride on the Sabbath or do anything like that.<sup>13</sup>

Even the local Rabbi turned a blind eye:

It was Mr Dove who lived next door. Oh, he was a wonderful man. On Saturday, even on a nice day he wouldn't go out in the afternoon after he'd been to *shool* (synagogue) in the morning... He wouldn't go out in case he embarrassed his congregation if they met him and they were on business.<sup>14</sup>

For marketmen, amongst whom were many Jewish immigrants, Saturday was the critical day of the week. An immigrant from Vitebsk who toured the Lancashire textile towns with a drapery stall shortly before the First World War told me:

We explained it to ourselves this way. We thought, 'It's a necessity.' That's how it was. You couldn't make a living if you didn't work on a Saturday in England.'<sup>15</sup>

Shopkeepers too opened for at least part of the Sabbath, even in the solid immigrant districts of North Manchester:

*What about religion in the home, in the shop?*

Very strict. She (his mother) was very strict.

*Kosher?*

Strictly kosher... She was strictly kosher. When Friday night came along, everything was laid out, white tablecloth on the table, brass candlesticks lit, the wine and the *challah* (twisted sweet bread) was put on the table, *kid-dush* (blessing) was made, which is the Friday night prayer and ... we knew it was Shabbos. On the Shabbos morning, naturally she opened the shop. She'd make us go to school... She was that orthodox that she wouldn't even tear paper on Saturday even though she had to serve. Any brown paper that she had to wrap up, she had it cut in squares ready so that she didn't have to cut it or tear it on the Shabbos. Although she had to work, she didn't want to make more sins than she absolutely had to

do. Pieces of string. We had balls of string. Well she cut them in different lengths beforehand so that she could tie the parcels up without making and initial sin as it was considered.<sup>16</sup>

In a photograph taken in 1910 of Farber's travel agency in Bury New Road, the artery of immigrant Jewry, a sign is clearly visible in the window: 'On Saturdays, this shop is open until one o'clock.'<sup>17</sup>

The argument does not depend on no Jewish shops or workshops being closed on the Sabbath. Undoubtedly, many were. The point is that the possibility of observing the Sabbath was *not* the attraction of the workshop trades and travelling commerce, since in making an adjustment to English life, Sabbath work was the one sacrifice which many extremely observant immigrants were prepared to make. And if they were ready to make that sacrifice, then the full range of Manchester trades was theoretically open to them. Another line of argument might equally eliminate Sabbath observance as a factor in occupational choice: the same occupations were chosen by a secularised, even atheistic minority as by the religious observant.<sup>18</sup> The point need not be laboured. I am not trying to close a case, so much as suggest the ways in which personal testimony may cast doubt upon arguments which appear to be both logical and based squarely on central elements in Jewish custom. Documentary sources are not so revealing, since it was part of Anglo-Jewish propaganda that the immigrants kept their Sabbath strictly and did not compete unfairly by opening on Saturday and Sunday.

Similar doubt may be cast on other explanations of occupational choice. An argument based on the 'entrepreneurial tastes' of the immigrants was up against the fatalistic doggedness with which many immigrants retained their attachment to occupations in which they were clearly unsuccessful and often desperately exploited. It may well be that such 'entrepreneurial taste' existed but, if so, it was almost certainly acquired: a result of being in the 'immigrant trades' rather than a motive for entering them, for they were trades in which the minimal capital required for independence suggested the possibility of independence, while the small workforces in the garment trades were so elementally organised that the only way forward for an enterprising worker was into an entrepreneurial role. Many interviewees suggest that independence was their only alternative to exploitation. Nor is there convincing evidence of widespread prejudice in 'English' grades such as engineering. When prejudice of this kind is mentioned, it is invariably at second-hand; in over 300 interviews there is no personal testimony to discrimination against Jewish workers. If anything, the evidence suggests discrimination by Jewish workers against engineering. Again the historian may be up against communal myth, in the form of a collective rationalisation of preference; what the evidence may well suggest is the power of myth in shaping immigrant life. In the oral record the only examples of discrimination against Jewish applicants relate (as might perhaps be more logically expected) to English firms in trades which Jewish immigrants *did* espouse, such as tailoring and bootmaking.<sup>19</sup>

Oral history also has a positive contribution to make to the argument. The *existence* of certain trades in the Jewish area is, of course, a reflection of the economic pattern of Jewish life in Eastern Europe: skilled workers brought their trades with them. The question is why they were followed by the unskilled majority (and often by a second generation), particularly when the trades in question were notoriously unstable and exploitative. The answer may well lie in the narrow concentration of immigrant residence: in Manchester, in two closely-connected slum districts, Strangeways and Red Bank. Once drawn into these districts by ties of kin, country or friendship, the availability of cheap and congenial lodgings or the accessibility of essential communal facilities, immigrants were drawn naturally towards certain trades by the social network in which they lived. The point was put sharply by a Russian immigrant who arrived in Manchester in 18% at the age of 13:

*Why did you choose capmaking?*

Well, I had no other trade. Somebody recommend me ... They took me to the factory and they showed me how to learn to do the capmaking.

*Who took you?*

A friend. No relation at all. No relation.

*How; did you meet this friend?*

I don't know how I met him. In the street, talking. Standing in the corner. He said, 'Sonny boy, what are you looking for?' Zocht, 'I'm looking for work,' 'What sort of work?' Zocht, 'I have no trade at all.' Said, 'Come with me.' He took me to the workshop and showed me how to do it with an iron, with everything.<sup>20</sup>

A machinist, who moved from one ill-paid and physically exhausting job to the next within the garment trade of the early 1920s, answered my suggestion that she might have tried a cotton mill or some other 'English' occupation: 'No, no. I wouldn't go into that... You go into what you are, where the trade is, near you. This is near where you lived.'<sup>21</sup>

One conclusion might be that unskilled Jewish immigrants chose their trades not for any special 'Jewish' reason, but for the same reason as everyone else: because they were the trades of the neighbourhood, the kinship group or the friendship network. In the case of Jewish workers, all these ties were likely to co-exist within the confined residential districts where earlier immigrants had planted trades based on their Eastern European experience. Occupational choice was a function of ghettoised residence, however voluntary the ghetto. It is significant that the son of a Jewish immigrant who found his way into engineering belonged to a family which had settled outside the Jewish district, in Openshaw, an engineering suburb.<sup>22</sup> The son of an exceptional Jewish family which settled in the 1890s in one of the smaller Yorkshire woollen towns actually entered a local mill as a part-timer shortly before the First World War.<sup>23</sup>

Another seminal myth is rooted in the concept of

communal solidarity: a view of the Jewish community as a socially homogeneous, coherent and mutually supportive group, or, at the very least, one in which the ties of Judaism overrode social distinctions and divisions. This was substantially the view of Harry Lewis in his classic response to anti-alienism in the *The Jew in London* (1901). Of the small immigrant workshops of the East End, Lewis wrote, 'there is practically no class distinction between master and men', and elsewhere he argued that the common bond of religion created working conditions marked by 'kindliness and good feeling'.<sup>24</sup> Amongst recent writers, the authors of *Steel City Jews* found the key to the relatively rapid upward social mobility of Sheffield Jewish families in a quality they specifically describe as 'ethnic solidarity'.<sup>25</sup> This view is occasionally echoed in the oral testimony of non-Jews who saw the Jewish community as a kind of ethnic Freemasonry:

Well, they all seemed to get on more, yes. They always got on more, more than what we did. No matter how hard we worked, you know. They got on better. I think it was the case that they all helped one another there, you know.<sup>26</sup>

Similar notions of uniformity and solidarity are implicit in the reductive stereotypes of the anti-alienism, in the more common non-Jewish perception of the immigrant district as an undifferentiated and perhaps frightening alien mass,<sup>27</sup> and in the typically romantic recall of Hightown life in Louis Goldings' *Magnolia Street* (1932).

In a more subtle way, the social solidarity of Jewry is not so much stated as assumed by the historians of Anglo-Jewry. In so far as reasons for change are sought in any kind of division, the divisions are seen as distinctively internal: differences in ritual taste, theological differences, differing interpretations of the Chief Rabbi's powers, differences of nationality, and so on. The tacit assumption is that overriding these 'family' divisions was a wider social coherence. In other words, social differences themselves are rarely put forward as explanations of communal change.

And yet the reality was a community as socially laminated as the neighbouring *Classic Slum* of Robert Roberts: a world in which real distinctions existed not simply between the slum and the suburb, but within the slum itself. A reconstruction of one of the major streets in the immigrant district as it existed in the early 1920s suggests the sharpness of distinctions between the rough and the respectable. The earliest memories of a woman from a socially aspiring family, in which the father owned an attic trouser-making workshop, were of –

the very nice neighbours that we had and, em, the not so nice neighbours, as far as my memory's concerned, because, I don't know, they were... I can't say exactly uncouth... But they were the kind of people who you really had to understand to get on with. They had very large families, and some of them could have lived, even in their large families, in better conditions than they made for themselves ... At five years mother decided that the best thing for me was to have this piano business, and if I went out to play they'd all laugh at me because I wasn't one of them.<sup>28</sup>

And another resident in the street – who later made a career as a bookie's runner – remembers the same family in this way :

They were a bit, er, on the lofty side, you know,... a bit higher up than anyone else, say, put it that way, the snob-bish side. When she talked to yer, oo, she's come on, 'Now please don't play near my door'. The real talk where people didn't use that kind of talk in that class what we were.<sup>29</sup>

Other immigrant streets were characterised by as many as ten synagogues, some rooted in differences of language, nationality or ritual, but many originating in and most sustained by increasing social segmentation and its accompanying struggle for status and power within immigrant society. 'Now all those people that lived in that part', one informant put it, 'were all comfortable Jews, so they didn't mix with the ones that lived in our part of Morlton Street. Never. Never. They had their own little synagogue at the top'.<sup>30</sup> Overlapping and competing immigrant charities served a similar purpose.

The main thrust of the oral evidence is to suggest the degree to which immigrants rapidly assumed the ambitions and gradations of English urban society, although these are often concealed behind more acceptable rationalisations of division. One respondent found great difficulty in defining the difference between her own family and the Levines, who lived next door:

The Levines were ... she was an English woman, born here. He was foreign. But she was more foreigner if you understand what I mean. And they were, I don't know, they were, the family were more foreign, they were different from us, you know what I mean ... a different outlook, they were a religious family, very religious family, but they were brought up more in a foreign way than we were. They have a different outlook on life, you know what I mean. Well, for instance, or, we were never allowed to take food outside. And if we wanted bread and butter, or bread and jam 'inside'. When you've eaten it, then you can go out to play. You don't eat and play. They would sit on the garden wall there eating nuts, it didn't matter if the shells were on the floor, you know, this kind of thing. Rougher, rougher in ... a rougher way, I should say, a more foreign way ... They weren't rough ... I wouldn't say they were rough. They were...can't explain ...they were – ah different – or – the more working class outlook, if you understand what I mean.<sup>31</sup>

The reluctance with which this respondent reached her final verdict is evoked even more strongly by the tone, embarrassed laughter and long pauses of the original recording.

The greatest gulf separated immigrant society as a whole from an older-established Jewish elite in the smarter suburbs of north and south Manchester. One series of perceptions by upper middle-class Jewish interviewees recalls Engels' account of the suburban-dwelling Manchester cotton merchants of the 1840s who chose routes into

the city which spared them the sight of working class slums. Each of the Jewish respondents quoted below lived in Cheetham Hill or Higher Broughton and to reach the city inevitably passed close to the immigrant homes of either Red Bank or Strangeways:

*How did you look upon the immigrants lower down the hill so to speak, in Red Bank and Strangeways?*

They were very remote. Completely remote. We didn't know much about them at all. This was another world as far as we were concerned..

*You didn't walk into Red Bank?*

Oh never, no.<sup>32</sup>

*What about Strangeways – do you remember Strangeways at all?*

All I know there was a gaol there.<sup>33</sup>

*What was Strangeways like?*

Well we were always in the tram or on the tram ... so we didn't notice it very much.<sup>34</sup>

*What about the people who lived in Red Bank?*

Don't know anything about Red Bank.<sup>35</sup>

Before the First World War (and even more in the inter-war years) Manchester Jewry existed as a patchwork of socially differentiated residential districts, within each of which were more refined gradations of status.\*

This hierarchy was reproduced in both the general institutional pattern of communal life and within institutions at the religious heart of Jewish society . The son of a former caretaker of the mikvah the ritual baths used by the women of the community, remembered that

there were three classes of the mikvah, first class, second class and third class. It depended how rich you were, how much you gave my mother. The first class had a tallboy... and chairs and you would get a nice cup of tea and biscuits and things like that ... I can remember the third class was just like our wash-house, just a plain common-or-garden bathroom. Mother never asked for any money, that was a sort of gratuity, you understand.

*If she didn't ask for money, how did she know which mikvah to put them in?*

If you were well-dressed, you know, she went into number one, do you follow what I mean?<sup>36</sup>

If anything, social distinction was more powerful in the minority than in the majority community, since within the minority it was more territorially and institutionally confined, more inescapable, and therefore more abrasive.

Nor is the existence of powerful communal charities to be taken as contrary evidence. Charity was controlled almost exclusively by the Anglo-Jewish elite and served the secondary objective of acculturation. It reached across as wide a social gulf as English philanthropy of the same period:

*Did it make any impact on you, Red Bank?*

It smelt ... We once ran a bazaar for charity – I did for charity work you see. And we ran a bazaar in Cheetham. And we delivered the stuff and the stench of Red Bank was terrible. Our people had cars and we went round with them. But to go to Red Bank! Does it still smell?<sup>37</sup>

The challenging of the communal myth, hostile stereotypes and explanations of change based essentially on communal factors is not to deny the existence of the unique historical experience of Anglo-Jewry (and Jewry in general) and the cultural inheritance which is based upon it. It is simply to suggest a note of caution in the use of ethnicity as an exclusive (and relatively easy) explanatory device. Most often explanations require both communal and non-communal elements. In 1872 a synagogue was founded in south Manchester to meet the needs of a group of Jewish families who had settled on that side of the city. Their need for a new synagogue rested on the orthodox prohibition of Sabbath travel, since they had moved out of walking distance of the nearest places of worship. But their reason for being *in* south Manchester was social: as a self-consciously anglicised and more sophisticated group, they had chosen to distance themselves from an immigrant *nouveaux riches* of shop-keepers and workshop entrepreneurs who were beginning to settle in suburban Cheetham. The distortion caused by considering only the communal factor is emphasised by the fact that several families who joined the south Manchester synagogue continued to live in the north, contemptuously walking past their old place of worship on their way to the 'more convenient' synagogue in the south.<sup>38</sup> This mixture of origins may also be detected in the many communal institutions, such as the Jews School, the Jewish Board of Guardians and the Jewish Working Men's Club, which adapted non-Jewish models to solve communal problems.<sup>39</sup> Again, a questioning of the myth of 'solidarity' is not to suggest that the immigrant community possessed no coherence, either organisational or informal. On the contrary, the coherence of the community helps to explain, for example, the internal transmission and retention of commercial and craft skills derived from the special historical experience of European Jewry.

This was true, for example, of various forms of itinerant commerce. Interviews with former travellers suggest a range of quite specific commercial skills, rooted in the forced Jewish involvement in commerce and finance in medieval Europe, and transmitted along lines of kin, friendship and inter-marriage. There was, so to say, a circuit of commercial expertise accessible to anyone with the right contact, usually a relative or a friend. So one immigrant was set up in credit drapery by a relative of his wife, Bernard Brown, who taught him the elementary skills of travelling commerce:

*What trade was Bernard Brown in?*

He was in the credit (drapery) business and that's how he set dad up in the credit business too ... I remember dad saying once that the first time he went out with a pack in the country districts, you know, and sell it on weekly payments ... He came back pleased because one customer had bought nearly everything he'd got. And Mr Brown said that was very, very foolish.. He said, 'You could have got 6d a week from every article instead of 6d a week for the lot.' He said, 'You could have made a dozen customers, gone back and had six shillings instead of just six pence.'<sup>40</sup>

Many other interviews define the points of personal contact with commercial 'circuits' and the informal apprenticeships of pedlars, market stall-holders, picture-fakers, klappers,<sup>41</sup> mock-auctioneers and so on. The advantage of such detailed reconstructions is that they provide an answer to stereotypical explanations of Jewish commercial skill which rest (depending on the standpoint of the observer) on the acquisitiveness or the special inventiveness of 'the Jewish temperament' (what Gartner calls 'Intensity in seeking out sources of livelihood').

A balancing of ethnic and non-ethnic elements is also required in explaining anti-Jewish feeling, not all of which was antisemitic in the sense of deriving all its force from the 'Jewishness' of its targets. There is clear evidence, both written<sup>42</sup> and oral, of anti-Jewish activity which centred on the immigrants' role as foreigners rather than as Jews: in the case of the 1915 Lusitania Riots, for example, when the shops of German pork-butchers and Jewish clothes dealers and drapers were indiscriminately attacked.<sup>43</sup> In the well-remembered clashes between Jewish and non-Jewish children on 'the hills', an open area of Strangeways, before the First World War there is evidence that the fights were as much about territory as race and in fact closely resembled the inter-street warfare of such English working-class districts as Ancoats and Gorton.<sup>44</sup> In the 1920s, when Jewish families had penetrated some of the former 'English' streets, the battles continued, with Jews and non-Jews on both sides, as two non-Jewish accounts confirm:

The gang was in Hightown. There was this Hightown gang and us ... And they used to fight on the hills with stones. The Hightowners. They used to chase us down into Bury New Road. They'd start fighting at the top, or half-way, and more often than not we was outnumbered and they used to run us down into Bury New Road. The Hightown Jewish, yes.

*And what about your group?*

Our group, well ...

*Was it Jewish?*

No... Well, there was one or two Jewish. Yes there was one or two Jews with us. Yes. See, the Jewish lads in our street and round about. Like I was with them. They were born...

We was all brought up together. So they didn't know any different. They just fought the Hightown lot.<sup>45</sup>

That was when word used to go round Hightown we are fighting the Jews from Strangeways you see. All that Strangeways area and part of Waterloo Road, Pimblett Street, and streets like that on the other side of the Jewish Hospital. As a matter of fact the Jewish hospital was a dividing line. The Jewish Hospital is parallel with Marlborough Road, you see, and St Albans and all the Jews from that side used to fight all the Christians from this side, but the Jews on this side would fight with us against the Jews down there. Oo, there'd be hundreds there. I don't know where they got all the missiles from, but they found all those stones, of course as they throw them over, you see, we picked them up and throw them back. There would be quite a few cut heads and what not.

*You say the Jews from Hightown would join in with you? Join in.*

Oh yes, yes they were us you see, they were actually us; they never thought anything.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, when specifically Jewish gangs and corner-groups arose in Strangeways in the early 1920s, these combined a sense of territoriality and feelings of economic frustration in streets which had become totally Judaised. Although they sometimes clashed with 'English' gangs from further north, they also shared some obvious targets, including the local police.<sup>47</sup> All this is again not to suggest that ethnicity played no part in holding Jewish groups together or in attracting hostility towards them; it emphasises only the danger of taking 'Jewishness' to be the only, or necessarily the overriding factor.

Here, as in other instances, oral evidence restores the full context of Jewish life as it was reflected in individual experience. And while exploding many inherited collective

explanations of communal evolution, it also reveals the role and power of such generalisations as mechanisms of solidarity and defence. It is for this reason that communal myth may co-exist in oral testimony with contradictory personal experience. An immigrant Jewish worker angry at the ill-paid, seasonal, unskilled and physically debilitating work he was forced to accept in the waterproof industry, was able in the same interview to project an image of the Jewish immigrant worker as typically the importer of new craft skills such as waterproofing.<sup>48</sup> The earlier part of his evidence was an accurate account of the low status and privations of the Jewish *schmearer* (naphaline-spreader on cloth for waterproofing). The latter was a personalised variant of the collective communal defence against anti-alien accusations of undercutting:

But I tell you something else. In them days when the Jewish people came to this country, they find most of the English people backward. You'll ask me in what way. As I told you before, the girls who left school went to work in the spinning, wearing clogs and shawl. The men used to work repairing the roads used to wear corduroy trousers tied up round the bottom. Do you understand? Jewish people didn't. You know why? They came straight away with a trade and they brought a trade into the country – raincoats, waterproof, mantles in costumes – which this country had very little in it.

Another interview revealed a poignant contrast between an asserted Jewish 'love of learning' and the reality of an early withdrawal from school for life-long, low-paid, repetitive work in a tailoring sweat-shop.<sup>49</sup> A communal history drawn from documentary sources tends to be a re-enactment of communal myth, since most surviving documents were formulated by those most concerned to keep the myths alive. These myths may reappear in oral evidence, but beside them will be found the details of individual lives. It is these details which make oral evidence so powerful a method of exploring minority experience.

## NOTES

1. The Manchester Jewish community was founded in the late eighteenth century by pedlars from London and Liverpool. As a result of subsequent migration from Germany, Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean lands, the Jewish population had probably reached 10,000 by 1880. This article is chiefly concerned with the 'mass immigration' of the period 1881-1914, when the community probably trebled in size. Behind it, however, was a longer-established, anglicised elite, which had already set up an efficient network of welfare, social, religious and educational agencies. The oral evidence used is selected from recordings of over 350 interviews.

2. For example by Bill Fishman, whose evidence for *East End Jewish Radicals 1875-1914*, London, 1975, included

interviews with surviving anarchists, and Joe Buckman, who cites conversations with former slipper makers and other sweated workers in *The Economic and Social History of Alien Immigrants to Leeds, 1880-1914*, unpublished PhD thesis, Strathclyde University, 1968.

3. The word is now often used to describe the culture of the more orthodox sections of the Jewish community. Here it is used in the older and more general sense of the imported culture of the immigrant masses.

4. *Jewish Chronicle*, 16 February 1883.

5. For example by Lloyd Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant in England, 1870-1914*, London, 2nd edition, 1973, Foreword np.

6. Gartner, p 63.

7. Gartner, p 64, 66, 68..

8. John Garrard, *The English and Immigration*, Oxford, 1971, p 96.

9. Gartner, p 63.

10. Interview B15.

11. Interview A4.

12. Interview A8.

13. Interview B17.

14. Interview B17.

15. Interview A6.

16. Interview C1.

17. In Manchester Studies collection of over 3,000 photographs of Jewish life

18. For example interviews B5 and B7.

19. Interview A9. An immigrant bootmaker from Riga was unable to find work in English bootmaking firms; he turned to an alternative.

20. Interview A2.

21. Interview B22.

22. Interview B18.

23. Interview B25. He worked subsequently as an engineer and as a labourer in a Halifax biscuit factory.

24. C Russell and HS Lewis, *The Jew in*



London: A Study of Racial Character and Present-Day Conditions, London, 1901).

**25.** BA Kosmin, M Bauer and Nigel Grizzard, *Steel City Jews* (Research Unit, Board of Deputies of British Jews 1976), p 25: 'Obviously ethnicity is an important and persuasive element in Jewish social mobility'.

**26.** Interview D5.

**27.** Interviews D4 and D6.

**28.** Interview B11.

**29.** Interview B14.

**30.** Interview B3.

**31.** Interview B13.

**32.** Interview B26.

**33.** Interview B10.

**34.** Interview A1.

**35.** Interview A1.

**36.** Interview B1

**37.** Interview B10.

**38.** Bill Williams, *The Making of Manchester Jewry 1740-1875* (Manchester University Press, 1975), chapter 12.

**39.** Williams, chapters 7 and 11.

**40.** Interview B17.

**41.** Interviews A6, A7, B19, B20, B21. 'Picture-fakers' sold picture frames and tinted photographs on a door-to-door basis, teams from Manchester travelling as far as Scotland and South Wales. 'Klappers' (from the Yiddish, 'klap', to knock) travelled from house to house buying gold jewellery and ornaments for resale at a profit to city bullion dealers.

**42.** For example in the virulent anti-Jewish articles in the Manchester satirical journal, *Spy* (1891-98).

**43.** Interview B15.

**44.** Interviews B5, B14.

**45.** Interview D3.

**46.** Interview D6.

**47.** Interview B6, B16.

**48.** Interview A3.

**49.** Interview B24; another striking example is B12.

## INTERVIEWS CITED

**A** – Immigrant

**B** – Child of Immigrant parents

**C** – Grandchild of Immigrant parents

**D** – Non-Jewish Informant

**A1** Born 1885, Romania. Father a cotton merchant. Doctor.

**A2** Born 1878, Vilna, Lithuania. Father a

synagogue official. Arrived in Manchester alone in 1891 and took lodgings in Fernie Street, Red Bank. Capmaker.

**A3** Born 1895, Kaminetz, White Russia.

Arrived in Manchester, 1913. Family rented a house in Julia Street, Strangeways. Tailor.

**A4** Born 1883, Kalvariya, Russian Poland. Father an innkeeper. Arrived in 1898 to join his brother. Tailor.

**A5** Born 1882 in Austria. Arrived in Manchester with her father in 1892. Tailoress.

**A6** Born 1895, Vitebsk, White Russia. Father a tea-traveller. Arrived in Manchester, 1910. Wholesale draper.

**A7** Born 1896, Russia. Father a tailor. Arrived in Manchester 1906. Picture faker.

**A8** Born 1907, Austria. Father a Hebrew scholar. Arrived in 1914. Rabbi.

**A9** Born 1891, Riga. Father was a tailor. Arrived in Manchester alone in 1908. Boot maker and capmaker.

**B1** Born 1894, Cheetham. Father the caretaker of the Great Synagogue. Watchmaker.

**B2** Born 1917. Father a tailor, arrived in Manchester from Russia about 1890. Machinist.

**B3** Born 1918. Father a cap presser, arrived in Manchester from Austria about 1887. Raincoat Machinist.

**B4** Born 1913, Hightown. Father a greengrocer, arrived in Manchester from Russia about 1904. Machinist.

**B5** Born 1905, Cheetham. Father an immigrant cabinet-maker, mother a corner shop keeper. Cabinet maker and party official.

**B6** Born 1907, Strangeways, Father an immigrant bespoke tailor. Waterproof.

**B7** Born 1901, Ancoats. Father an immigrant walking-stick polisher. School teacher.

**B8** Born 1899, Cheetham. Father a Russian immigrant of the 1870s. Waterproof.

**B9** Born 1902, Strangeways. Father a Galican immigrant, tailor's presser. Raincoat machiner.

**B10** Born in London, daughter of a Romanian immigrant. Come to Manchester to join her husband in 1918.

**B11** Born 1920, Hightown. Father a trouser-maker, born in Manchester: mother a Russian immigrant of 1913. Secretary.

**B12** Born circa 1910 in London. Parents came to Manchester in 1917, to escape Zeppelin raids. Machinist.

**B13** Born in 1916, Hightown. Father came to Manchester from Russia with his parents in the 1870s. Clerical worker.

**B14** Born 1905, Hightown. Father an immigrant picture faker. Bookie's runner.

**B15** Born 1900, Lower Broughton. Father a Russian immigrant tailor. Market-stall holder.

**B16** Born 1902, Strangeways, Father an Austrian immigrant, general dealer and Synagogue shamash. Waterproof.

**B17** Born 1908, Stockport. Father an immigrant of 1906. Credit draper.

**B18** Born 1901, Openshaw. Father a tailor from Warsaw. Engineer.

**B19** Born 1896, Strangeways. Father a Russian immigrant tailor. Tailor and later klapper.

**B20** Born 1904, Higher Broughton. Father a Romanian immigrant of 1899. Picture faker and klapper.

**B21** Born 1897, Glasgow. Father a Russian immigrant of 1877. Waterproof garment maker.

**B22** Born 1900, Gravel Lane, Salford. Daughter of a Russian immigrant to Leeds. Tailoress.

**B23** Born 1902, Strangeways. Father an Austrian immigrant. Waterproof.

**B24** Born 1901, Cheetham. Father a Russian immigrant. Tailoress.

**B25** Born 1897, Cheetham. Father a presser. Various occupations.

**B26** Born 1900, Higher Broughton. Father a waterproofer. Waterproof factory owner.

**C1** Born 1917, Cheetham. Grandfather a Romanian immigrant. Clothes dealer and market-stall holder.

**C2** Born 1903, Cheetham. Father a money-lender. Waterproof garment manufacturer.

**D1** Born 1909, Chadderton. Father a building labourer. Artisan in rubber works and iron foundry.

**D2** Born 1914, Broughton. Baker and later engineering worker.

**D3** Born 1914, Cheetham. Father a foreman calico-printer. School teacher.

**D4** Born 1909, Lower Broughton. Father a cart driver for a textile warehouse. Machinist.

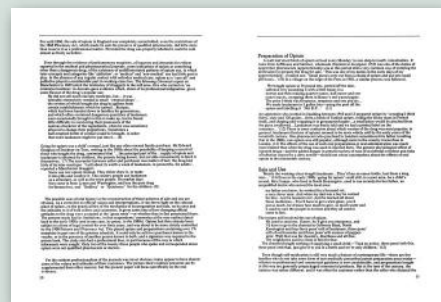
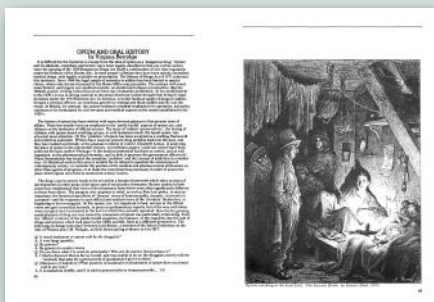
**D5** Born 1911, Strangeways. Father a master-baker. Insurance agent.



## Opium and oral history

by Virginia Berridge

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This article was part of a bigger project which looked at the role of opium and other drugs in British society and the development of drug control policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>12</sup> It was informed by the 'history from below' tendency in historical work.

I remember my visits to

an elderly pharmacist in St Johns Wood in London who told me she would have offered me a sherry but assumed I would be temperance. Or my foray to a council block in run-down Limehouse to visit the old man whose family went hop picking and who had run errands for Chinese sailors and opium smokers. Walking

through Limehouse – now so smart – I remember the area as it was then.

My own research still uses oral history. But my work is different and so are the surrounding structures. I have focussed on elites in health and their role in policy – for HIV/AIDS; drugs, alcohol and

smoking; and swine flu.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>56</sup> I did dabble in temperance but for work which sought the views of present day policy makers about the role of temperance and its relevance to the present.<sup>7</sup>

With 'Opium and oral history' there was a closeness to interviewees and a

complete absence of either ethical procedures or technical analysis. Those have developed over my career. My interviews on HIV/AIDS were done in an interim

phase of anonymity for the interviewees and we are still discussing how the deposited transcripts can be made available to other researchers.\* Oral

history is very much part of my ongoing historical practice. My current work on e-cigarettes; history, evidence and policy would be the poorer without it.

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1. V Berridge and G Edwards, *Opium and the People. Opiate Use in Nineteenth Century England*, Allen Lane: St Martin's Press, 1981. Subsequent paperback edition Yale University Press, 1987. 2. V Berridge, *Opium and the People. Opiate Use and Drug Control Policy in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century England*, London: Free Association Books, 1999. 3. V Berridge, 'Hidden from history? Oral history and the history of health policy', *Oral History*, vol 38, no 1, 2010, pp 91-100. 4. V Berridge, *AIDS in the UK. The Making of Policy, 1981-1994*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 5. V Berridge, *Marketing Health. Smoking and the discourse of public health in Britain, 1945-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 6. V Berridge and S Taylor, 'The problems of commissioned oral history: the swine flu 'crisis' of 2009', *Oral History*, forthcoming. 7. V Berridge, *Temperance: Its History and Impact on Current and Future Alcohol Policy*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005. 8. Discussions are currently ongoing with the LSHTM archive staff.

It is difficult for the historian to escape from the idea of opium as a 'dangerous drug'. Opium and its alkaloids, morphine and heroin, have been legally classified in this way in this country since the passing of the 1920 Dangerous Drugs Act (itself a continuation of war-time regulation under the Defence of the Realm Act). In most people's lifetime they have been strictly controlled, medical drugs, only legally available on prescription. The Misuse of Drugs Act of 1971 continues this tendency. Since 1968 the legal supply of narcotics to addicts has been limited to special clinics, where only doctors licensed by the Home Office may prescribe. The contrast with much more limited, and largely non-medical controls, on alcohol and tobacco is instructive. But the 'British system' of drug control has never been one of absolute prohibition. At its establishment in the 1920's it was in strong contrast to the penal American system brought into being by legal decisions under the 1914 Harrison Act. In America, even the medical supply of drugs to addicts became a criminal offence; an enormous growth in criminal and black market activity was the result. In Britain, by contrast, the system retained a medical emphasis in its operation; and policy continues to be formulated by civil servants and medical experts on the model established in the 1920s.

The history of opium has been written with many forward glances to this present state of affairs. There has usually been an emphasis on the 'public health' aspects of opium use; and reliance on the testimony of official sources. The issue of 'infants' preservatives', the dosing of children with opium-based soothing syrups, or with laudanum itself, the liquid opiate, has attracted most attention.<sup>2</sup> The 'problem' of opium has been accepted as a working framework and control as axiomatic. Writers have read our present drug problem back into the past, and they have looked uncritically at the gradual evolution of control. Elizabeth Lomax, in analysing the place of opium in the nineteenth century, nevertheless argues 'could not control have been achieved 40 years earlier? Perhaps – if the medical profession had been as united, and as well organised, as the pharmaceutical chemists, and so able to pressure the government effectively'. Glenn Sonnedecker has treated the morphine 'problem' and the concept of addiction in a similar way.<sup>3</sup> Historical work in this area is notable

for its refusal to question the stereotypes of contemporary society, to consider the position of the medical and pharmaceutical professions as other than agents of progress, or to make the conceptual leap necessary in order to assess the place which opium once held in nineteenth century society. The drug's use in society needs to be set within a broader framework which takes account of developments in other areas of deviance and of social policy formation. Recent studies in both areas have emphasised that views of developments from below were often significantly different to those from above. The paupers own response to relief, as well as Poor Law policy, is seen as important; the historical specificity of 'disease' views of homosexuality, insanity, or poverty is accepted – and the response to such official and medical views of the 'deviants' themselves, is beginning to be investigated.<sup>4</sup> For opium, too, it is important to look, not just at the official views one gets in medical journals, in press or parliamentary reports, but at the way such ideas were accepted and transmuted at the level at which they actually operated. How far the growing medicalisation of drug use was viewed by consumers of opium was particularly interesting. Even the 'official' evidence of the public health enquiries, for instance, or the enquiries into the sale of drugs and poisons which took place in the 1850s and 60s, hints at a different perspective. The following exchange took place between Lord Rossie, a member of the Select Committee on the Sale of Poisons and JM Neligan, an Irish doctor giving evidence to it in 1857:

*Is much laudanum or opium sold by the druggists?*

A very large quantity.

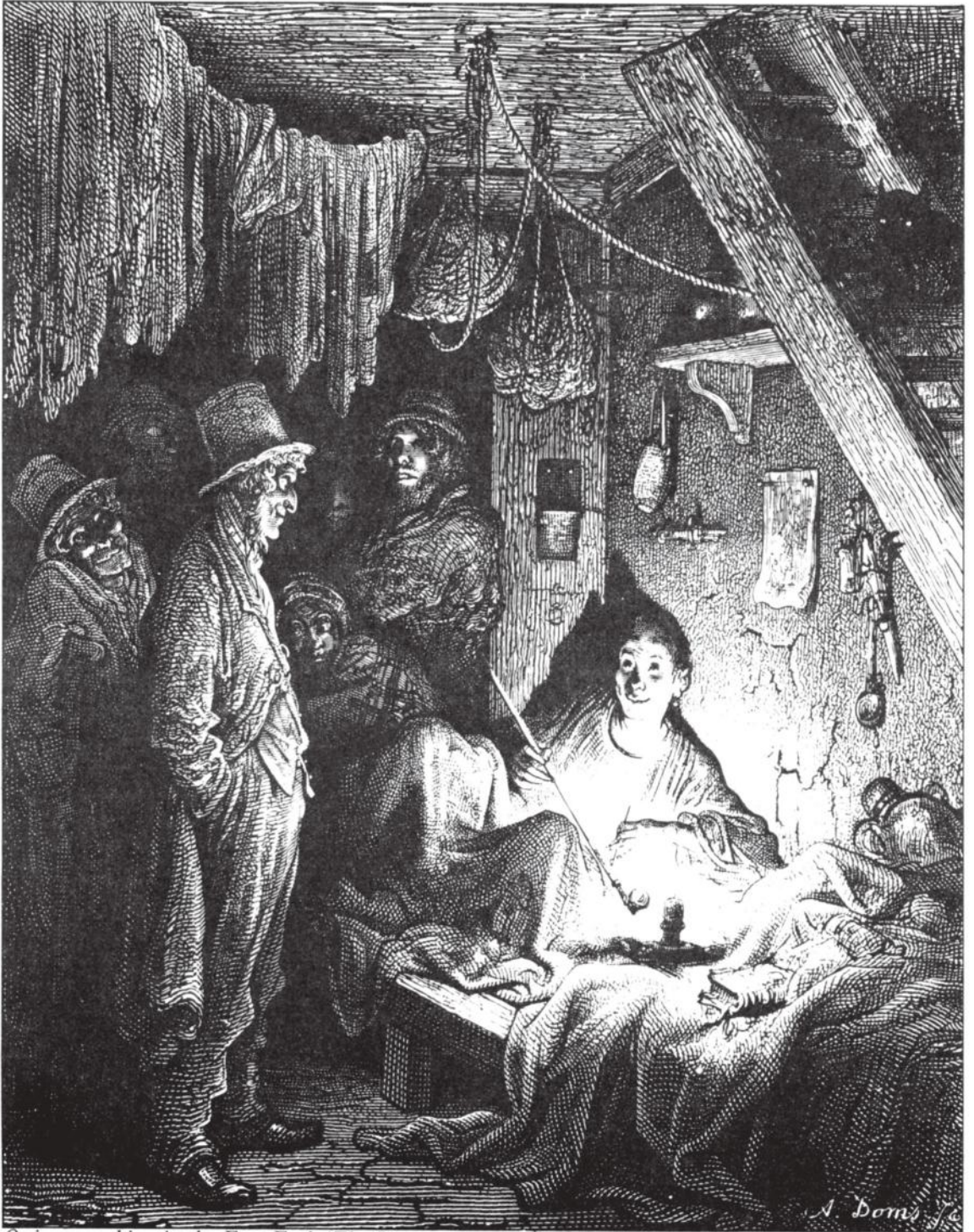
*By grocers?*

By grocers in country towns.

*Do you know what it is used for principally? Who are the parties that purchase it?*

I tried to discover that as far as I could, and was unable to do so; the druggists merely told me 'Anybody that asks for a pennyworth of laudanum I give it to them'.





Opium smoking in the East End. 'The Lascars Room' by Gustav Doré, 1873.

[Marquess of Salisbury] *What quantity of laudanum or preparation of opium have you found sold in any case?*

It is laudanum chiefly; and it is sold in pennyworths or twopenny worths...<sup>5</sup>

For until 1868, the sale of opium in England was completely uncontrolled; even the restrictions of the 1868 Pharmacy Act, which made its sale the preserve of qualified pharmacists, did little more than reserve it as a professional matter. Provided the drug was properly labelled it could be sold almost as freely as before.

Even through the evidence of parliamentary enquiries, of inquests and demands for reform reported in the medical and pharmaceutical journals, come indications of opium as something other than a dangerous drug, of the existence of undifferentiated patterns of opium use, in which other than a dangerous drug, of the existence of undifferentiated patterns of opium use, in which later concepts and categories like 'addiction', or 'medical' and 'non-medical' use had little part to play. In the absence of any regular contact with orthodox medical care, opium as a 'cure-all' and palliative played a considerable part in working-class life. The *Morning Chronicle* report on Manchester in 1849 noted the testimony of druggists in the mill area. One who carried on 'an extensive business' in Ancoats gave evidence which, shorn of its professional indignation, gives some flavour of the drug's popular use:

He did not sell much narcotic medicine, but... it was tolerably extensively vended in small 'general shops', the owners of which bought the drug by gallons from certain establishments which he named... Recipes, which had been handed down in families for generations, and which often contained dangerous quantities of laudanum were occasionally brought to him to make up, but he found little difficulty in convincing their possessors of the noxious character of the ingredients, when he was sometimes allowed to change their proportions. Sometimes a half -emptied bottle of cordial would be brought, in order that more laudanum might be put into it...<sup>6</sup>

Going for opium was a child's errand, just like any other normal family purchase. Mr Edward Hodgson of Stockton-on-Tees, writing in the 1850s about the possibility of keeping a record of those who bought the drug, commented that '...the principal part of the... supply of opium and laudanum is obtained by children, the parents being known, but not able conveniently to fetch it themselves.'<sup>7</sup> The encounter between seller and purchaser was matter of fact; the drug had little of its later mystique. 'I sell about 2s worth a week of laudanum, in pennorths, for adults', reported a Manchester druggist:

Some use raw opium instead. They either chew it, or make it into pills and swallow it. The country people use laudanum as a stimulant, as well as the town people. On market days they come in from Lymm and Warrington, and buy the pure drug for themselves, and 'Godfrey' or 'Quietness' for the children.<sup>8</sup>

The possible uses of oral history in the reconstruction of these patterns of sale and use are obvious. As a corrective to official values and interpretations, it can throw light on the cultural place of opium, on the practicalities of the mechanics of its preparation and sale, on its uses and the attitudes to it of both sellers and customers. It gives some idea of how changing official attitudes to the drug were accepted at the 'grass roots' – or whether they in fact penetrated there. The present study had its limitations, in that respondents' memories at the very earliest dated back to the early 1900s (and in one case, by proxy, to the 1880s). Opium had then already been subject to a form of legal control for over forty years, and was about to be more strictly controlled by the 1908 Poisons and Pharmacy Act. This placed opium and preparations containing over 1% morphine in part one of the poisons schedule. It could only be sold to a purchaser known to the vendor, or in the presence of another person known to both, and a signature was required in the poison book. The study also had a professional bias, in part because of the way in which informants were sought. Only two of the twenty-three people who spoke and corresponded about opium were not qualified pharmacists or doctors.

Yet the strident professionalism of the journals was never obvious; many appear to have shared some of the values and attitudes of their customers. The picture their evidence presents can be supplemented from other sources; but the present paper will focus specifically on the oral evidence.

### Preparation of opium

A malt loaf sized block of opium arrived every Monday in one shop in Louth, Lincolnshire. It came from Lofthouse and Saltmer, wholesale chemists in Liverpool.<sup>9</sup> It was one of the duties of apprentice pharmacists (apprenticeship was at this period still a very common way of entering the profession) to prepare the drug for sale. This was one of my duties in the early days of my apprenticeship', recalled one. 'Small pieces were cut from a chunk of opium and put into small pill boxes...'<sup>10</sup> In a village on the edge of the Fens in 1903, a similar process was followed.

We bought opium in 56 pound lots, peeled off the skin, softened it by pounding it with a little honey in a mortar and then making quarter ounce, half ounce and one ounce loaves, wrapping them in Rouse's red waxed paper. The price I think was fivepence, tenpence and one and six... We made laudanum in 5 gallon lots – using the peel off the opium and labelling it 'Not B.P...'<sup>11</sup>

An apprentice who worked in Spalding between 1910 and 1913 prepared opium by 'scooping I think thirty, sixty and 120 grains... from a block of Turkish opium, rolling the sticky mass in French chalk, and shaping and wrapping it in greaseproof paper... a small piece would be pinched from the piece swallowed... Laudanum was freely sold and we had a printed label on the container...'<sup>12</sup> There is some confusion about which version of the drug was most popular; in general, laudanum (tincture of opium) seemed to be more widely sold by the early years of the twentieth



century. One pharmacist (who practised in London) remembered his father recalling that in the 1880s, raw opium was still popular, although more in the country towns than in London.<sup>13</sup> The effects of the use of such oral preparations or oral administration was much more limited than when the drug was used in injected form. The greater physiological effect of injected drugs – and the added danger in present society of ease of accidental overdose and risks of infection caused by a dirty needle – should not colour assumptions about the effects of oral opium in the nineteenth century.

### Sale and use

'Mostly the working-class bought laudanum... They'd buy an ounce bottle, last them a long time...' <sup>14</sup> Even in the early 1900s 'going for opium' could still, in a poor area, be a child's errand. Mrs Cooper, who lived in North Kensington, used to run errands for her father, an unqualified doctor who served the local area:

my father you know, he worked for a licensed vet, a very clever man. And when my dad was a boy he worked for him... but he learned a lot. And he learned all about these medicines... You'd have to get a wine glass, you'd put so much, he'd know how much to give, so much water and it used to cure the people in no time and they all used to come to him.

The recipes still involved the use of opium.

He used to send me, I know, he'd give you ninepence, and I'd have to go to the chemist in Golborne Road, North Kensington and buy three penn'orth of laudanum, three penn'orth of red lavender and three penn'orth essence of pepper- mint. Well that was for dysentery, diarrhoea and all that. The neighbours used to come to him for that.

The chemist thought nothing of supplying a small child – 'Took no notice, three penn'orth this, three penn'orth that, just give it to you in a bottle and we're only children.'<sup>15</sup>

Even though self-medication is still very much a feature of contemporary life – there are few families who do not take some form of non-medically prescribed patent preparation most weeks – reliance on professional and commercial guidance is now considerable, and preparations bought in this way are generally prepackaged commercial products. But at the turn of the century, the balance was rather different, and it was often the customer rather than the seller who dictated the terms of the transaction. Families, like the North Kensington one, had their own opium recipes; a Hoxton woman recalled a family cough mixture based on laudanum and ipecacuanha.<sup>16</sup> Although chemists did have their own bottles, it was quite normal for customers to bring their own containers to the shop and have them filled up. Canal boat women told an apprentice pharmacist, 'Fill it up, Master.' The bottle of laudanum would last them till the end of their journey, where they were refilled'.<sup>17</sup> Opium was used by these women to alleviate the pains of gout and rheumatism. In poor families

generally the drug was a 'cure-all' relied on for diarrhoea, coughs, the pain of toothache. Laudanum was used both internally and externally – 'People with toothache would use it... they'd rub a little on their gums, you see – it works like a charm'<sup>18</sup> – and this was done for cuts, gumboils and bruises as well. Even in the 1920s, when the 1920 Dangerous Drug Act had made opium in any form much more difficult to obtain, a London Dangerous Drug Act had made opium in any form much more difficult to obtain, a London chemist kept a large jar of poppy capsules in his shop which were boiled up into a fomentation. A rag dipped in this liquid helped soothe the pain of toothache.<sup>19</sup>

Poppy fomentations were made by breaking up poppy heads and adding camomile flowers. This was gently simmered; 'the liquid was used as a warm compress to bathe inflamed breasts and also I think for gout.'<sup>20</sup> Laudanum was taken in water for stomach upsets. In orthodox medical practice its use as a sleeping draught was being replaced by chloral, an hypnotic which was thought at the time to be safer and surer in its action although, it took, gave rise to problems both of misuse and of addiction. Dante Gabriel Rossetti was among the most prominent of the early chloral addicts. But in self-medication opium was still used for this purpose. An apprentice whose working experience began in 1908 'sold laudanum, and before we closed on Saturday, we had a few old ladies wrapped in shawls, bringing their old bottles for three-pence or fourpence of 'Lodlum' which helped them with their coughs and sleeping.'<sup>21</sup> A pharmacist practising in the 1880s made up special cheap 'pauverine' cough mixtures to appeal to poor customers.<sup>22</sup> There was a popular belief that laudanum was somehow strengthening, reflected in the previous century in the names applied to infants soothing syrups – 'cordials' and 'preservatives'. A pharmacist who was apprenticed in Holbeach, Lincolnshire in 1909 remembers cycling to work one morning and being stopped by a customer who asked him to bring some laudanum. 'She gave a few drops to her Robbie on a lump of sugar these cold and foggy mornings'. Robbie was not a child, but a youth of seventeen.<sup>23</sup>

### Children, animals and opium

The practice of giving young babies opiates – in particular the famous Godfrey's Cordial – seems to have been in decline by the turn of the century. Most pharmacy practices still made their own versions of the preparation, but sales were limited compared to their previous level. The Holbeach pharmacy made up a mixture of gum opium, liquorice and oil of aniseed which was their version of Godfrey's – 'a dark brown horrible mess.'<sup>24</sup> Other practices had different recipes. One made it 'by darkening golden syrup by treating with sodium bicarbonate and adding aniseed oil and lacing with laudanum.'<sup>25</sup> Sometimes laudanum and not Godfrey's was used to quieten a baby. A few drops in a baby's milk had a similar effect for a harassed mother.<sup>26</sup> But the practice of dosing children with opium was in decline. The official child (under 5) mortality rate from opium poisoning had dropped from 19.3 per million population in 1868 to around four or five per million in the 1890s. The influence of the restrictions on

opium in the 1868 Pharmacy Act appear to have a significant effect in this respect, if not on the overall opium mortality rate, which remained around the level of five or six per million until the end of the century.<sup>27</sup> Later, in the 1890s, many patent soothing medicines, excluded from control in the 1868 Act, became restricted to professional vendors. Opium was dropped in favour of other ingredients such as alcohol and bromide of potassium which were, as the British Medical Association's own enquiry into patent medicines itself noted, often hardly an improvement.<sup>28</sup> These developments had their effect on chemists' own preparations too. In Holbeach, not a great deal of the home-made Godfrey's was sold. Two pints went in a year, sold half an ounce at a time.<sup>29</sup> Another chemist was busy crossing out the opium from recipes for 'Mothers Friend' and 'Childrens' Cough Mixture' in his recipe book.<sup>30</sup> This was in line with official enquiries into infant mortality in the 1900s, which found infants 'soothing syrups' to be no longer widely used. But a chemist who was apprenticed in Hull in the 1920s remembers that requests for "six pennuth a laudanum "...one ounce of tincture of opium made up to six ounces with chloroform water' were still usual on a Saturday evening at least.<sup>31</sup>

Child use was declining, but the use of opium in cattle medicines in some areas still continued. Opium was well known to horsemen in East Anglia as a means of quietening vicious and unmanageable horses before they went for sale, and the drug had a wider use as an animal medicine.<sup>32</sup> Mrs Cooper's father gained his knowledge of medicines, and of opium in particular, through working with horses. The quantities of laudanum sold varied, according to a pharmacist who worked in the Midlands 'depending upon which – human or horse'.<sup>33</sup> In Holbeach, farmers bought laudanum for their cattle; it was used in cattle drenches for colic and scour. There was much consternation in 1920 when it became impossible to buy laudanum over the counter for this purpose; the practice then adopted was to dilute the preparation below the legal limit. Many of the old farmers had jealously guarded cattle recipes based on laudanum which they continued to use.<sup>34</sup>

### The Fens

The tradition of animal use was particularly marked in the marshy Fenland area. In 1924, the Home Office made a particular investigation into laudanum sales there, and found that their notable quantity arose from the continuing practice of animal medication.<sup>35</sup> The Fens itself had been well-known, in the nineteenth century, for a generally high level of opium consumption by been well-known, in the nineteenth century, for a generally high level of opium consumption by its population. This low-lying, marshy and undrained land and the poverty of its inhabitants together brought what appears to have been an unusual reliance on the drug.<sup>36</sup> Even in the present century, this was still a marked characteristic of the area. Five out of twenty-one pharmacists who remembered the dispensing of the drug had practised there. Miss Robertson, who went to Louth in 1913, still recalls her surprise at the much larger quantities of opium sold there than in Edinburgh, where she

had served her apprenticeship. Every Monday morning she made two half gallon bottles, and sometimes more, into laudanum, 'to keep up with the week's demand. Every market day carriers brought orders from country folk for four ounces, eight ounces or one pint of laudanum'.<sup>37</sup> These orders were delivered by a twelve year old boy to various pubs in the town where the carriers were lodging, ready for carriage back to the village. In Holbeach too, it was 'labourers and smallholders' who bought the most opium, in particular the 'Fen tigers' from the outlying villages and marshier areas. The practice was no longer, by the early 1900s, as widespread in the towns as it had once been; and the pattern of use was also changing in line with other altered circumstances. 'Old boys' who, in Holbeach, had come in regularly for opium every Thursday, which was market day, changed to Friday after the introduction of old age pensions. 'They would go to the post office for their pension on Friday and then come in for "fivepence worth" (quarter of an ounce of gum opium) or "tenpence worth" (half an ounce of gum opium)...'<sup>38</sup>

### Opium dens

A widespread use of opium was thus sanctioned in the Fens. In the dockland areas of ports like Liverpool, Cardiff and London, opium smoking among the Chinese population found a similar local acceptance. At the level of national public debate, the East End opium 'den', peopled by dazed and lolling Chinese, the haunt of vice and crime, had become a popular stereotype as early as the 1870s. It found its reflection in fictional presentations like Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1891). The racial hostility which it embodied contributed to the 'deviant' image of opium use being propagated at an official and professional level.<sup>39</sup> But opium smoking among the Chinese seamen and lodging house keepers appeared rather differently to the local population. Once again, official values were not the dominant ones. One Limehouse resident who, as a boy in the early 1900s, ran errands for the seamen in Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway (the two main Chinese streets) recalled the details of how opium was sold and prepared for smoking. When the opium was sold (by a Chinese grocer, contrary to the provisions of the 1868 Act)

They bring out a great big quill from some gigantic bird... with a little leaden weight at one end, with a nice silk coloured ribbon on it and a steelyard... and they'll put your empty on first and they'll weigh your empty, because... the empty may be one that they'd made themselves out of a lemon skin. They'll weigh it, dive down under the counter, put it in, like treacle, weigh it again, then give it to you. And I've gone there for a cook, and he's had 1/6... they got a lot for 1/6.<sup>40</sup>

The lemon skin was prepared by putting it over a broom handle and binding it tightly with string until it was completely dried out; the opium was then carried about in it 'like a packet of cigarettes'.

It was prepared for smoking in the various houses by mixing fresh opium with the remains of the drug which had previously been smoked:

when you start to prepare for smoking, you get an enamel bowl without a crack or a break in it, the opium is put into the bowl, with water, and they go round to every bed in the house where opium smoking takes place and you scrape the bowl of the pipes.

This was all placed on a stove

and after a time it just starts to boil. And they will sit there for hours, one man, you know how they sit on a form... They got a long feather of a bird, a large bird, and they'll just skim the top of the opium, and until that opium is absolutely perfect without a bubble on it, and it's boiled to the amount that they've tested, and that's that, and they'll go and get the Chinese earthenware jars with a lid and they'll fill them up as best they can.<sup>41</sup>

Smoking the drug was a complicated matter:

You get a shilling's worth offish oil... The glass on the light is a great thick heavy glass, four inches thick, it's only about seven or eight inches high... now the pipe is about 15-18 inches long, on the end of the pipe there's a bowl. In the surface of the bowl, there's a small hole. When you've got your vessel, a lemon or small tin, you dip your needle into the substance, the opium and place it over the light... not too near, just so as it will frizzle, like bacon, and twist it, and twist it until it become sticky, solid sticky substance, warm that up and place the bowl of the pipe over the lamp, put the needle through the hole of the bowl of the pipe. That leaves the opium on the bowl of the pipe...<sup>42</sup>

The opium pipe was then placed over the lamp and the smoke continuously inhaled until the dross in the bowl of the pipe was dried out.

But of the opium 'den' there was little sign – 'you'd push a door open and you'd see them smoking'. The Chinese opium smokers were not evil or vicious, but 'ordinary working people that come in... and have their pipe, because they're paid off from the shipping and they have their pleasure time in the Causeway as long as their money lasts.' The lodging houses where smoking took place were more akin to social clubs; certainly the image of stupor and lassitude accepted as part of the opium 'den' stereotype found little foundation in reality.

I've known them to get up at eight, seven or eight in the morning smoking opium twice, two periods of opium, and then go and do their duty, do their work, and they won't go to bed before eleven o'clock at night... When they start to smoke opium, they've always got their own crowd, all clamouring to talk together, they're all... countrymen, one province... with the opium lamp going, and a fire agoing the place gets steaming hot!<sup>43</sup>

### Attitudes towards addiction

Here was a matter of fact acceptance of a practice which was publicly presented in very different terms. Addiction too, was viewed in much the same way by pharmacists who came into contact with it. By the 1900s, when most of

them began work, what had once been seen as the 'opium habit' or 'opium eating' had become classified as a disease, a medical matter requiring treatment and control. 'Opio-mania', 'chronic poisoning by opium', 'morphinism' and 'morphinomania' made their appearance in the medical journals and texts. The establishment of such medical perceptions and values had obvious parallels in other areas. Homosexuality, poverty, insanity, were coming under scientific scrutiny at the same time; and the putative objectivity of scientific definitions of abnormality replaced the previous moral outlook on 'bad behaviour'. Social explanations were largely excluded in favour of individually oriented definitions based to a large extent on biological, and later, hereditary, predisposition. In the case of drug addiction, a number of consequences followed. Disease views were notably framed with middle class hypodermic morphine – using addicts in mind; working class consumers of oral opiates were less prominent in the textbook discussions. Morphine certainly had a greater physiological effect and was to that extent more 'dangerous'; but the available evidence suggests that numbers of morphine addicts were in fact low. Medical perceptions were coloured by the type of patient most often seen. Hypodermic morphine, as a more expensive means of administration, was more likely to be given under medical supervision; and the apparent middle-class basis of the phenomenon of addiction aided the acceptance of its disease nature.<sup>44</sup> The dissemination of this medical ideology undermined the idea of the 'moderate' addict – those who could manage on the same controlled dose of the drug for years on and without noticeable deterioration. Present judgement concurs with the earlier view that opiates produce no directly damaging or life-shortening effect on the body and that low level addiction need not be a physically damaging condition. The variety of patterns of drug use, replacing the stereotype of ever-escalating and damaging dosage, is only just being rediscovered.<sup>45</sup> But in the late nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth, there were expanding discussions of treatment and moves to secure the compulsory detention of addicts under the terms of the inebriate acts, moves which again had clear parallels in, for instance, the discussion of labour colonies to deal with the 'residuum' of undeserving poor.

It is easy enough to write of this ideology as if it was formulated in a vacuum. The doctors' busy elaboration disease views of addiction were clearly expressing the values and outlook of that elaboration disease views of addiction were clearly expressing the values and outlook of that section of the expanding professional middle-class of which they were part. But how far were the views they expressed at the official level accepted among consumers and sellers of the drug? The medical ideas of disease and treatment, of professional intervention, in fact appear to have made little impact among pharmacists in day-to-day contact with consumers of opium. Most had at least one regular customer who stood out as taking particularly large quantities of laudanum. 'In my apprentice days, we used to have a few drinkers', recalled a pharmacist who began work in Battersea. One of his customers who bought a two ounce bottle regularly knew the limit of her dose – 'her usual

dosing method was to put a finger on the bottle and drink until the level came to that'. Unfortunately the shop 'boy' got the labels on the big Winchester bottles in the cellar mixed up. The drinker's laudanum bottle was filled with belladonna mixture instead. When she took her usual dose, the results were fatal.<sup>46</sup> Mr Owen, who worked in Wrexham, had a similar customer – 'used to come in regularly for two sixpenny worths of laudanum. ...and proceed to do a full days washing...'<sup>47</sup> Another regular customer was a 'man taking diarrhoea mixture – he had a regular prescription for 40 odd ounces and bought another 40 over the counter. How he kept his bowels regular is a mystery to me.'<sup>48</sup> Clearly other customers may also have been physically addicted to opium, but it was these customers of larger quantities who stood out in the pharmacists' minds. Even these consumers of larger than normal amounts managed to lead normal lives. Miss Robertson in Louth had a friend addicted to Collis Browne's chlorodyne. Her eyes looked strange – 'she sometimes "looked yonderly"', but she otherwise led a normal life. 'There was also a regular customer who bought laudanum in a pint bottle and carried a smaller one on her so she could take it when she was out.' But this was regarded quite calmly – 'nobody noticed addiction and everyone had laudanum at home.'<sup>49</sup> In Holbeach, people who were addicted were 'just accepted... it was just part of life in those days.'<sup>50</sup> The picture of addiction presented in the medical texts appeared rather differently at this level, and the stereotype of harmful addiction, needing medical control and treatment, had little foundation in the experience of these pharmacists.

### Changing patterns of use: the influence of restriction

Nor did any of them encounter the morphine injecting addict who figured largely in medical discussions. This was not surprising, since most had a working-class clientele. Morphine, as already explained, was a more expensive drug, and its hypodermic use, involving expensive equipment and often medical administration, was necessarily reserved for those of greater means. Nevertheless, patterns of use were changing in other ways. Young people did not take much opium in Holbeach by the 1900s – 'it was mainly the older generation.'<sup>51</sup> There is general agreement on this point. 'My recollection is that all the buyers were old people, who could not write their own name but signed with a cross in a shaky hand.'<sup>52</sup> An apprentice who began work in 1915 'had one old lady come in regularly for tict. opii... She could neither read nor write, so we made an entry once in a while for her to add her cross. If we had done it every time we should have filled the register.'<sup>53</sup> Mortality figures remained stable until the turn of the century, when they began to decline. Greater legal restriction, the advent of newer remedies like chloral, the removal of opium from patent remedies, and even slightly increased access to medical care, must all be explanations.

The simple signing of a poison register was replaced in 1916 by Defence of the Realm Act Regulations 40B and in 1920 by the first Dangerous Drugs Act which required that opium and preparations containing more than 0.1% morphine, morphine itself, and cocaine be put on a

prescription only basis. It was still possible to sell laudanum over the counter but only if it was diluted down below the legal limit. An assistant chemist in a mining village in South Yorkshire remembers selling this mixture to 'a number of customers who called once a day, they were working-class women of about fifty to seventy...'<sup>54</sup> Another who was apprenticed to his father in 1923 and was also in Yorkshire, supplied one woman who came from a mining village six miles away every Saturday afternoon 'with a large lidded basket containing two empty flagons and eight or ten eight ounce medicine bottles. These were filled with laudanum diluted one to five with water.'<sup>55</sup> The bond between seller and customer which had been notable before the passing of the more restrictive legislation, to this extent survived it. In the Attercliffe district of Sheffield, a pharmacist even found, just after the First World War 'a shop with a register of laudanum drinkers – the people on the register were allowed to buy one ounce of laudanum diluted... once a week and no new names were allowed on the register...'<sup>56</sup>

The pharmacist in that shop clearly accepted the need for further control, however informal. But in general there were some reservations about further restrictions. This was expressed at an official pharmaceutical level by protests about the unnecessarily cumbersome machinery of control and the 'bureaucratic interference' which the 1920 Act and its attendant regulations control and the 'bureaucratic interference' which the 1920 Act and its attendant regulations epitomised. Among pharmacists at the 'grass roots' however, there appears to have been a feeling against any further controls. On balance, recalled one, 'it wasn't necessary then. There was no amount of addiction that I can recall – it was more an international thing.'<sup>57</sup> A doctor on locum in Scotland at this time heard of an old chemist who decided to sell up rather than operate under the Dangerous Drugs Act. 'For many years he sold laudanum "over the counter" and one of his customers purchased three ounces of laudanum every day... She drank half in the shop and... the other half at bed time.'<sup>58</sup>

What emerges most strongly from these albeit mostly professional perspectives is the gulf between the 'official' presentation of the dangers of opium use and continuing, if declining, popular reliance on the drug. The ideology of disease and treatment propagated by the expanding medical profession appears not to have established any sort of dominance over consumers, or indeed, seller of opium at this level. It is clearly unwise to draw sure-fire and simple contemporary implications from this. There is some danger of implying that consumers could indeed manage in a *laissez faire* situation of market supply without any interference or control. This is to ignore the undoubted 'public health' problems which occurred when opium was less restricted – although even these had their wider social context. The overall opium mortality rate at that time at between five or six per million population, was in fact far lower than the contemporary death rate from medically-prescribed barbiturates, which rested at 29 per million in 1974. And it is still more important to recognise the cumulative effect on the social role of opium of the medical perceptions and definitions which have gained ground



since the turn of the century, and in particular, since the 1920s, when the 'disease' nature of addiction and a combination of medical and Home Office control became the corner stone of drug control policies.

Nevertheless, the views of ordinary consumer and sellers of opium in the early years of the present century do indicate that for the history of opium and drug control policies a simple model of 'progress' and a framework which assumes the existence of an objective 'problem', is insufficient as an analysis. At this level, opium was not a medical problem, but an over-the-counter transaction. The form of use at this level was significantly different from its medical and public presentation. The morphine-injecting addicts who aroused so much medical concern were absent, and laudanum drinkers and opium eaters more numerous. Addicts of that type may still have been quite common in the early decades of the century, given that most pharmacists interviewed appear to have had at least one regular customer for larger than normal quantities of the drug. The reminiscences of pharmacists indicate, not a 'problem' of opium use, but a continuing mutual interest between sellers and consumers of opium which in some respects ran counter even to the official attitudes of the pharmaceutical profession. The oral material contributes to an analysis of opium's historical place in society which recognises both the complexity and diversity

of motives which underlay its control and gives value to the experience of users and sellers.

It emphasises not simply the 'manufacture' of deviance or the formulation of control policies from above, but the way they were experienced and perceived at their level of operation. Historians in both these areas, in their anxiety to replace the narrower analyses of the past, have tended to concentrate on the formulation of medical views of abnormality, or the influences at work in the establishment of policy. There is often an implicit assumption that such ideologies and policies were accepted by those to whom they were applied. In the case of opium, the oral material suggests that the acceptance of the framework of control was less than total, and that the ideology of disease was far from the experience of most of those interviewed. Even opium smoking, the most obviously 'deviant' variety of opium use in that it was associated with a racial minority, appears not to have caused much concern in the surrounding population. The filtering down of official values and dominant ideologies was thus limited. Oral evidence thus indicates that responses to control and to official notions of deviance in the ordinary population are valid and important areas of investigation. Indeed, without such checks medical history falls into the trap of simply re validating official perspectives, and cannot lead to any deeper understanding of the dynamics of change in the social history of health and disease.

## NOTES

1. The research on which this paper is based is part of a project – not primarily using oral history – funded initially by the Washington Drug Abuse Council and later by the Social Science Research Council on opium in nineteenth century society and the development of narcotic policy in the early twentieth century.
2. Margaret Hewitt, *Wives and Mothers in Victorian Industry*, Rockliff, 1958, pp 141-52, is the best-known exposition of this view of opium use. See also Anne E Roberts, *Feeding and Mortality in the Early Months of Life: Changes in Medical Opinion and Popular Feeding Practice 1850-1900*, unpublished University of Hull, PhD thesis, 1973, chapter 8.
3. Elizabeth Lomax, 'The uses and abuses of opiates in nineteenth century England', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 1973, 47, pp 67-76; Glenn Sonnedeker 'Emergence of the Concept of Opiate Addiction', *Journal Mondiale Pharmacie*, 1962m, no 3, pp 275-90; *ibid.* 1963, no 1, pp 27-34.
4. For examples of recent work which asks this sort of question, see MA Crowther, 'The Later Years of the Workhouse 1890-1929', pp 36-55, in Pat Thane (ed), *The Origins of British Social Policy*, Groom Helm, 1978, and J Weeks, 'Sins and Diseases: Some Notes on Male Homosexuality in Nineteenth Century England', *History Workshop*, 1, 1976, pp 211-219.
5. PP 1857, XII. *Report from the Select*

*Committee of the House of Lords on the Sale of Poisons etc Bill*, qs 1047-1054.

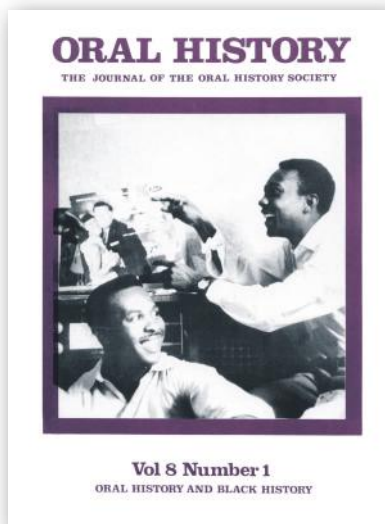
6. *Morning Chronicle*, 15 November 1849.
7. 'Register of the sales of opium and laudanum in Stockton-on-Tees', *Pharmaceutical Journal*, 1857-58, 17p 165.
8. *Morning Chronicle*, 15 November 1849.
9. Interview with Miss I Robertson, retired pharmacist who practised in Louth, Lincolnshire from 1913; July 1975.
10. Correspondence with Mr E W Frost, retired pharmacist recalling the period 1915-16; June 1975.
11. Correspondence with Mr H Cook, retired pharmacist who worked in the Fens from 1903; May 1975.
12. Correspondence with Mr CE Wilcox, retired pharmacist, who worked in Spalding 1910-13; May 1975.
13. Interview with Mr Ives, retired pharmacist; October 1978.
14. Interview with Mr Hollows, retired pharmacist who worked in London; May 1977.
15. Interview with Mrs Cooper who was brought up in North Kensington; October 1978.
16. I am grateful to Anna Davin for passing this information on from a Hackney WEA Class.
17. Correspondence with Mr K Clark, retired pharmacist May 1975. Mr Clark first wrote his reminiscences in a series 'Opium as a daily transaction', *Pharmaceutical Journal*, 1971, 207, p 164, 214-15, 236.

18. Interview with Mr Hollows who worked in Liverpool in 1909, also London and Devon; May 1977.

19. Interview with Mr Ives.
20. Correspondence with Mr K Dark.
21. Correspondence with Mr G Rimmington, retired pharmacist; June 1975.
22. Interview with the late Mr Lloyd Thomas June 1978. Mr Lloyd Thomas had his father's recipe book containing the pauvenne mixtures, dating back to the 1870s and 80s, when he worked in Birkenhead, London and Wallasey.
23. Interview with Mr Waterman, retired pharmacist, who worked in Holbeach, Lincolnshire from 1909; April 1977.
24. Interview with Mr Waterman.
25. Correspondence with Mr H Cook.
- 26, 26 Interview with Mr Ives.
27. For a more detailed discussion of opium mortality data, see Virginia Berridge & Nigel Rawson, 'Opiate use and legislative control: a nineteenth century case study', *Social Science and Medicine*, forthcoming, 1979.
28. British Medical Association, *More Secret Remedies. What They Cost and What They Contain*, British Medical Association, 1912, pp 147-48.
29. Interview with Mr Waterman.
30. Interview with Mr Lloyd Thomas.
31. Correspondence with Mr J Holmes who was apprenticed in Hull in the 1920s, June 1975.
32. I am grateful to George Ewart Evans for details of this practice.



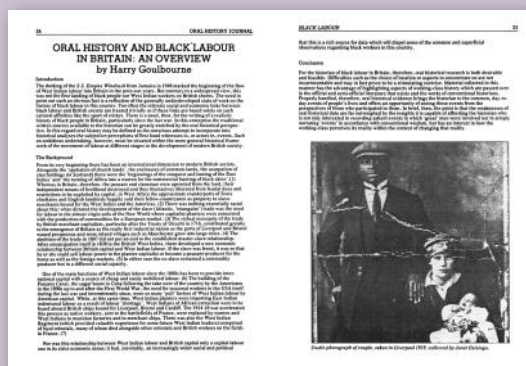
33. Correspondence with Mr R Cox, retired pharmacist; May 1975.
34. Interview with Mr Waterman.
35. This is detailed in Public Record Office, *Home Office papers*, HO 45/11932.
36. For details of this, see Virginia Berridge, 'Fenland opium eating in the nineteenth century,' *British Journal of Addiction*, no 72, 1977, pp 275-284.
37. Interview with Miss I Robertson.
38. Interview with Mr Waterman.
39. Virginia Berridge, 'East End Opium Dens and Narcotic Use in Britain', *London Journal*, 1978, no 4, pp 3-28.
40. Interview with Mr W J C; February 1976.
41. Interview with Mr W J C.
42. Interview with Mr WJC.
43. Interview with Mr WJC.
44. For further consideration of these developments, see Virginia Berridge, 'Mortality and Medical Science: concepts of narcotic addiction in Britain, 1820-1926', *Annals of Science* 36, 1979, pp 67-85.
45. As, for example, in the work done by Norman Zinberg, eg N Zinberg & R Jacobson, 'The Natural History of "chipping"', *American Journal of Psychiatry* 133, 1976, pp 37-40; and N Zinberg, W Harding & R Apsler, 'What is Drug Abuse?' *Journal of Drug Issues* 8, 1978, pp 9-35. In England, Judith Blackwell has been researching into people who use heroin, but are not addicted.
46. Correspondence with Mr H Kennington, retired pharmacist; June 1975.
47. Correspondence with Mr J Owen, retired pharmacist; June 1975.
48. Correspondence with Mr Clark.
49. Interview with Miss Robertson.
50. Interview with Mr Waterman.
51. Interview with Mr Waterman.
52. Correspondence with Mr Willcox.
53. Correspondence with Mr Sanders, retired pharmacist; June 1975.
54. Correspondence with Mrs D Gale; June 1975.
55. Correspondence with Mr H Judge; May 1975.
56. Correspondence with Mr H Cook.
57. Interview with Mr Waterman. The Dangerous Drugs Act of 1920 did indeed arise out of Britain's international obligations under a series of Hague Conventions between 1911 and 1914, confirmed under article 295 of the Treaty of Versailles. It was also a continuation of the temporary war-time control of 1916.
58. Correspondence with Dr J Scott Green; July 1975.



# Oral history and Black Labour in Britain: An overview

by Harry Goulbourne

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This opportunity to see how arguments stand up to the test of time offers an ideal occasion to revisit Harry Goulbourne's early thoughts and observations on issues of race relations and the Caribbean migration experience in Britain. These concerns have continued to inform much

of his work as a political scientist and sociologist. 'Properly handled', he wrote back in 1980, 'historical evidence brings the historian to the common everyday events of people's lives and offers an opportunity of seeing these events from the perspectives of those who participated in them'. Oral testimony not only

provides readers with insights into the experiences of people coming to Britain from the English speaking Caribbean; it also opens ways to consider how individuals perceive their reality 'within the context of changing that reality'. In this article, framed by prevailing interests in labour history,

Goulbourne sets Britain's post-war migration of invited workers from the English speaking Caribbean into a much longer history of colonialism, economics, politics and cultural relations. Personal testimony supports his discussion of how government policies intersect with class, race,

education, jobs and housing to shape lives and opportunities over successive generations. Published in *Oral History* before the Scarman Report (1981) recommended urgent action to tackle racial disadvantage and discrimination and the Swann Report on *Education for All* (1985), this piece now has a rather prophetic quality in how it recognises signs of 'fragmentation' among the newcomers and 'stability followed by

despondency'. Like other early commentators on the emerging realities of 'severe state repression' and failing policies that affected Britain's second generation of African-Caribbean descendents, Goulbourne's words and those of his interviewees sounded clear warnings about the need for change. This article's call for listening to the voices of younger peoples of African-Caribbean descent also seems as valid now as in 1980. For anyone concerned with

understanding the challenges that face communities, families and individuals in our towns and cities, this remains an important read.

**Heather Norris Nicholson, writer, researcher and community-based historian in West Yorkshire, UK**

Thank you again for wanting to republish this piece. Re-reading it strikes me of how I must've been angry in my mid-twenties about British historiography, and

skimming over my 1991 book with Cambridge (*Ethnicity and Nationalism in Post-Imperial Britain*) that they also republished after 20 years extant, I'm humbled. Of course, I'd want to express points a little differently today, but – as my mentor/tutor from schooldays – taught me: express oneself as clearly as possible and you can stand by it through time.

**Harry Goulbourne, Professor Emeritus, London South Bank University**

## Introduction

The docking of the *SS Empire Windrush* from Jamaica in 1948 marked the beginning of the flow of West Indian labour into Britain in the post-war years. But contrary to a widespread view, this was not the first landing of black people nor West Indian workers on British shores. The need to point out such an obvious fact is a reflection of the generally underdeveloped state of work on the history of black labour in this country. Too often the intrinsic social and economic links between black labour and British society are treated trivially as if these links are based solely on such cultural affinities like the sport of cricket. There is a need, then, for the writing of a realistic history of black people in Britain, particularly since the last war. In this enterprise the traditional written sources available to the historian can be greatly enriched by the oral historical perspective. In this regard oral history may be defined as the conscious attempt to incorporate into historical analyses the subjective perceptions of first hand witnesses to, or actors in, events. Such an ambitious undertaking, however, must be situated within the more general historical framework of the movement of labour at different stages in the development of modern British society.

## The background

From its very beginning there has been an international dimension to modern British society. Alongside the 'spoliation of church lands', the enclosures of common-lands, the usurpation of clan holdings (in Scotland) there were the 'beginnings of the conquest and looting of the East Indies' and 'the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins'.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas in Britain, therefore, the peasant and clansman were uprooted from the land, their independent means of livelihood destroyed and they themselves liberated from

feudal dues and restrictions to be exploited by capital, in West Africa the approximate counterparts of Scots chieftains and English landlords happily sold their fellow-countrymen as property to slave merchants bound for the West Indies and the Americas.<sup>2</sup> There was nothing essentially racial about this: what dictated the development of the slave (Atlantic, 'triangular') trade was the need for labour in the almost virgin soils of the New World where capitalist-planters were concerned with the production of commodities for a European market.<sup>3</sup> The virtual monopoly of the trade by British merchant-capitalists, particular after the Treaty of Utrecht in 1716, contributed greatly to the emergence of Britain as the really first industrial nation as the ports of Liverpool and Bristol waxed prosperous and more inland villages such as Manchester grew into large cities.<sup>4</sup> The abolition of the trade in 1807 did not put an end to the established master-slave relationship.

After emancipation itself in 1838 in the British West Indies, there developed a new economic relationship between British capital and West Indian labour. If the slave was freed, it was so that he or she could sell labour power to the planter-capitalist or become a peasant-producer for the home as well as the foreign markets.<sup>5</sup> In either case the ex-slave remained a commodity producer but in a different social capacity.

One of the main functions of West Indian labour since the 1880s has been to provide international capital with a source of cheap and easily mobilised labour.<sup>6</sup> The building of the Panama Canal, the sugar boom in Cuba following the take-over of the country by the Americans in the 1890s up to and after the First World War, the need for seasonal workers in the USA itself during the last war and intermittently since, were so many 'pull' factors of West Indian labour by American capital. While, at this same time, West Indian planters were importing East Indian indentured

labour as a result of labour 'shortage', West Indians of African extraction were to be found aboard British ships bound for Liverpool, Bristol and Cardiff. The 1914-18 war accelerated this process as native workers, sent to the battlefields of France, were replaced by women and West Indians in munition factories and in merchant ships. There was also the West Indian Regiment (which provided valuable experience for some future West Indian leaders) comprised of loyal colonials, many of whom died alongside other colonials and British workers on the fields in France.<sup>7</sup>

Nor was this relationship between West Indian labour and British capital only a capital-labour one in its strict economic sense; it had, inevitably, an increasingly wider social and political significance. From the sixteenth century sizeable pockets of black folks were to be found in the country. As early as the 1590s, by which time the English peasantry had been significantly uprooted from the land and transformed (partly) into vagabonds in the towns, the state outlawed both vagabondry as a felony and black folks as an undesirable element in the country. Thus, although the first black people in the country in the 1550s appeared to have been strong men 'who could well agree with our meates and drinks'<sup>8</sup> but, naturally, bothered by the cold, by an Act of Elizabeth in 1596 it was stated that:

there are lately divers blackamoors brought into the realm, of which kind of people *there are already here too manie* (emphasis added) considering how God hath blessed this land with great increase of people of our ownie nation as anie cuntry in the world, whereof manie for want of service and meanse to sett them in work fall in idleness and to great extremitye... that those kinde of people shall be sent forth of the Ian de...<sup>9</sup>

Already we see here a basic response of those who take decisions in Britain towards black workers: 'pulled' into the country to meet the demands of 'labour shortage', as the contradictions between various capital interests or between capital and labour begin to express themselves in political terms, the black workers are 'pushed' out as a 'solution' to some of the problems which are to be expected in capitalist societies. During the period of slavery there were many black people in the country, especially in the eighteenth century when they were popular, Shyllon tells us, in London and provincial towns as body-servants.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the period of trading in slaves directly from Africa there were sufficient black people in the country to give spur to the humanitarian drive to have them repatriated to West Africa – hence the founding of Sierra Leone, a venture eventually opposed by the leading black spokesman of the time, Olaudah Equiano.<sup>11</sup>

The small groups of men who arrived intermittently at British ports as sailors from the 1880s to the 1940s formed a visible part of the working-class. They settled, typically, close to each other at city-ports and married local girls. It is not surprising, therefore, that many West Indians who had fought in the Great War settled in these cities also. Their settlement was not a quiet one. In 1919-20 as a

result of the worsening economic conditions of the time, native workers expressed their frustrations in no uncertain racial terms. The black communities of Bute Town (Cardiff) and Liverpool were attacked – the early British precedents of the 'race riots' – race-relations experts are so fond of going to the USA to learn about. As previously, the 'solution' arrived at by the government of the day was to repatriate black workers to the West Indies and to West Africa, although even so, some remained in the cities they had settled.

The landing of the *SS Empire Windrush*, however, marked a new and significant stage in the relationship between black labour and British capital. For the rejuvenation and expansion of the economy after the War a cheap and reliable source of labour was at least useful if not absolutely necessary. The women who had manned the factories during the war were quickly replaced by the men returning from the front. No doubt female labour could still be had at a cheaper rate than male labour, but it would appear that this was not a sufficient nor reliable source of reserve labour for industry. Indians, Pakistanis and West Indians could provide Britain with an almost inexhaustable source of this type of required labour, much as Southern Europe, North Africa and Turkey provided North West Europe with the required reserve of labour in the same period. The hypothesis may also be advanced that if female labour was cheap, labour from the Commonwealth was attractive to employers because not only was it cheap, it was also amenable to control.

First generation immigrant labour was cheap for a number of reasons which are often overlooked. Although these workers were shifting thousands of miles and to very different climates from their own, they had to stand the expenses of moving and resettling. They were prepared to do work which native labour was not prepared to do and were therefore likely to keep wages for these jobs at a level which could not be maintained without their presence. There was also the tendency for first generation immigrants not to lay claims on the social amenities provided by the state. Immigrant labour could be easily controlled through legal instruments. The first of these points may be illustrated by direct reference to my conversations with workers from the West Indies:

*And how much was the fare [from Jamaica] in those days, can you remember?*

(Wife): Oh, I paid £85.13.0

(Husband): My own was £85, that's right.

*Did you have to save-up to do this? Did you have to borrow? Was the money hard to come by?*

(Wife): Well, at that time my husband was here, so it was quite different you know.

(Husband): Not really because I used to do lorry business, you know; and after finding that things wasn't working all right, I just set out, you know.

To the same question another worker from Jamaica responded thus:

It was easy for me really, because we wasn't that badly off. I was a mason-builder, and we could find the money easily.

The same worker went on:

Well, I have a brother at the time over here, and a sister, and they want me to come – 1956. I refused – they even sent me the fare; 1956 my sister sent me the fare and I didn't come. 1958, sent me the fare again, I didn't come until 1960. Well, most of my friends was leaving – coming to England – all friends and cousins... so I was coming from work one Friday and I saw them going to the Travel Service place – I went in with them ... Well, I booked my passage at the same time because I did have money with me.

Whereas in the 1930s new groups of black people in the country were of a transitory nature for example, students and intellectuals, in the 1950s and the following decades the new groups were brought almost entirely into the centres of industrial life. Adult immigration from the West Indies came to a peak in the late 1950s, by which time many husbands were in the position to send for their wives and children who could work. The use of black immigration as a political issue between the parties, resulting in the first of several restrictive measures in 1962, stimulated a rush on the part of more parents to bring their younger children to Britain in case a desire should arise (as inevitably it did) to stay longer than originally intended. In this way the black population not only increased noticeably but also became more stable and cohesive.<sup>12</sup>

### A framework for analysis

Generally speaking, these developments have been treated as purely peripheral or incidental to the emergence and reproduction of modern British society. Traditionally, therefore, black people appeared in the pages of British history either as appendages in the fields of colonial and imperial histories or as sudden apparitions in paintings of the leisurely age of Walpole and his immediate mid-eighteenth century successors and in lines of poetry of the same period. Where black people were spoken of explicitly it was in connection with what others were said to have done on their behalf, like the struggle in parliament and the press over the ending of the slave trade with Africa or the humanitarian impulse behind the founding of Sierra Leone. This situation amounts to the relegating of a people's experience to the margins of the greater totality of which they are a part.

Currently, of course, there is a great deal of interest in black people in this country and the growing body of literature on this section of the working class reflects two important social factors. In the first instance the literature reveals the liberal's concern for social harmony and, in the second, it betrays a desire to satisfy sentiments of a largely

cultural nationalist nature on the part of an increasingly vocal, if small, black middle-class. The liberal urge has encouraged a sociological trend with a two-fold purpose: it aims at 'explaining' the 'strange' phenomenon of black people and to influence decision-makers at local and national levels. From such a perspective black workers are reduced to a 'problem' to be categorised and explained in terms of poor housing, low educational levels and alien cultural traits. Racism is recognised but it is identified as *cause* rather than *effect*, as if it has explanatory value. One important consequence of the liberal concern has been that it has partly contributed to the legitimacy for the expansion of State functions into social life. In this regard state expansion involves the preemption of much of black radicalism by incorporating particular elements within their platform.

The upsurge in black cultural awareness which accompanied the revolt of young black labour has had important positive implications for the struggle of black workers but there are also some grave pitfalls. Whereas the slogan 'black power' or the question of black consciousness in the face of white racism in Britain has been very useful in strengthening one major pillar of the cultural background of black workers, in the hands of elements of the black middle-class black consciousness has come to form the alleged basis for a political strategy in a struggle they perceive to be pitched between blacks and whites, irrespective of class considerations. This situation has also left many older and concerned parents bewildered regarding prescriptions for the future of their children.

Both trends are, admittedly, simplified as presented here and in reality they represent powerful social forces or moods which are very complex. The simple point to be made, however, is that neither tendencies point the way to a rigorous and comprehensive history of black people in Britain. One direction leads to the discovery that black people, generally, also had a great past and great leaders; the other points to 'problems' and 'crises' which call for good and responsible management, but management nonetheless.

This state of affairs is, hopefully, in the process of being corrected. For example, Shyllon's work on black people in eighteenth century England<sup>13</sup> and the work of Mike Phillips for the BBC television network, "The Black Man in Britain" (1974)<sup>14</sup> were important pointers in the first part of the present decade. These efforts, however, do not furnish a general framework for a comprehensive history of black people. The general framework being suggested here is that black people in Britain should be seen within the context of the various phases of capitalist development and thereby showing the different forms that black labour has taken under capitalism. These may be summarised thus:

#### (i) *Early Capitalism and Slavery*

It was necessary for capitalism at this particular phase to resort to practices of an earlier mode of production (slavery) because, after settlement, there was a dramatic drop in the local population and therefore labour had to be imported into the New World. Moreover, the abun-



dance of land, as Marx correctly observed,<sup>15</sup> meant that planters could not successfully transplant the relations of production developed in England to the colonies. Every new ship load of free labourers from Europe soon established themselves independently and there was no way of reproducing the exact capital-labour relationship without resort to crude and brutal force. This problem of labour, itself arising out of the general problem of colonisation for the purposes of commodity production, was at the root of slavery, not racism, as is still widely believed.

### **(ii) Mature Capitalism and a Free-Labour Force**

Slavery had, to a large extent, disciplined and partly proletarianised the slave but his total transformation from 'slave' into 'proletarian' necessitated the granting of his freedom to sell his labour-power to whichever employer he preferred. This transformation coincided with the struggle between merchant and industrial capitals over mercantilist-monopolism and free-trade, and was, therefore, not accidental.

### **(iii) Monopoly Capitalism and a Reserve Labour Force**

Brought into the West Indies as a slave, the black person found him or herself on attaining the status of free-labourer, shifting from one place to another in search of employment. This process reached its zenith in the mass emigration of West Indian workers to the USA and Britain after the last war. The contention here is that this situation is best seen against the background of the requirements of monopoly capitalism in the post-war years. Marx's insight into the movement of labour within capitalism is particularly pertinent here. In his view continued reproduction in the capitalist mode of production and the accumulation of capital in general entail not only the availability of an active work-force but also a reserve-labour force. This reserve-labour force is constantly being *attracted and repelled* by capitalist centres of production, depending on whether the economy is booming or is experiencing one of its periodic crises.<sup>16</sup> Developed capitalism in Britain first pulled the majority of the remaining agricultural workers into an army of reserve labour but before this source was exhausted the Irish population also became an important source from which to draw. Under monopoly capitalism, and especially with the greater internationalisation of capitalist production since the war, large sections of the world have become, depending on old colonial links, so many areas of reserve-labour for production. In Europe the workforce drawn from these pools of reserve-labour retain certain characteristics of their origins, that is, characteristics peculiar to labourers drawn from a reserve labour force. In Britain during the fifties and most of the sixties this was not the case. Two reasons may be advanced to explain this difference. First, Britain drew upon the reserve-labour force in her ex-colonies and this was done within the context of the shifting of labour within the Commonwealth. Second, unlike the situation in continental Europe, British skilled and semi-skilled workers could always emigrate to the

white Commonwealth in search of improved standards of living and this would tend to minimise the degree of competition for jobs.

### **Oral history as an added source**

For Marxists the importance of the study of socio-historical phenomena is to understand the objective nature of such phenomena with a view to changing them. Thus, at one level it would seem that the study of history involves the rejection of the individual's subjective perceptions about events. For as Marx himself put it, in order to understand man we cannot 'set out from what men say, imagine, conceive nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived in order to arrive at men in the flesh'.<sup>17</sup> Rather, we must 'set out from real *active men on the basis of their real/life-process*',<sup>18</sup> from which we can then demonstrate what Marx calls the development of the ideological 'reflexes and echoes' of the real life-processes men experience. This is another way of expressing his well-known observation that bourgeois historians have confused the 'illusions' of the bourgeois epoch with the objective characterisation of that epoch. The point is a simple one: a man's assessment of himself is necessarily subjective. And by extension this reveals at least two basic weaknesses of oral historical data for the historian weakness, however, which may be found to be equally present in more acceptable historical evidence. First, there is its extreme subjectivity arising from its focus on the individual's limited and limiting consciousness. Even after the researcher has got together all the responses of the people he has included in the scope of his study, he is still not far removed from this subjective position; he has still to make statements that are objective as possible about the data he has in his possession. In other words, the task of interpreting events is still present. It follows, therefore, that although the collection of 'memories' of witnesses to, or actors in events can greatly assist towards the construction of a given history, the historian must still weigh such evidence against his other sources (which are also subjective to varying degrees) and must exercise the traditional skill of *narration* as well as bearing the responsibility of *reflecting* on events and giving an *interpretation* to them.

The second drawback (more of a danger than a drawback as such) is that too much attention to detail could result in a crude empiricism. If the practice of positivistic social science were to be adopted uncritically and wholesale then oral historical research could lead to arguing by numbers (for example, how many respondents said x or y). The point is that numbers cannot argue for themselves and where they do they do not do so eloquently; oral historical research must not therefore become another way of demonstrating the allegedly value-free, neutral position of established social science. The use of techniques from the social sciences should not be made to pretend to preempt the traditional role of the historian as interpreter of his material.

For oral historical evidence has a positive contribution to make insofar as it brings the historian closer to 'real', active, men on the basis of their 'real-life processes', and can thereby help the historian to better understand the

development of what Marx called 'the ideological reflexes' and 'echoes' of the individual's primary life-process within a given society. The difficulty lies in connecting subjective consciousness with objective reality. But however difficult this task may be, material collected in this way should help us to grasp the degree of penetration as well as rejection of the 'ruling ideology' or the dominant set of ideas in that section of the working-class with which we are directly concerned.

As indicated earlier, an adequate account of black people in Britain entails seeing them in relation to the various stages or phases of capitalist development, and within a Marxist framework which would allow for both the general and the particular, the empirical and the theoretical perspectives. Oral historical records would not, quite obviously, help us all the way in the construction of such a history, but it would be of great relevance at particular phases of such an effort. Generally speaking, these would be:

**(i) *The late nineteenth century to the period of repatriation in the 1920***

For this period we could hope to find, not the original settlers but their children, or perhaps more realistically their grandchildren. These would therefore be 'witnesses', and what would be tapped are their memories of their childhood, of their parents, neighbourhood, and so on. Their experiences regarding housing, education, employment and relations with such other social services as there were would help us to understand the continuities (or lack of them) between this period and the present conditions of black workers. In this way a number of important points could be clarified. For example, do the number of immigrants make any difference to the treatment they receive? It is worth noting here that the oral history approach to the collection of historical data could fill a definite gap in the records, because at the moment the only reports are of the official type (eg. reports at the Home Office, PRO, newspapers). It is probably too optimistic to hope that there are letters, diaries, etc., to be found for this period. The preliminary work of Paul Thompson some years ago amongst offsprings of those who settled in Cardiff at the turn of the century indicates that there is a fair amount of material to be collected in the port-cities and perhaps even in inland cities such as London and Manchester, using the oral history method.

**(ii) *1930s-40s: middle-class politics or the politics for national independence***

This period is often covered in the literature on independence movements in Africa and the West Indies, but inadequately since the focus is usually on the most prominent figures. The new groups of black people were often from the colonial middle-class – for example, CLR James, George Padmore, Ras Makonnen from the West Indies and Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, Azikiwe, Johnson from Africa. With few exceptions, the primary aims of these individuals were to agitate over the colonial question and to study. Two points may however be borne in mind. First, the West Indian group, particularly Padmore, provided a

framework within which the African nationalist struggle at this stage and at the international level could be expressed coherently, namely, the stress on Pan-Africanism; others like Kamonnen helped financially from business concerns in London and Manchester. Second, according to Mike Phillips who has done some work on the Pan-Africanists in Britain in this period, such leaders had an influence on black workers such as there were around at the time and the movement had strong support among them at this time. If this is in fact the case then there is a need to identify the black section of the working class in this period.

**(iii) *1950s-70s: stability followed by despondency***

The late fifties and early sixties witnessed the stabilisation of the black population in Britain as husbands were joined by their wives and children and as this section of the working-class reproduced itself. From the late sixties, but particularly with the worsening conditions of the economy in the present decade, the second generation is steadily being turned into a depressed section of the class of which they are a part. Oral historical evidence would be an enormously rich source in an attempt to understand this period from the perspective of West Indian workers themselves. There is a great deal of statistical and official documentation both in Britain and the West Indies and after the Notting Hill 'disturbances' of 1957 writings about West Indians abounded. The refusal of young black labour to take up jobs the first generation of West Indians were prepared to do has also given its own momentum to the proliferation of literature about black labour. Moreover, looked at as a 'community' (and this has its own drawbacks) the black population of this country is not only abundantly written about, but has also left behind no insignificant body of literature on itself. It would be grossly misleading, then, to say that as a community the black section of the working-class has not left evidence of its *presence* and its *responses* to British society. There is a sizeable body of creative literature made up of the writings of George Lamming from Barbados, Samuel Selvon from Trinidad, Andrew Salkey from Jamaica not to mention younger writers such as Linton Kwesi Johnson. More significantly, the decade of the seventies began with a profusion of protest literature (leaflets, pamphlets, weeklies and journals; the detailing of specific case histories of individuals) as part of the response of the second generation of West Indian labour to the severe state repression and ideological attacks they were subjected to, and continue to be subjected to. Oral historical research should therefore aim to go beyond the 'problem' oriented perspective in the official literature and take us to a point from which we may better see the real-life processes of this much maligned section of the working-class.

For this period research should concentrate on at least the following points. First, the steps taken towards the newcomers by the institutions which play an integrative role (the unions, political parties, the churches, the schools, social and sports clubs) and the responses of the newcomers to these institutions. This should be complemented by focusing also in the same set of questions with respect to the institutions which are essentially coercive (the police,

courts and aspects of the civil service), both in terms of the early and the later years. A few more examples from some oral historical evidence may not be amiss here. The first conversation concerns attitudes towards politics and politicians; the second touches on the question of the unions and the third about the churches.

*Did you feel that British politics had anything to do with you?*

I did admire MacMillan and... when he was Prime Minister. The 'wind of change' and all those things. I remember all that in the fifties.

*Did you vote at all?*

Only recently... 1970.

*Why didn't you vote before that? Didn't you think it was important?*

I wasn't so interested at the time... General Election 1959 – that was the one I was very interested in – MacMillan never had it so good when the wind of change... that was the one I remember very much.

And with respect to trade unions, he had the following to say:

*Did the unions here strike you as being fairly different from the unions in Jamaica?*

Oh, yes. Well, at that time the unions were... I couldn't tell you much about the outside, you know. But at that time the feeling was negative, it was no good. Just take your money and that was that-you never get anything out of it. Certainly the whiteman get something out of it.

*But the unions were never officially hostile to black labour? Would officials of the union make public statements against black workers?*

No. They say it privately but not publicly.

As regards religion he went on:

*Let me ask you about your religion... when you first arrived presumably you didn't find any of the churches of your denomination?*

No, I didn't find any when I came.

*What influence did this have on you? Did you go to other churches?*

Yes, I used to go to Baptist Church. It was something similar to Church of God. I didn't try Anglican. I knew of them from back home.

*Why?*

I didn't believe in them! I didn't believe they were true.

Secondly, research must also focus on the expectations of the first generation, their 'achievements' as well as their disappointments with the new environment and their offsprings.

The conversation with another informant went thus:

*When your children were being brought up... did you find that you had any ideas about what would be proper or improper ways of bringing them up?*

Yes. I got this idea that I want them well brought-up-have a good trade and look after themselves very good.

*And what did you mean by being brought-up well? Or having a trade?*

Have a nice school-have a nice education. Good education. Very good education. Always wanted them to have a good trade-a good skilled man or a good trade.

*And what was the guiding principle you imparted to them as being important in their lives?*

The same thing-I say a good education and a good trade. That's the thing most important to them.

This would also necessitate ascertaining the social backgrounds of the first generation, which are too often taken for granted.

Similarly, thirdly, it will be important to trace the patterns of social differentiation which have developed and are being reproduced within the black community. Too often the black population of this country is seen as if it constitutes a homogenous whole, but this notion does not concur with the reality of the situation. Already from the 1950s there were those who could invest in photographic studios, housing, barber shops. I have already indicated that with the increase in the employment of black personnel in institutions of the state, the *salaried* (as opposed to the small-owner) element of a black middle-class is rapidly developing. It would be of sufficient interest in itself to follow the development of this 'class-in-formation', so to speak, which receives major assistance from the state, perhaps unwittingly. Regarding those people who came during the first years of immigration to England, one worker summed up what a number of others also expressed:

*What sort of people left your district?... Were they rich or poor... how would you describe them?*

Most of them were self-sufficient, because I've known men, friends or neighbours, they have big houses and all, you see, they sell it to come away. Mostly the middle-aged people in their thirties or forties, they could pay their fares to come away. Kind of surprising most of the men were coming away. Everybody say 'why are these

men leaving to go to England to work, they have a plantation (farm), they have a couple of cows and-they wasn't so badly off.'

Obviously such a statement cannot be accepted without further ado, but it is sufficient to provoke further research on the lines of social differentiation among those who arrived between 1948-70.

Lastly, what have been the patterns of cultural change in the black community under the impact of industrial life? Although the essential elements of West Indian culture derive from this country, nonetheless there are important aspects which have developed differently than they have done in Britain. These differences are clearly seen in such things as language, food habits, family systems and the like. For example, whereas in the fifties teachers and others would remark on the relative stability (Victorian habits?) of the West Indian family, by the late sixties and especially in the seventies, most social commentators were aware of the increasing fragmentation occurring at this dimension of the life of West Indians in this country. For example, in rural Jamaica where most workers in Britain are from, it was common practice for an elderly, respected person to discipline an unruly child in public and report this to the parents without then taking any exception to the act of correction. In an industrial setting this kind of behaviour could not be expected because of the impersonal nature of most relationships. The effects of the changes brought about by living in England may be seen in the following conversation:

*You wouldn't like your child to be disciplined outside the home, would you?*

(Wife): No, but I would like them to behave. I hate them to be nasty to an old lady or an old man out on the street, I'd hate that. I would be very cross! ... I still would like to see my boys get up for an old lady. Because I get up for an old lady-or an old man. I'd still like to see my children do it-and I wouldn't get onto a bus with any of my children and see them sitting down, say, a tottery old lady come in or an old man and they (the children) sitting down. No, I couldn't ... I am not responsible for what they do when I'm not there, but while I'm there, you know. I can't follow them around.

Such shifts in cultural patterns of behaviour, the expectations of parents brought up in a different cultural context, and so forth, are important pointers to the adaptation of a people to new set of norms.

### **The prospects**

It must be stressed that oral historical research among the black working class is still only in its beginnings. Although this does not allow for definitive generalisations, there are some important indications emerging from the material collected. As noted earlier, the preliminary work of Paul Thompson and Mike Phillips, in the first period outlined above are important beginnings and there may well be

others in this country working on similar lines. The second period is almost entirely neglected.

With respect to the third period, I carried out some tape-recorded interviews in 1975 amongst workers who settled in the Brixton, Camberwell, Peckham and East Dulwich districts of South London in the 1950s-60s. This area was chosen partly for convenience since I know it very well having been brought-up there and know many workers who have settled in the area since their arrival in this country. A more important consideration, however, was the fact that for those who settled in London, and perhaps the greater part of the South-East region, living in this country began in Brixton and its immediate surroundings. Although all but one of the workers I interviewed were Jamaicans with predominantly rural backgrounds, the selection was a random one. The only criteria for being interviewed were that the informant should have lived in the area for the whole or part of the 1950s-60s and, of course, was willing to be interviewed. There were individuals who did not mind being interviewed provided that it was not tape recorded; there were others who could not afford the time necessary since many who qualified are still active workers. Each interview was preceded by some background work, particularly meeting the person(s) to be interviewed at least once before interviewing, which itself followed a fairly formal procedure so as to make the work of editing easier and to avoid too much information of little or no value to be included. The recorded interviews lasted from between two-and-a-half hours to eight hours each, some taking more than one sitting to complete. In one case both husband and wife participated simultaneously, to the enrichment of the material. Significantly enough, most of the interviewees had either travelled before coming to Britain or could recall members of their families who had travelled to such places as Cuba, Panama, the USA or Britain. What is important from the point of view of oral historical research in this period is that from this very preliminary work some encouraging pointers for further research can be detected.

In the first place, the objective conditions for oral historical research amongst black workers in this country are highly favourable. It is noticeable that there are now black workers receiving their pensions in this country. Until the mid-seventies the trend was that as workers came up for retirement they would return to the West Indies to live on their meagre savings and with relatives who had stayed behind. This of course relieved Britain of some of her social responsibilities. But there are now a number of factors, including the depressed economic conditions both here and in the West Indies, working against the continuation of such a situation. Many of those workers who arrived in the fifties and sixties are now approaching retirement age and it is likely that a great many of them will be spending their last days in the country. This is a promising situation for the type of work envisaged here, which demands a great deal of time from both the researcher and the informant. In areas such as Brixton, I understand, some of these workers are already making themselves accessible to the researcher and this will no doubt become a regular feature.





Studio photograph of couple, taken in Liverpool in 1919, collected by Janet Osisiogu.

But these very necessary conditions are not sufficient for successful work in this field. The cooperation and honesty of the individual are crucial if their testimony or memories are to be useful in the writing of a reliable history. The experience in this respect was that, generally, informants are very honest and remarkably frank about themselves. With the exception of one interviewee, at no point did I get the impression that answers to questions were being tailored to suit what he or she wrongly thought I was 'looking for'. For example, in describing living conditions in the 'early days', workers who have now achieved a 'comfortable' standard of living, were far from underplaying the extremely bad conditions in which they had to live and which were contrary to their expectations and their

ways of life in the West Indies. Nearly all stressed the absence of baths in the houses they lived in and the poor cooking facilities. Since most of the informants were men they nearly all stressed the fact that they had to live five or more to a small room and in some cases had to share a bed on a shift basis, that is, there may have been five men sleeping in a room during the day and another five at night, following the pattern of their work. There were moments of some sensitivity such as when a tired worker after a day's hard labour returns at night to find that his share of a room is taken for the night by a female companion of his roommate who communicates this behind a closed door from his bed. Moments like these inevitably involve the researcher with his informant and material in ways that



other sources do not. Empathy with the interviewee, patience with his or her manner of responding and a general working knowledge of his or her background are very important factors. For example, knowing the rift that exists between town and country in Jamaica is extremely useful when interviewing a worker from that country. Finally, oral historical research of this preliminary nature has indicated that this is a rich source for data which will dispel some of the common and superficial observations regarding black workers in this country.

## Conclusion

For the historian of black labour in Britain, therefore, oral historical research is both desirable and feasible. Difficulties such as the choice of location or aspects to concentrate on are not insurmountable and may in fact

prove to be a stimulating exercise. Material collected in this manner has the advantage of highlighting aspects of working-class history which are passed over in the official and semi-official literature that exists and the works of conventional historians. Properly handled, therefore, oral historical evidence brings the historian to the common, day-to-day events of people's lives and offers an opportunity of seeing these events from the perspectives of those who participated in them. In brief, then, the point is that the weaknesses of oral historical data are far outweighed by the insights it is capable of affording the historian who is not only interested in *recording* salient events in which 'great' men were involved nor in simply *narrating* 'events' in accordance with conventional wisdom, but has an interest in how the working-class perceives its reality within the context of changing that reality.

## NOTES

1. K Marx, *Capital*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954), vol 1, p 703.
2. See for example, W Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, (London: Bogle L'Overture Publications, 1972), ch 2; Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).
3. For a useful discussion on the role of slavery in the capitalist mode of production, see B Hindess and P Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), chapter on slavery.
4. Williams, *op cit*.
5. An attack on the West Indian freedom by British historian Thomas Carlyle and others in the 1850s-60s led to GW Sewell's, *The Ordeal of Free Labour in the West Indies*, (New York: Harper Bros., 1862); see also, Eric Williams, *British Historians and the West Indies*, (London, 1963), and D Hall, *Free Jamaica, 1838-65: An Economic History* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1959).
6. GW Roberts and DO Mills, *Study of External Migration Affecting Jamaica, 1953-55*, (Kingston: Institute of Social & Economic Research, University College of the West Indies, 1958), particularly chapters 1 and 4; for an analysis of immigrant labour in Europe since the war see, S Castles and G Kosack, 'The Function of Labour Migration in Western European Capitalism', *New Left Review* 73, May-June, 1972, pp 3-22, which raises some important questions within a Marxist

framework of analysis but some of which are not relevant to the British context.

7. See for example, R Nettleford (ed), *Manley and the New Jamaica*, (London: Longman Caribbean, 1971); also M Phillips, 'Landfall', *The Listener*, 21 November, 1974, pp 660-1.
8. FO Shyllon, *Black Slaves in Britain* (London: Oxford University Press for the Institute of Race Relations, 1974), p x.
9. Shyllon, above.
10. Shyllon, ch 1.
11. Shyllon, p 27; unfortunately he does not give much prominence to Equiano, whose, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oloudah Equiano, or Vassa Gustavus, the African*, was published in London, 1789.
12. It is more than incidental to point out that, stemming largely from the 'conquest and looting of the East Indies', a similar story could be told of workers from India, particularly from the 1880s.
13. Shyllon.
14. See M Phillips, above.
15. K Marx, *Capital*, ch.xxiii; see also, Hindess and Hirst, above.
16. Marx, *Capital*, pp 600-606.
17. K Marx and F Engels, 'The German Ideology', in *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), vol 1, p 25.
18. *Ibid*.
19. Thanks are due to Paul Thompson, University of Essex, who made funds available for this work from his grant for 'The Development of the Interview Method in Social History' from the Nuffield Foundation.

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

In addition to the works cited in the footnotes, the following texts are also useful:

S Patterson, *Dark Strangers: A Study of West Indians in London* (London: Penguin, 1963); A Olater, *Race Relations in Britain* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1966); WW Daniel, *Racial Discrimination in England* (Penguin Books, 1968); N Deakin, *Colour, Citizenship and British Society* (Panther Books, 1970); *Colonial Students in Britain*, (A PEP Report, 1955); D Hiro, *Black British, White British* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1971); *Coloured Immigrants in Britain* (Oxford University Press for the Institute of Race Relations, 1960); D Humphrey, *Police Power and Black People* (Panther, 1972).

These works, of course, cannot be indiscriminately thrown together because they reflect different perspectives of the general subject they all treat in one way or another. Paul Foot's *Immigration and Race in British Politics* (Penguin Books, 1965) should be clearly marked off from most of these texts. In a similar manner the following novels and short stories should also be seen as a different aspect of the available literature on the subject.

Claude McKay, *Banjo* (Harper and Brothers, 1929); G Lamming, *The Immigrants* (1954); A Salkey (ed), *Island Voices* (1970); Samuel Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*.



# Scratching the Surface. Women, work and coalmining history in England and Wales

by Angela V John

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Re-reading this article thirty-seven years after it appeared, I am struck by its timing. It was published just 10 years after women ceased manual work at British coalmines. In Whitehaven I had interviewed the last two women workers on the pit top or surface. I was fortunate to have the

opportunity to speak to the final generation of these workers, including Polly Gee of Wigan who had attended a deputation to the Home Office in 1911 to demand the right to continue working. Yet although female Lancashire mill workers were familiar figures in History books, along

with the women and children banned from work below ground in coal mines in 1842, next to nothing was known about women surface workers when I began my doctoral research in the seventies, although attempts to ban their employment had generated considerable

publicity, even notoriety, in the 1880s. I first had to establish a chronology for their employment history. There followed my first book 'By the Sweat of Their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coal Mines' (1980, 1984, 2006). The article's timing is also interesting because

it was written before the seminal Miners' Strike of 1984-5 which demonstrated, inter alia, widespread support and action by women within and beyond colliery communities at a time when the women's movement was buoyant.

My article emphasised women's employment in mining and voices that had been neglected for too long. Were I to be writing it today, I would probably address gender relations more directly. Some time after my interviews, I visited a

couple who had spent many years working at a Lancashire coalmine. When I arrived Mr R was busy gardening. I spoke at length to Mrs R. She was forthcoming and fascinating. After about an hour Mr R appeared, sat down and said: "Well,

what would you like to know about Mrs R?" She spoke not another word. He told me all about her: it was equally illuminating. I suspect that she had suggested that it was a good morning for gardening. **Angela V John**

Women's history and oral history have undoubtedly been two of the most prolific and controversial growth areas of the past decade for those studying 'history from below'. Recent research has reflected the vigorous commitment of practitioners, experiments with non-traditional sources and methods and a recognition of the problems inherent in the fragmentation of their subjects into discrete discourses. Due to simultaneous emergence as expanding fields in the 1970s (though neither can correctly be described as new despite their particular forms of recent development) they have been able to benefit from each other. The recognition by modern feminists that oral history can provide openings which were hitherto inaccessible has been matched by a realisation on the part of oral historians that women's history represents 'probably the greatest challenge and contribution which oral evidence may offer to the making of history'.<sup>1</sup>

Just as women's history requires ultimately much more than an exercise in recovery (even though that first necessary step of *discovery* is a vital and often difficult process) so too does oral history contain the potential to move beyond filling in missing details and become more than an alternative, albeit useful, form of narrative. It can also attempt a much more ambitious task which turns to advantage and utilises what is often seen as its most vulnerable point: memory. By looking at the ways in which memory operates over time, contrasting individual and collective memory and examining the ambiguities and conflicts that reside behind the narrative – tackling what has been called 'the mystery of subjectivity' – memory can be turned to positive use.<sup>2</sup>

Coal miners in Britain have a rich and powerful tradition of appreciating the value of collective memory.<sup>3</sup> They have frequently drawn upon this to counteract the way that memory is officially organised and emphasised through what the ruling class acknowledges as appropriate key historical moments and celebrates through public ceremonies and anniversaries. The miners' recourse to a collective memory asserts not only the importance of a counter-culture but the lessons of history in the context of continuing struggle.

On the whole women have not been recognised as an integral part of this process though their support in strikes is increasingly being acknowledged.<sup>4</sup> Historians of coalmining have concentrated on work and struggle in an industry

which has helped set the pace for wage levels more generally and in which conflicts between Capital and Labour have been particularly bitter. Work and struggle have however usually been defined in ways which do not fully reflect the past experience of mining communities. Not only has the miner, until very recently been portrayed quite uncritically as the archetypal proletarian<sup>5</sup> but historical analysis has been directed towards the male underground miner. The more varied, less dramatic employment of the surface worker has been virtually ignored despite the fact that the latter accounted for one fifth of all miners, over 200,000 men, women and children by the beginning of this century.<sup>6</sup> Struggle has been largely defined as union battles acted out through lock-outs, strikes and embittered negotiations between masters and men from the lodge to the national level. Individual histories of miners' unions, autobiographies and biographies of miners (generally union leaders) have both shaped and reinforced the concentration on institutional conflicts.

This emphasis on work and union activities has left little room for detailed examination of social life. To some extent community studies and the development of social history have taken over this question (at least for certain coalfields) but as recently as 1980 John Benson's *British Coalminers in the Nineteenth Century* has reminded us how little is known about how mining families have been organised. His work challenges the stereotype of the thriftless and irresponsible miner, an image which is rooted in a lack of actual knowledge and a multitude of myths.<sup>7</sup> Coalmining history is ripe for investigations which engage with and intersect recent developments in differing 'branches' of history. Too rigid an insistence on separate historical disciplines can only perpetuate the neglect of crucial questions and narrow the focus of study. The stress on male labour organisation in mining history has inevitably reinforced and in part is shaped by, the type of records which exist. Yet new questions can be asked of old material. A broadening of scope is needed to examine the sexual division of labour and issues of domination and subordination within and beyond the home. This might not only provide insights into the ways that women have been marginalised and the differing expectations of men and women but could also explore how the family helps to reinforce the capitalist mode of production. This requires moving beyond replacing one branch of history with another or accommodating or subsuming

women's history into labour history in order to avoid simply illuminating processes which ultimately remain dominated by a male eye-view.<sup>8</sup> Only by altering the angle of vision to enable female perspectives to be seen alongside those of the male sex, can the basis be laid for modes of analysis which seriously begin to break with the traditional forms and confront both class and gender-based relations of power.

The expansion of work at the pit top in the second half of the nineteenth century was a product of the rapidly increasing demand for coal. Known generally by the Lancashire term 'pit brow lasses', women worked at collieries and ironworks in parts of south Staffordshire, Shropshire, Cumberland and South Wales, though their most extensive employment was in west Lancashire. They performed a variety of jobs, helping to unload and tip tubs at the pit mouth, sort and transport coal. Gradually some of the heavier tasks were eliminated and work was increasingly based at the picking belts or sorting tables at the foot of the screens. Here the women monitored and sorted coal. Their numbers were small – just under 7,000 in the 1870s. They decreased to 5,000 by 1900 though rose again by a further thousand in the next decade and almost doubled during wartime. However colliery closures, mechanisation and some replacement by male labour ultimately eliminated pit women. The last two women screen workers were made redundant at Whitehaven in 1972, 130 years after females had been forbidden to work below ground.

However the pit women's influence was greater than the overall numbers suggest since they were concentrated in certain parts of the coalfields.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, their absence from historical accounts is not matched by a corresponding lack of contemporary interest – far from it. Indeed the concern which they aroused stands in marked contrast to the way in which they have been written out of history. In 1886-7 and again in 1911 (a year better remembered for the Suffragettes' action) the pit women's livelihood was threatened by attempts to prohibit their work through the coal mines bills being debated in Parliament. On both occasions they were ultimately allowed to continue work but only after a considerable degree of protest had been orchestrated and deputations of pit women had protested to the Home Secretary. In the 1880s the debate about their right to work became a microcosm of wider issues confronting industries employing women at a time when protective legislation was a particularly topical question. They became a test case for the right of women to perform rough outdoor work, receiving considerable publicity through Parliamentary debates, Public meetings for and against the work and endless newspaper reports. Yet historians have ignored the subject. Paucity of sources is no excuse here. The failure to consider the women's plight is all the more marked when the symbolic significance of their exclusion threat is considered. The debate about their work raised fundamental questions about coalmining and the economy, about cheap labour conveniently exploited by the coalmasters and the application of domestic ideology as well as mirroring attitudes towards women's employment more generally. The way that the pit brow women have until very recently been 'Hidden from History' provides an historiographical comment on the development of women's history. It is a

reflection of the ways in which history is constructed and in particular of what has traditionally been deemed 'significant'.

This is highlighted when we consider the few occasions when women colliery workers have briefly entered into the historical consciousness. The best known instance is the Children's Employment Commission of 1842. A vivid piece of oral history in its own time, the Commission's results emphasised the employment of women as well as that of children, minors in another sense. Both were felt to be in need of protection. The report revealed barbaric work demands and conditions – the replacement of child and female labour by animals speaks for itself. Most British school-children today learn about this. However, women had worked in mines for centuries and their employment was already past its height. The 1842 Act required that all females as well as boys under 10 leave work within six months. The law could scarcely have been passed at a more economically disastrous time. Yet, significantly, the years following the legislation when the women and their families suffered intense privation have, like the years preceding 1842, been largely ignored by historians.<sup>10</sup> Historical analysis has overwhelmingly concentrated upon the intention rather than the implementation of the law and the wording of the 1842 Act is a far cry from the illegal employment of women which persisted in Lancashire and elsewhere for over twenty years and prompted Engels to describe the female clause as a 'dead letter'.<sup>11</sup>

Women's work more generally has received publicity when it has been about to begin or end or when, for some reason, it has suddenly become crucial to the economy. Women colliery workers were conveniently hailed as heroines during the First World War, being praised for work which many of them had been performing for years, and which was now becoming considerably easier with the adoption of more sophisticated sorting and coal washing arrangements. A St Helens pit lass who had been working since she left school appeared in a family picture in the local newspaper with the caption 'A Family, a credit to King and Country'.<sup>12</sup> One Cumberland screen lass got incensed at the glory being accorded to pit women by the press during the last-war. Her experience gave her a sense of history and collective time which was essentially different to that perceived and recorded by the journalists who helped to shape the writing and interpretation of present and future history. She has explained how the *News of the World* applauded some Lancashire pit women recruited during the war:

It said what a grand job they were doing for the war effort and they'd been there three years. I says, well, good grief, three years, I said, there's four of you on here, you've got 100 years between you, I says, I think I'll challenge them, you know.<sup>13</sup>

And she did. Several reporters visited her colliery, devoting space to 'The girls who wear the lipstick among the coal dust' and explaining to the uninitiated that screen girls were not film stars but 'heroines all, a lesson in devotion to duty'. Her efforts however resulted in a stiff rebuke from manage-

ment who clearly resented the exposure of the work conditions. Unlike their Lancashire counterparts these women had no cabin, heating or protection from rain or snow. Yet ironically the very fact that it was war time prevented her from being sacked – she and the other screen lasses were badly needed by the coal industry.

But just as pit women could be applauded when required, so could they be quietly discarded when no longer needed. In the 1950s the National Union of Mineworkers and the National Coal Board adopted a policy that disabled miners or those in danger of redundancy should replace them as they retired. Colliery closures, the use of mechanised tumblers for tipping coal, washeries and rapid loading schemes affected different pits at different times but they all pointed towards female manual labour becoming superfluous. Many were made redundant in circumstances which today would be viewed as blatant discrimination against women. One former pit woman explained that she lost her job because management used the excuse that women were forbidden to do nightwork. They replaced them with men who, it was argued, could operate the new coal washer at night.<sup>14</sup> Today the women remember with some bitterness the lack of adequate warning and the low compensation. Yet those who left work in the 1950s-60s did so in the context of a rapidly declining industry not yet reinvigorated by talk of an energy crisis. At the same time the so-called 'affluent' society did not concern itself with the fortunes of displaced women pit workers. Unlike their predecessors of 1842, they were not forbidden to work by law and so lacked the attendant publicity and potential of uniting to fight legislation. There was no fixed date when all pit women had to leave work. Their numbers had been dwindling for many years and the women's movement had not yet made its resurgence. They were from mining families where the work demands of the male collier had always been paramount and in the National Union of Mineworkers which clearly felt its allegiance to the majority of its members rather than to the women.

On leaving their employment they became part of a localised, romanticised folk memory. This was reinforced by the existence of photographs and postcards. Many had been taken during the earlier pit brow debates and depicted the women in pit gear posing against highly decorative and incongruous photographic studio backgrounds. One Lancashire paper now referred to the women as the 'shawled, clogged "bicep girls" of a past mining era... the brawny pit lasses... The age of mechanisation has swept them into history' (my emphasis).<sup>15</sup>

Where women have received some attention from coal mining historians it has usually been as the wives and mothers of miners. Not only is their childhood and young working life usually ignored, but almost invariably they have been considered from the standpoint of the male miner, helping to elucidate his little-known world. They have appeared too as widows, the surviving victims of explosions, though they have tended to disappear quite rapidly once the story of an accident has been told. Certainly the back-up support provided by miners' wives has been crucial, particularly since dust, disablement and

death have been the biggest offerings from the mine. Family strength and resilience have needed to be in plentiful supply. The emphasis on providing comforts for the miner whose work demands have been so exacting (particularly before mechanisation) has helped produce cohesive family units and traditional attitudes towards women. But history, literature and community studies have tended to present and reinforce views of miners' families and villages essentially through male eyes. Women's behaviour is refracted through the men's views and represented as a response but not as an alternative starting point in trying to understand the society. Ronald Frankenberg's refreshing re-assessment of the community study *Coal is our Life* points at the extent to which studies of mining have not only accepted but have internalised the male miners' eye view.<sup>16</sup> Family life and the social relations of production within families require examining from the perspectives of both men and women.

The impact of the separation of home from production in the labour market and a shifting (though there is a danger in posing too rigid a distinction between home and paid work. It is necessary to relationship between men and women. Joanna Bornat has argued for 'an approach which seeks to understand men and women, their institutions, interactions and self conceptions, in terms of their living and working relationships rather than an abstraction of either sex at home or at work'.<sup>17</sup> The pit women's experiences can provide another way of demolishing some of the artificial distinctions between the work situation and the domestic economy. Women's and men's work needs viewing in the light of their whole and differing life cycles, their positions as individuals, as parents and members of a family and as part of a working class involved in production. Considering the daily lives of the pit women means looking at the maintenance of unequal relationships in terms of class and gender and challenging the stereotype of the female sex in the mining community seen at just one possible stage in her life, as the miner's wife. Not only did many pit women never marry but the wives of miners might themselves have been and in some cases continued to be, pit workers.

The majority did leave work when they married. At certain collieries (such as Blundells' collieries at Pemberton, Lancashire) no married women could be employed. The married women who worked appear to have done so either because they had no children to keep them at home, or because they were at a particular stage in the family cycle where children were young and an additional bread-winner was needed to boost the income. A number left the pit on marriage, returning later as widows. Mining employment might be the only means of holding on to a colliery house. Most pit women were however single and many were teenage girls. This fact immediately calls into question the nineteenth century charges that pit lasses were neglecting their homes and families by working. Yet these accusations were hardly surprising since they were predicted upon an assumed moral threat, a reality of cheap labour competition and a domestic ideal of womanhood which ensured that they were anyway always portrayed as *potential* wives and mothers. The practice however never fitted the theory



(particularly with the demographic imbalance of the second half of the nineteenth century). Moreover the number of women who spent almost their entire adult lives at the pit should not be forgotten. From interviews with 26 pit brow women who worked in the first half of this century ten never married working from leaving school until redundancy or retirement. Though higher school leaving ages gradually meant starting work at a slightly later age than their predecessors, increased life expectancy meant that many years might be spent at the colliery, particularly since healthiness and longevity appear to be quite marked amongst pit women. The length of time spent working at the pit was on average thirty-five years for the ten women who remained in colliery work and though some had short breaks, three of the ten worked for over forty years and only one for less than twenty.

Considering the responses of some of the twentieth century pit women means focussing on a completely neglected group of women workers. We need to look not just at the flashpoints, the moments when the women entered into the arena of public debate (and when their fate was largely discussed, shaped and settled by and for others). The less dramatic forces which have helped determine their lifestyles also need examining especially the relationship between their employment and home and their positions as workers and servicers of labour power. Most of the 26 women were elderly – ten were born before 1900 and only three after 1925.<sup>18</sup> They worked in areas where women's surface work lasted longest. Sixteen worked at west Lancashire pits mainly near Wigan and nine in the Whitehaven-Workington area, Cumbria. The remaining woman came from Wales where women's pit work ceased earlier than in the other two districts. She worked at Daren colliery, Deri in south east Wales. Colliers and people who did not work in mining (but knew pit lasses) have also been recorded.

The difficulties of generalising from vastly different areas and conditions are enormous, particularly since some communities were quite isolated whilst others were much more integrated into towns with some alternative employment prospects. The problems of relying on 'survivors' and on such a small and elderly group over a relatively long period are well known to the oral historian. These recollections are not however being used just to provide evidence about their life and work, but to consider how and why they might recall their experiences in a particular way. Luisa Passerini has pointed out that oral history consists not just of factual statements but is 'pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and therefore includes not only literal narrations but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires.'<sup>19</sup>

All, except three, started at the pit in their teens. The majority went straight from school at 13. One Wigan girl began as a half-timer of twelve-and-a-half, spending part of the day at school and the rest picking coal. She was so small that the manager told her to bring two bricks to stand on.<sup>20</sup> A number lied about their age where there was a policy of not employing the very young. Nineteen boasted at least one female colliery worker relative. Seven were pit women's daughters, three were granddaughters. One was

the niece of one of the three Cumberland deputies to the Home Office in 1887. As she put it, 'We were of pit people'.<sup>21</sup> Fourteen had sisters at the pit and they or another relative secured the job for them by putting in a word on their behalf. Women's pit work was traditionally part of a family occupation and although the job had changed considerably, family connections at work remained strong. Moreover daughters lived at home and tipped up their whole wage to their mothers, receiving in turn a small amount as pocket money. One Lancashire woman has left a written account of her rise to two shillings a day when she reached eighteen:

I got a rise in my spenderns as well, sixpence, that was the top limit, both wage and spenderns. I began to think I was a millionaire. I kept turning it over, and studying how to spend it for the best. I had my own clothes to buy and very seldom, never to many tasty bits in my basket we were too poor.<sup>22</sup>

Joanna Bornat's study of early twentieth century Yorkshire textile families illustrates how tipping up potentially gave the mother some economic power as the family banker.<sup>23</sup> This power was later enhanced during the depression. Certainly the working-class wife was only too frequently upbraided by social investigators for failing to be a 'competent manager'.<sup>24</sup> Her position was in practice however circumscribed and controlled by her legal dependence on her husband, the hope (but not guarantee) that he would declare most of his earnings and, ultimately, the strength of the wage labour-capital relationship. In mining the power of the coal owners, the slow establishment of wage rates, difficult working conditions and longer term decline of the industry combined to exacerbate the feeling of helplessness. For the pit lass the surrender of the wage increased the dependence on the family, particularly since she did not determine how much spending money she received. The amount would be related to the economic demands being made upon the family as a whole. Not only would she be earning much less than the menfolk but daughters were not considered to need as much pocket money as their male relatives. For the latter, the need for sufficient spending money was linked to considerations of masculinity and camaraderie and could affect the image and status of the family in the community. Lewis Jones's novel *Cwmardy* (1937), based on his experience as a Rhondda miner illustrates the pressures.<sup>25</sup> In the preparations for the chapel excursion to the seaside – for Big Jim the passport to a day in the pub rather than the pit – he is slyly putting aside each week little sums of money. When he brings home especially small wage packets, not only are he and his wife Shane shown to be at the mercy of their employer but Shane is placed in the extremely difficult position of having both to administer the housekeeping money and give Jim his pocket money. Though the two financial demands conflict, her realisation of his need to maintain his status and for the family not to be shamed, ensures that in the last resort his request for spending money will be granted – as well he knows. The pit lass, aware of the demands constantly made upon the family in purchasing

food, was not only likely to be sensitive to the problems of budgeting, but was anyway expected to spend much of her free time helping in the house.

It was not just miners' wives who looked after homes. Daughters too played a crucial part. Older single and widowed women often had to care for elderly and disabled relatives. One Lancashire woman who started work at 7am has recalled how:

My mother left us with plenty of work to do. Oh every night it was there-no sitting and having a read you know. Oh no... I've been getting up and carrying things in me hand and putting them on as I've been going. That's true. Oh it was murder getting up in the morning cos it got near midnight before you got to bed you know.<sup>26</sup>

Not only did many families have lodgers to cater for in addition to relatives but, in mining areas, a disproportionate demand for young workers produced a younger than average population and so larger than average families. In parts of south east Wales in 1911 the proportion of married women in the child-bearing age range stood at more than double the national average.<sup>27</sup> With large families at home and the strong sense of helping neighbours and relatives which has so characterised many of the more remote colliery communities, any spare hands were welcome and indeed necessary. Not only might different members of a family be working different shifts but, before the opening of pit head baths, there was the dirt to contend with as well. The emphasis on masculinity in the mining areas and the knowledge that a boy would only too soon be a collier himself helped to ensure that jobs were done by the girls. A Welsh woman explained:

I used to get up at half past five in the morning to put four colliers out... when we came older – when I was at home then – we had to clean even the colliers' shoes, on a Saturday afternoon, and oil them ready for Monday. That was a big job. Of course we had to do it, not the boys. The girls, yes.<sup>28</sup>

Christopher Storm-Clark has compared the work of a miner's wife to that of a domestic outworker in the early years of industrialisation. The economic and work organisation of the pit imposed a corresponding cycle of cooking, washing and household demands.<sup>29</sup> The interdependence of work and family life was marked yet it worked in differing ways for males and females, even if both sexes were engaged in pit work. The perception of a day's work for a pit lass was very different from that of her male counterpart. The former's 'turn' at the pit would be followed by a 'turn' at home. Though this was recognised as essential and very different from the demands 'in work' it was still, nevertheless, work. It is remembered as such and could be lengthy and physically demanding. Even the surfaceman's 'time-table' would be very different from the woman surface worker's. The women were usually the last to leave their shift since they would have to clear up after all the coal had come up the pit. Their work demands were less clearly demarcated than the men's. They might be moved from the

screens to perform a range of other jobs including working at coal tips and moving timber:

We carried wood, like in yard and men used to laugh at us and they were waiting to go down and they'd say, 'You're fools for carrying that', so they complained and we got stopped. We used to use a shovel and clean the lines where the wagons were, shovel the coal into wagons. We used to carry wood in little tubs many times, we used to clean tables and grease wheels. I liked it on screens best, used to clean walls down with big brushes...<sup>30</sup>

Viewed as unskilled workers, they were sometimes given additional jobs, particularly 'women's' work which might include cleaning the manager's office and even his home. The varying demand for coal, and the backward conditions at some collieries meant that women were always vulnerable and some even did additional cleaning work or took in washing to supplement their low wages.

Time was taken up with housework. Pit women were anyway not encouraged to join in most of the men's recreational activities. The overwhelming emphasis placed on heavy drinking, on sports and on the culture of the miners' clubs suggests pastimes which were viewed as essentially male. However questions have not usually been asked about the nature of women's recreations and it has been too easily presumed that because they did not participate in the traditional male pastimes, they did not have a social life. Recreation has largely been defined in terms of male expectations and opportunities which have meant that women's use of their free time has been dismissed as frivolous or unimportant. Women's assertion of a sex solidarity through time spent with neighbours (often based in or close to the home because of child-minding functions) needs to be taken as seriously as the men's equivalent through the pub or miners' Institute. The pit women interviewed indicate that though circumscribed by household demands, a lack of facilities, sometimes geographical isolation and always small amounts of spending money, women in mining communities might nevertheless take part in a wider range of social activities than historical accounts have suggested. Quite apart from some social outlets offered through chapel, the pit women of the first half of the twentieth century made the most of their limited opportunities. They usually spent their free time with other colliery workers. Those who married almost invariably married miners, quite often from the same colliery. As single women they relaxed with other pit lasses. Some did go to the pub though this was not very easily accepted by the miners. One old collier, the son-in-law of a pit woman, divides them into two types, the respectable chapel goers and those who went to the pubs:

There were two types – there was the type who lived a gay life, who went to the public houses and drank and there was another type. It's rather odd that most of them, most of them were susceptible to having a drink of beer-my mother-in-law did. My mother-in-law loved a glass of beer and it was an escape in the evenings and usually they would go with their own crowd.<sup>31</sup>



Sorting at the picking belts, Wigan Coal and Iron Company. From JR Mannix, *Miners and Their Story*, 1913.

The chief source of entertainment for the women who were interviewed appears to have been the cinema which by 1914 had become a national institution. Another popular way of spending free time was cycling and some of the pit girls joined clubs such as the Wigan Wheelers. Although many pits never laid on entertainments, some did provide a treat once a year. Until the First World War Bamfurlong colliery near Wigan had a 'Pit Brow girls' ball' – tea in the local hall was followed by a dance. At nearby Hindley Green there was an annual 'Pit Brow stir' with a tea party followed by a fiddler, pianist and dancing. One pit woman recalls a song celebrating a pit 'soiree' at Coppull Moor school.

Pearsons had a soiree  
A soiree I'll never forget  
Where all the pit proud lasses  
Were wearing collerettes.

Some were wearing frillens  
Some were wearing lace  
Some were having their hair on top  
And fringed all round their face.<sup>32</sup>

The women sometimes organised day trips to resorts such as Blackpool and Southport.

Since social activities and politics were so closely related for miners, these women were further alienated by remaining outside the dominant recreational structures of the communities. Unlike male colliery workers, the union does not appear to have played a central part in the lives of pit women. When asked about their union commitment they mention 1921 and 1926, emphasise the economic hardship and the need to go coal picking but otherwise, for these women at least, the union meant mainly another stoppage from the wage.

Penny Infirmary, Penny compensation, got 6/- and 3d out of that, 3d or 4d to union. Had to pay flag days...<sup>33</sup>

Doubtless this in part reflects the fact that the majority of women interviewed were not employed in the more militant coalfields. It is not however surprising that the union was relatively unimportant to them given the historical development of miners' unions, their structure and the time and places of meetings. Although the women received support from those who worked at the same pit as themselves, there was a tradition of official union opposition to their work which was slow to disappear. In Lancashire the successful recruitment of women pit workers to the National Federation of Women Workers during the 1914-

1918 war was followed by their acceptance as members of the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners' Federation. Yet many miners still had considerable reservations about such work. Misgivings were rooted in the long struggle waged with the coal owners in the nineteenth century when pit women had been outside the union and exploited as cheap, convenient, unorganised labour and their work defended by these same men who were so distrusted by the miners. Although by 1918 the miners recognised the need to negotiate decent wage rates for their fellow workers and members and accepted that screening might be reasonable employment, they were still concerned about whether other jobs might be suitable. They explained that they found the practice of women pushing tubs 'a disgrace' and they stressed that 'to handle the full tubs out of the cage to the tippler and tip them, we consider is work for males only'. They also argued that women should not be put in charge of any machinery.<sup>34</sup>

Mining women were not always free to attend union meetings. Frequently the men's political activity was made possible by the fact that their womenfolk were undertaking the vital household tasks. Pit women and miners' wives might be most active in opposing high food prices in their community. It is important to consider what issues would have appeared most pertinent to them. The difficulties of balancing household budgets and the need for regular payment of wages were particularly relevant and recurring problems. In addition women in mining communities have an impressive record of asserting solidarity with miners in times of industrial conflict. In Lancashire pit girls raised and collected money during strikes.<sup>35</sup> Practices have of course varied not just over time but between and within coalfields. Certainly in the traditionally militant mining villages of south Wales women have played a crucial part in maintaining community and class consciousness. The Welsh pit woman interviewed recalled how she was fined £1 for throwing a brick at a policeman who was protecting a black-leg miner in her village.<sup>36</sup> In a relatively new mining community in a neighbouring valley one miner's wife started a women's section of the Labour Party, which, during the General Strike found its own way of exerting influence.

There was a man that was lodging in the village here and he went to work. And so we women got together. we decided to go to the pit to meet him coming out. And we had sticks and brooms you know, like you had and one of our members pinned a white nightdress on a broom and we marched right to the pit and waited for him to come out. And when he came out we marched behind him bleating and whatyoucall until he came up to a house up here in the avenue where he was lodging and we chanted outside and then we went to our homes, like. And we heard the next morning that he had gone away in the night.<sup>37</sup>

Such episodes demonstrate both continuity in the exercise of traditional community action and the value of considering how the women became involved in the men's politics, how they related to other women and themselves helped to shape social relations in the community, even though they may view and relate their contributions in very modest terms.

How have the pit women remembered their past? It is not just a question of what they tell. Why and how do they concentrate on particular features, and reject, consciously or otherwise, other aspects of their past experiences? Confusions in detail, silences and gaps can be highly significant. Omissions in a narrative can point not so much to a confirmation that oral history can be an unreliable and misleading method of historical research as to an indication of some of the complex ways in which memory works. Oral history does not need to be the search for a 'truer' form of history even though it might in the process be providing a valuable corrective to other sources by its more 'humanised' and everyday, personal focus. Through its revelation of what memory has made of the past it can however permit investigation of the ways in which peoples' perceptions of past time interact with the present, and so approach wider questions about the nature and purpose of history. The creation of myths about the past can be a means of coping with the difficulties of the present, or of erasing particularly painful experiences and rejection by other groups.

Perhaps the most striking feature about the interviews with the pit women has been the uniformity of their responses. When asked if they liked their work, all, with only one exception, emphasised, indeed, reiterated time and again how much they had enjoyed it. Seven volunteered the information that if it were possible and they were younger, they would be back working again at the pit. Despite the fact that a number of them had some other form of employment (usually either for a short time before beginning at the pit or after being made redundant) pit work was always the job they enjoyed best. The other jobs were, however, on their own admission, lighter and easier. These included ancillary jobs at the pit (chiefly cleaning and canteen work), factory work, serving school meals, domestic service, shop and pub work, and hotel work. The fact that over half the women interviewed were made redundant and therefore did not leave their jobs of their own free will would have influenced their feelings about the work. The likelihood of romanticising about the past, enhanced in this instance by their being the last generation of pit women, must be borne in mind; as must the fact that they were being interviewed precisely because they had worked at the pit. But at the same time their insistence on their enjoyment of their work is still remarkable:

Oh, I loved every minute of it. Oh I did. I loved every minute of it.<sup>39</sup>

And another woman:

It was hard work but we loved it. Ah we loved it, we loved it.<sup>40</sup>

It cannot be completely explained in terms of nostalgic reminiscing about one's youth. The last two women to leave were interviewed only three years after they ceased to work and anyway some of the women remained at pit work until they were elderly, retiring at 60. Just under half were in work until and, in a few cases, beyond the 1950s. Although it can be argued that the women who came forward to be



interviewed were likely to be those who enjoyed their work, interviewing was carried out in a 'snowballing' pattern. One pit woman would suggest another who would probably have worked with her but whom she had not usually seen for a long period. These women were then interviewed and although they had not initially suggested themselves as potential interviewees, they nevertheless confirmed the general impression when interviewed. Moreover another researcher has interviewed some of these Wigan women. They have repeated their predilection for this work and this has been borne out by additional interviews with other pit women. Exactly the same pattern has emerged with only one person saying that she disliked the work.<sup>41</sup>

The overwhelming stress on the enjoyment of the work is all the more remarkable when viewed in the context of its incessant demands which the women were careful to emphasise. Their evaluation of their job was accompanied by a realistic recognition of its claims on them.

I used to go to bed with a bandage on every finger at night. It was slavery really. Oh, yes, I enjoyed it but it was slavery really. It was really hard work, it was.<sup>42</sup>

But, do you know, they were the happiest days of our lives, the happiest days of our lives. We were dirty, we had poor wages – well in fact it were a pittance, it weren't a wage; but we were happy. When I started when I were 13 year old I had 10d a day, not 10p.<sup>43</sup>

I liked every minute of it at screens. I've hurt me fingers, I've had me fingers busted open.<sup>44</sup>

Or at a Whitehaven pit exposed to the winds off the Irish Sea:

There was no heat whatever on the screens. It was absolutely – and everything was iron and you see it was always breaking down and they had to take the sides off and then all the opening was there. It was, well you had to be really tough for to stick the cold alone. But as I say, it was a job and nobody thought anything of it you know. It was really terrific (laughter).<sup>45</sup>

And another:

Oh I loved it. It was cold, mind you, very cold. But it was nice, cold to the fingers you know and rain.<sup>46</sup>

The contradictions in these descriptions are deliberate. They are not the response of 'gluttons for punishment'; but the reactions of women who worked in a job which many simply dismissed as unfeminine, unsuitable and degrading. In the Whitehaven area 'As black as Sal Madge' is a popular local saying and refers to a nineteenth century screen lass. The women who were interviewed acknowledge that the work was dirty, tiring, caused back-ache, varicose veins and other discomforts. In South Wales at the beginning of this century Welsh women continued to be harnessed to trams by ropes which went round their waists.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, in contrast to many jobs and in direct antithesis to the image

of what constituted appropriate work for women, it was 'real' work and the women are at pains to stress their ability to do it. They will speak of their other jobs with a degree of scorn. One woman who spent her adult working life operating a fly tippler, loading tubs and stacking and sawing timber described the munitions work she was forced to take when she became redundant at the age of 59:

It were not my work – it weren't heavy enough for me. A play thing that were to me because I've not been used to that. I've been used to roughing it and going among things you know – but a little paintbrush ... it was a play-thing. It was murder.<sup>48</sup>

They are anxious to point out that sorting coal required constant attention and deftness, that unloading tubs was heavy and arduous work. This is not just to suggest that people have it 'soft' now. They accept that though demanding, it was not difficult once a knack was acquired. This vehement defence of their work is, it would seem, partly connected to the need to distinguish it from the very different yet much better known work below ground. Due to the way that history has concentrated on the 'women and children' of 1842 as a frozen snapshot and neglected their own work, they are aware that mention of women and mining to those outside the industry evokes a very different kind of work, replete with tales of immorality. Their reactions are also clearly linked to the ways that their work was and still is, regarded within coal mining areas. A retired collier explained his view of the pit women:

There was a social barrier, no question about it. There can be no question about it that there was a social barrier, that a girl in domestic service if she was among the upper class, among the managerial class in Tredegar, would consider herself of a higher social status than any girl working at the top of a pit. It was said in a disparaging fashion – 'Oh she works on top of the pit'.<sup>49</sup>

For girls, going to work at the pit was seen as a less automatic process and desirable start to work than it was for their brothers. In multi-occupational towns such as Wigan, alternative work might be sought first. Some girls found however that mill work did not suit their health, and two of the women interviewed soon transferred to the open air of the pit on their doctors' recommendation. One of them had four other sisters who worked at the screens like their mother before them, and her mother had worked below ground.<sup>50</sup> Mill work was sometimes tried because it could at least offer the possibility of a trade:

That was a big thing they used to talk about, the cotton workers. You've a trade in Jour hands, a wonderful trade a weaver. A trade in your hands if you learned to weave.<sup>51</sup>

In comparison pit women were aware of their lack of skilled status – 'There was no trade in it, no trade in it'<sup>52</sup> – in an outdoor and dirty job. Strength was the prime prerequisite for the jobs which involved moving tubs – the miners' agent Stephen Walsh explained that if a girl was 'a bonny



lass' she could earn a higher wage.<sup>53</sup> One pit woman explained the mill girls' attitudes towards them:

Some think they're above you but they're going to the same place... so there's no need to be above... They looked down really – because you worked at the pit you were nothing, but we were as good as them—we can come up to them any day.<sup>54</sup>

The former pit women emphasise how others viewed them as set apart. In the words of one Cumbrian woman 'They didn't want to know. I think they thought we were common.'<sup>55</sup> And they insist on putting the record straight:

They were great lasses – because everybody used to look down on pit lasses. I don't know why. But they made great wives, yes they did, they made great wives, because there were some nice lasses on.<sup>56</sup>

We enjoyed the company ... and the old ladies used to get talking. They say women but they were ladies and they were alright. We enjoyed it.<sup>57</sup>

The notion of social stigma had been emphasised by newspaper reporters in the 1880s though, anxious for a good story, they seem to have both simplified and exaggerated this.<sup>58</sup> The women were however particularly vulnerable since, unlike mill workers, they were in the minority at work. And like all surface workers they lacked the status of the skilled miner in the dangerous and peculiarly intimate world below ground. The distinction was made clearer by the Mines Act of 1911 which, by laying down minimum standards of safety and technical competence, encouraged a view of mining as a specialised and restricted craft occupation.<sup>59</sup> The women however were not able to earn the same wages as the male surface workers. There was usually a man in charge of them as their 'belt boss' though two of the women interviewed became forewomen. If a man did work at the screens with them, he would usually be an old or disabled miner, incapacitated by age, health or accident from his former work and *relegated* to the pit top. There were some lads too but the screens were only an early stage for them. They would be destined for 'proper' pit work and gaining experience until they were old enough to go underground. One woman who believes she has got the 'miners' disease' feels that pit women were always marginalised:

I've never had any compensation or anything but if the union men and the officials – and I paid into the mutual aid and all them sort of things you know were at the work – if they took my case up nobody bothered you see and of course in them days the doctors, the doctors and that were all for the companies, understand me? You see I'm only a pit lass. It doesn't matter. And they put it down to chronic bronchitis – it was coal... I could hear the coal dust and I never got it out.<sup>60</sup>

The unanimity with which the women recall their work suggests their recognition of the need to defend themselves. The one woman who did not talk with fond memories was

the youngest of the informants. She only worked for one year in the 1950s and her explanation for doing the work differed from everybody else's. As a schoolleaver of sixteen without qualifications she found that by this time it paid better than most other unskilled work for women. She left of her own volition and, perhaps most significantly, unlike any of the others, has recently taken up a profession and is now a nurse.<sup>61</sup>

For the women who spent years working at the pit, the sense of their own exclusiveness was enhanced by the nature of screening work. They operated as a team at the picking belts and tables, they generally had their own cabin, and they usually walked together to work. The women were even segregated from the men on the company train for Ty Trist Colliery, Tredegar.<sup>62</sup> Being a pit lass appears to have had a pervasive and lasting effect on the women's life-style (partly reinforced by working shifts) and was not confined to their place of employment. It has helped determine the way that they recollect their work. As one woman put it, they see themselves as having been 'one happy clique'.<sup>63</sup> There was an element of continuity in the work—frequently a relative would already be working at the screens or a girl might be replacing one. When a new girl began, an older and experienced woman would be placed in charge of her. There were popular stories about former characters who had been tremendous workers. At Great Clifton in Cumbria a screen table was nicknamed 'Jane Ann' after one such woman.<sup>64</sup>

The women recall a sense of camaraderie at work. They are likely to exaggerate it partly because the majority are now elderly, housebound and alone. Aware too that it lacked status, they are at pains to emphasise both their respectability and their enjoyment of the work. Some local people in the districts where they were employed expressed doubt as to whether former pit women would want to be interviewed, pointing out that it was quite a delicate matter. In several instances daughters of pit women have not wanted to identify themselves as such. Yet the women themselves have responded very differently and have taken the opportunity to present their picture of their past, even though some have been quite shy at first.

Recognising too how changing social, political and cultural factors help to reshape and reorganise memory, it is evident that despite the shortcomings of the 1970s legislation designed to combat sex discrimination, the influence of the women's movement has been manifested in a number of ways over the past decade. Though frequently ridiculing it, the way that the media has nevertheless publicised each entry of women to jobs hitherto seen as male enclaves, has redirected attention to the old question of what constitutes paid work for women and the implications of working in a 'man's world'. The 'art' of memory involves selecting from the past in the context of the demands and values of the present. Being interviewed at the time of a reinvigorated women's movement, the pit women's work has, rather belatedly, acquired a dimension which it lacked at the times that they left their work. One woman explained in 1980:

You see they talked about screen lasses but I bet a lot would want to go on now.<sup>65</sup>

The oldest can in fact remember the suffragettes and one of the Lancashire women actually attended the 1911 deputation to London as a young screen worker.<sup>66</sup> They are conscious of their position as the last women surface workers.

Their defences of the work, combined with a recognition of its grim and unpleasant nature, need to be viewed both in the context of how they saw and see themselves being accepted within their society and in the light of a renewed public interest in women's right to work in the 1970s. Yet however they may now choose to rationalise and recall their former employment, it is important to remember that when they began at the pit brow, the need to bring home a wage was the deciding factor in their being employed in the first instance. Ultimately their responses are recollections made at very different points in time and circumstance from those which first prompted such employment. Freedom of choice was not really an issue. When asked if her grandmother and great-aunt had liked or disliked their work pulling trams, a Welsh woman (not herself a pit worker) replied:

Well they didn't have any option, fach (dear). They didn't have any option. If they didn't work, they didn't eat

Bringing the pit women into the ambit of historical analysis illustrates how the historian's point of vision has been at times particularly limited and misleading. Only by recognising a parallax and drawing attention to the perspectives of women in mining communities can it become possible to begin to explore more fully the experiences of all those who have been connected in some way with coal mining.

There are various ways of trying to penetrate the percep-

tions of these women. One possible starting point, suggested in this article, has been to listen to the words of the pit lasses themselves. This however immediately raises complex problems. Any account of the past is refracted through the experience of the past and present and affected by ideology. As Raphael Samuel has observed, we have to ask ourselves theoretical questions about popular memory and historical consciousness and take into account the double character of the spoken word – what it conceals as well as what it expresses – and to build our understanding from such dualities.<sup>68</sup>

Women's history and oral history are both at a crucial stage in their development. There exists the possibility for their incorporation as 'tools' of analysis into the mainstream of historical scholarship. Doubtless this would considerably enrich and enliven much writing of history but in gaining 'respectability', they might stand in danger of ignoring the significance and political context of their appeal as developed in the seventies. In these years the women's movement saw a feminist approach to history as a means of 'challenging centuries of silence'<sup>69</sup> whilst oral history was encouraged in the belief that it could provide 'a means for a radical transformation of the social meaning of history'.<sup>70</sup> If these aims are still to be pursued and women's history and oral history retain their initial dynamism, they need to continue to raise questions themselves about the meaning of history. Utilising women's history and oral history together through the recollections of the pit women is a means of asking how the past shapes the present and the present impinges upon and structures views of the past. It can alert us to the ways that memory can reflect, distort, develop and mediate between the two and so begin to confront the nature of social change.

The Angela V John Oral History Collection is held in the South Wales Miners Library, Swansea University.

## NOTES

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7. *Ibid*.
8. M Roberts, 'Sickles and Scythes: Women's Work and Men's Work at Harvest Time', *History Workshop Journal* 7, Spring, 1979, p 21.
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12. C Forman, *Industrial Town*, London, 1978, p 41.
13. Interviewed September 1980, born 1907.
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16. R Frankenberg, 'In the Production of their Lives, Men (?)... Sex and Gender in British Community Studies', in D Barker and S Allen (eds), *Sexual Divisions and Society: Process and Change*, London, 1976, p 38.
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21. Interviewed September 1980, born 1905.
22. Mrs. Holden's undated manuscript, 'A True Story of a Lancashire Pit Brow Lass', Chorley Public Library.
23. J. Bornat (fn 17).
24. For example Lady Bell, *At the Works*, London, 1907.
25. L Jones, Cwmardy, London, 1978 ed, pp 68-70.
26. Interviewed March 1980, born 1900.
27. MR Haines, 'Fertility, Nuptiality and Occupation: A Study of Coal Mining Populations and Regions in England and Wales in the Mid Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, viii, 2, Autumn, 1977, pp 256, 258, 266-7.
28. P Thompson, 'The Problems of Method

in Oral History, *Oral History*, vol 1, no 4, pp 32-9.

**29.** C Storm-Clark, 'The Miners, the Relevance of Oral Evidence', *Oral History*, vol 1, no 4, p 90.

**30.** Interviewed October 1975, born 1920.

**31.** Interviewed November 1980, born 1906.

**32.** Song from interview August 1980 by Eileen Murphy.

**33.** Interviewed August 1978, born 1898.

**34.** Lancashire and Cheshire Joint District Committee, Arbitration on the Scale of Minimum Wages for Women, 1919, NUM Bolton, pp 25-6, 35.

**35.** *Ibid* p 9.

**36.** Interviewed November 1980, born 1892.

**37.** Interviewed November 1980; see also H Francis and D Smith, *The Fed*, London 1980, pp 59, 65.

**38.** See *Annales*, 45, Jan-Feb 1980, pp 124-83, 'Archives Orales: Une Autre Histoire': especially F Raphaël, 'Le Travail de la Memoire et les limites de l'Histoire Orale', and Y Lequin and J Metra, 'A La Recherche d'une Memoire Collective: Le Metallurgistes Retraites de Givors'; Passerini (see footnote 19) and

P Thompson, 'The New Oral History in France' in Samuel, *People's History and Socialist Theory*, pp 67-77.

**39.** Interviewed September 1980, born 1905.

**40.** Interviewed August 1978, born 1904.

**41.** Interviewed by Eileen Murphy, August 1980.

**42.** Interviewed August 1978, born 1910.

**43.** Interviewed August 1978, born 1896.

**44.** Interviewed July 1974, born 1906.

**45.** Interviewed September 1980, born 1927.

**46.** Interviewed August 1978, born 1898.

**47.** Interviewed November 1980, born 1892.

**48.** Interviewed August 1978, born 1898.

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**50.** Interviewed August 1978, born 1889.

**51.** Quoted in J. Liddington, 'Working Class Women in the North West', *Oral History* vol 5, no 2, p 33.

**52.** Interviewed August 1978, born 1898.

**53.** Lancashire and Cheshire Joint District Committee (see footnote 34) p 21.

**54.** Interviewed August 1978, born 1898.

**55.** Interviewed September 1980, born 1911.

**56.** Interviewed September 1980, born 1905.

**57.** Interviewed September 1980, born 1927.

**58.** See John, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, chapter 4.

**59.** Storm-Clark (fn 38).

**60.** Interviewed September 1980, born 1907.

**61.** Interviewed September 1980, born 1938.

**62.** Interviewed November 1980, born 1906.

**63.** Interviewed March 1974, born 1923.

**64.** Interviewed September 1980, born 1910.

**65.** Interviewed September 1980, born 1927.

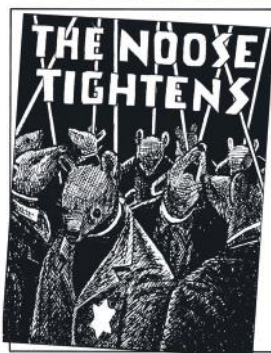
**66.** Interviewed June 1974 and again in August 1978, born 1893.

**67.** Interviewed April 1976.

**68.** R Samuel, *People's History and Socialist Theory*, p xxxii; see also A Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop Journal*, Autumn 1980, pp 96-107.

**69.** *Ibid* p xxxi.

**70.** Thompson. *The Voice of the Past*, p 18.

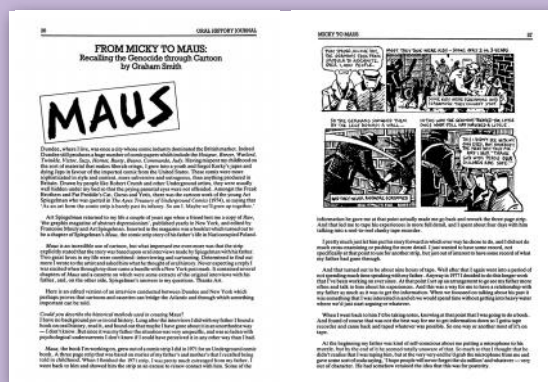


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# From Micky to Maus: recalling the Genocide through cartoon

by Graham Smith

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Art Siegelman's reflections here contains many of the elements that continue to fascinate oral historians, most notably the interview relationship and the affiliations individuals have with history. However, for me, what was important at

the time and continues to inspire, is his eloquent discussion of the mediation of memory and the complexities of subsequent representation. It is why he concludes that he is producing 'realistic fiction' and is even 'counterfeiting reality'.

Oral history is not simply a method of gathering information about the past, it is a way of making sense of history. His work should encourage us to realise the importance of how we interpret and use interviews through ongoing reflective

analysis that communicates new historical understandings.

It remains surprising to me that 'From Micky to Maus: recalling the Genocide through cartoon' was accepted for the journal. Comic books at the time hadn't

quite become graphic novels. Only a few grown-ups were interested. And of course, the article was

presented in an interview format that the editors normally eschew. Although given the layering of interpretation

and meaning explored by Spiegelman, it felt like the right thing to do. So, thank you editors of *Oral History*, then and now.

**Graham Smith,**  
Professor of Oral  
History, Newcastle  
University



Dundee, where I live, was once a city whose comic industry dominated the British market. Indeed Dundee still produces a huge number of comic papers which include the *Hotspur*, *Beezer*, *Warlord*, *Twinkle*, *Victor*, *Suzy*, *Hornet*, *Bunt*, *Beano*, *Commando*, *Judy*. Having mispent my childhood on the sort of material that makes liberals cringe, I grew into a youth and forgot Korky's japes and dying Japs in favour of the imported comix from the United States. These comix were more sophisticated in style and content, more subversive and outrageous, than anything produced in Britain. Drawn by people like Robert Crumb and other Underground artists, they were usually well hidden under my bed so that the prying parental eyes were not offended. Amongst the Freak Brothers and Fat Freddie's Cat, Gurus and Yetis, there was the cartoon work of the young Art Spiegelman who was quoted in *The Apex Treasury of Underground Comics* (1974), as saying that 'As an art form the comic strip is barely past its infancy. So am I. Maybe we'll grow up together.'

Art Spiegelman returned to my life a couple of years ago when a friend lent me a copy of *Raw*, 'the graphix magazine of abstract depressionism', published yearly in New York, and edited by Francoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman. Inserted in the magazine was a booklet which turned out to be a chapter of Spiegelman's *Maus*, the comic strip story of his father's life in Nazi occupied Poland.

*Maus* is an incredible use of cartoon, but what impressed me even more was that the strip explicitly stated that the story was based upon oral interviews made by Spiegelman with his father. Two great loves in my life were combined: interviewing and cartooning. Determined to find out more I wrote to the artist and asked him what he

thought of oral history. Never expecting a reply I was excited when through my door came a bundle with a New York post mark. It contained several chapters of *Maus* and a cassette on which were some extracts of the original interviews with his father, and, on the other side, Spiegelman's answers to my questions. Thanks Art.

Here is an edited version of an interview conducted between Dundee and New York which perhaps proves that cartoons and cassettes can bridge the Atlantic and through which something important can be told.

*Could you describe the historical methods used in creating Maus?*

I have no background *per se* in oral history. Long after the interviews I did with my father I found a book on oral history, read it, and found out that maybe I have gone about it in an unorthodox way – I don't know. But since it was my father the situation was very unspecific, and was so laden with psychological undercurrents I don't know if I could have perceived it in any other way than I had.

*Maus*, the book I'm working on, grew out of a comic strip I did in 1971 for an Underground comic book. A three page strip that was based on stories of my father's and mother's that I recalled being told in childhood. When I finished the 1971 strip, I was pretty much estranged from my father, I went back to him and showed him the strip as an excuse to renew contact with him. Some of the information he gave me at that point actually made me go back and rework the three page strip. And that led me to tape his experiences in more full





detail, and I spent about four days with him talking into a reel-to-reel clunky tape recorder.

I pretty much just let him put his story forward in which ever way he chose to do, and I did not do much cross-examining or pushing for more detail. I just wanted to have some record, not specifically at that point to use for another strip, but just out of interest to have some record of what my father had gone through.

And that turned out to be about nine hours of tape. Well after that I again went into a period of not spending much time speaking with my father. Anyway in 1977 I decided to do this longer work that I've been working on ever since. At that point I set up an arrangement to go see my father more often and talk to him about his experiences. And this was a way for me to have a relationship with my father as much as it was to get the information. When we focussed on talking about his past it was something that I was interested in and eh we would spend time without getting into heavy water where we'd just start arguing or whatever.

When I went back to him I'd be taking notes, knowing at that point that I was going to do a book. And found of course that was not the best way for me to get information down so I gotta tape recorder and came back and taped whatever was possible. So one way or another most of it's on tape.

At the beginning my father was kind of self-conscious about me putting a microphone to his muzzle, but by the end of it he seemed totally unaware of that. So much so that I thought that he didn't realise that I was taping him, but at the very very end he'd grab the microphone from me and gave some sort of coda saying, 'I hope people will never forget the six million' and whatever - very out of character. He had somehow retained the idea that this was for posterity.

I would ask questions of him that I would ask over and over again, because often he just wouldn't answer the question, not meaning to evade I don't think, but it would trigger some associational response and he'd get off on that. And I'd hear the same stories maybe four,

five, six, seven, times. I'd have to sort of trick him by finding other questions – other ways of asking – t'get a little bit more information. When I've gone back over his several times re-told story I find discrepancies either in dates or in the duration of time that something took.

*How important was the accuracy not only of your father's story, but also how he recalled the story, to the final version?*

Well, looking back at these various versions of the story I have t'kind of figure out what probably happened, and that's sometimes based on using some reference books about the period including one very specific work that was about Jews of his home town. It was published in Polish after the war and I've had it translated as some kind of objective guide post of dates. And to a degree I've been able to get correlating information from a cousin of mine named Lolek Spiegelman, who's mentioned in *Maus*, or from my step-mother, or from other friends of the family that I talked to. I've done that to corroborate his story, on the other hand most of the story I can't corroborate.

Although I set about in doing *Maus* to do a history of sorts I'm all too aware that ultimately what I'm creating is a realistic fiction. The experiences of my father actually went through, there's what he's able to remember and what he's able to articulate of these experiences. Then there's what A'm able to understand of what he articulated, and what A'm able to put down on paper. And then of course there's what the reader can make of that. *Maus* is so many steps removed from the actual experience, they're so distant from each other that all I can do is hint at, intimate, and try for something that feels real to me.

*Were there problems of using transcribed language in the cartoons?*

One moment I'm going to put you on pause while I gather my thoughts. O.K., so I was making these tapes and taking these notes, and I spent a long time organising that information as best I could – chronologically. And from that began to break the material down into chapter form and then into comic strip panels, which is the language A'm comfortable with. 'Nd this breaking down did involve not using his exact language, that is spoken language when transcribed. Transcription is not the easiest language to understand and it also fills a lotta space ye know. In comic strip one has to be efficient to be uh able to get ideas across in a small number of words so that they will fit into a caption and a balloon. So there is a kind of reduction going on to get to the essence of something. In the captions I've tried to capture my father's cadences and speech pattern, and eh his specific kind of language if not always his exact phrases. That's based on having spent many years listening to his language while I was growing up and therefore feeling comfortable enough with it to be able to make a facsimile of it or even a caricature of it.

I was able to use his exact words in the captions whenever that particular phrasing was felicitous. Sometimes where that was the most beautiful way to say something, although obviously it was not necessarily the grammatically correct way to say it.

I decided not to use my father's broken language for the balloons in the past. Sometimes when telling me his story he would make up dialogue for various people he'd been in contact with as if these were direct quotes, which he didn't remember word for word, obviously. When I came t'put the words in their mouths I felt very uncomfortable, because that was based on not being present and not knowing how people spoke. So I tried a fairly neutral kind of dialogue. In other words if I'd been writing a true fiction piece I'd probably would have taken a lot more liberties with the dialogue in order to give certain kind of cadences and to specify character. Here I felt I could use it as a way of conveying information and moving the narrative along, but not to hallucinate what I'd like that character to be like and make them too specific.

Also I didn't want to put the dialogue balloons in my father's broken English, like it was in his captions, in that in the captions I wanted t'use my father's difficulties with th'language as a pointer toward his situation in America where English is not his first language. I didn't want to impose that broken English on the characters in the past where they were speaking their native tongue and therefore spoke as fluently as one would in that circumstance.

*Why did you choose to tell your parents' story in cartoon?*

It's important to me that *Maus* is done in comic strip form, because it's the form A'm most comfortable shaping and working with. *Maus* for me in part is a way of telling my parents' life and therefore coming to terms with it.

That's important to me. It's not a matter of choice in the sense that I don't feel I could deal with this material as prose, or as a series of paintings, or as a film, or as poetry.

*The methods you use produce a distancing effect. Why was this effect sought?*

Yeh, yeh, uhm that was nice of you to say it that way, 'cause that was a phrase that was in my mind when I was working on the material. Uh again I don't just feel that I had that much choice about the way I've approached this material. Obviously I could have chosen to do commercial art comic strips, which I was doing when I started *Maus*, and not dealt with the material at all. But once I started on *Maus* I can't really imagine having done the comic strip for instance with people rather than with animals. And using the animals is one way that this distancing effect is achieved. If I'd tried to do a comic strip about my parents' experiences with human characters in



TRAINS WERE STILL GOING FROM PROTECTORATE TO REICH. ONLY, ONE NEEDED LEGAL PAPERS. OF COURSE, THIS I DIDN'T HAVE ...



...BUT ANYWAY I GOT ON THE TRAIN IN THE DIRECTION I WANTED.

I APPROACHED TO THE TRAIN MAN, A POLE...  
MAY I TALK TO YOU FOR A MOMENT?



SURE, SOLDIER.

I STILL HAD ON MY ARMY UNIFORM, AND I DIDN'T LET KNOW I WAS A JEW.

YOU'RE A POLE LIKE ME, SO I CAN TRUST YOU... THE STINKING NAZIS HAD ME IN A WAR PRISON... I JUST ESCAPED.



THE POLES WERE VERY BITTER ON THE GERMANS, SO IT WAS GOOD TO SPEAK BAD OF THEM.

I'M TRYING TO GET TO SÓSNOWIEC - BACK TO MY FAMILY.

DON'T WORRY... WHEN WE GET TO THE BORDER, HIDE IN HERE.



AND SO THE TRAIN MAN HELPED ME COME BACK TO MY SIDE OF POLAND.

which I tried to get likenesses of everyone I would be involved in a rather different endeavour. I'd be a kind of counterfeiting reality, in that I would be making the pretence of being a camera wandering through the ghettos of Europe. That would be something far enough away from my own direct experiences that any attempt to do so would be doomed in failure.

By using these mask-like faces, where characters look more or less the same, a sketchier drawing style, I am able to focus one's attention on the narrative while still telling it in comic strip form. So that distancing device

actually brings one closer to the heart of the material than a true comix approach.

Another thing I suppose is the fact that I've chosen to use a very sedate comic strip format. If one compares the panel layout in *Maus* to say a Marvel or Japanese comic it's rather quiet. Most of the boxes are nice rectilinear forms, and even rows – not very chaotic. It creates a kind of quietness and it makes you enter in, rather than it aggressively coming out and grabbing your eyeballs. I've done other comic strip work in the past, and probably will do others in the future, that have a stronger, more

overt, visual component. In this instance I wanted it to be quiet in that it would force the reader into a relationship with the strip.

In looking at other art and literature that's been shaped from the holocaust – a histrionic term I find problematic – that material is often very high pitched, very histrionic. And I've always been put off it a bit; in that the material's so horribly strong. That pitching for a tear or for an emotional response seems redundant. I felt a need for a more subdued approach, which would incorporate these distancing devices like using these animal mask faces.

Another aspect of the way I've chosen to use this material is that I've entered myself into the story. So the way the story got told and who the story was told to is as important if not a more important part of the story than solely my father's narrative. To me that's at the heart of the work. I suppose that's a distancing device in that one is constantly brought back to how the story is being told. And of course being brought back to whose telling the story and to whom they're telling the story and how that colours the information. It leaves more in the control of the reader to understand, to apply the reader's intelligence, and to pull out of the material what the reader will.

*Some critics might complain that you've trivialised the treatment of the Jews, how would you reply?*

Well, Graham, if it was somebody else asking I'd tell them t'go fuck themselves – frankly. Uhm, obviously I wouldn't put the kind of effort into this project if it was to trivialise anything.

I suppose that someone saying that would probably believe that comix are intrinsically trivial. It is my conviction that comix are a medium. They can be used to do something trivial or used to do something else. Same is true for novels that range from absolute pornography to James Joyce and William Faulkner. I believe that it's true that comix haven't been used that way for the most part. But there are occasional, beautiful, achievements in comic strips that aren't at all trivial. As a medium it has certain advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages I would include a certain kind of accessibility, an immediacy, a certain kind of intimacy that is to do with the interplay of one's own handwriting, as expressed in writing out the balloons and the drawn signs that represents characters. It's immediate in that it appears one step closer to uh the way the mind works than pure language. It also doesn't require the high finance, and working with large groups of people that making a movie would entail. It allows one to carry more narrative content than painting. It just has it's own rules that's maybe too complex to go into now. But to work with an interaction of words and pictures is nothing intrinsically trivial.

Uh, using the animals allowed me a handle on the material. It wasn't meant t'turn it into a funny animal story.

On the other hand it was intended to allow me to make reference to and use cartoon conventions, of ideas that have to do with cat and mouse chases. I suppose one of the original inspirations to do the story this way was from seeing old animated cartoons in which cats and mice are portrayed. Mice are kinda seen as 'happy darkies', if you'll pardon the expression. The way blacks were portrayed in these early cartoons and the way mice are portrayed are almost identical: uh, singing and dancing playing, not being adults with responsibilities.

At first, the genesis of that first three page *Maus* strip was that I was asked to take part in an 'Underground Comic' that Robert Crumb was part of, and a few other Underground cartoonists who were based in San Francisco were part of. The only editorial premise was one used anthropomorphised creatures rather than people. At first I wanted to do comic strips about black oppression in America using cats and mice. As I started I realised that this was a ridiculous thought in that I just didn't know enough about the situation to be anything other than a liberal wimp with good intentions, but not enough underlying knowledge about the situation to do uhm any meaningful work. I realised that my own background included material of oppression which could be more directly applied.

As soon as the idea hit I realised that there's all too much justification for it. The rhetoric of the genocide that the Nazis used had to do with the extermination of vermin; it wasn't murdering people, it was squashing parasites, lice, rats. In fact there's a movie – a propaganda film – uh by a guy named Hitler, called *The Eternal Jew*.

That was made under Goebbels during World War Two. In the movie there is a scene of Jews milling around a ghetto and then it cuts to rats milling around a hole. And the intertitle is very german if I kind of find it – I'll read it into the microphone here, one moment – let's see – yeh, O.K. 'wherever rats turn up they spread annihilation throughout the land, destroying property and food supplies. This is how they disseminate disease, pestilence, leprosy, typhus, cholera, dysentery. Just like the Jews among mankind; rats represent the very essence of subterane destruction'. Uh I've a number of other quotes from the Nazi period that also uh cover the same kind of ground.

And I then would find references to the fact that, in one history of comix Hitler banned Mickey Mouse from Germany, 'cause he thought they were a Jewish art-form and he hated them as such.

I understand that the metaphor I'm using is just that. It's a metaphor and can't be carried very far before it cracks. See on the hand I'm using these mice as Jews, cats as Nazis, Poles as pigs, uhm dogs as Americans, and so on, in an ironic fashion, in that on the surface at least this tends to, uh, verify the Nazi racial theories, and of course that can't hold up as a – tssshh, can't hold up



FOR A COUPLE MONTHS I DID HERE STILL MY BLACK MARKET BUSINESS. THEN CAME MORE BAD NEWS, VERY BAD...







even as a metaphor. And as a result the metaphor cracks a number of times in the book. There's a point where my father's travelling from prisoner of war camp, sneaking across the border to his own part of Poland, the Poles feeling rather antipathetic towards the Germans, although they also bore no love t'the Jews. My father never mentioned he was Jewish, he was just wearing a Polish army uniform and said he'd escaped from a prisoner of war camp and was trying to sneak back and some Poles helped him. Now in my comic book if I did that straight I would have been in a bind in that the Pole pig looking at the mouse in uniform would be aware that he was a mouse. So I had my father wearing a pig mask, that's a mask on top of a mask, and it's obviously there as a way of calling attention to the fact that this metaphor can't hold.

Urn also in the course of the book there's a number of places where this thing, this dynamic, operates, including in chapter five where I include an earlier strip I'd done about my mother. There's this mouse cartoonist who draws a comic strip about his mother committing suicide, and uh 'an there's the cartoonist drawing about real humanoid-types, which is a reversal of the situation that exists in the rest of the book. There is also incorporated somewhere in that strip a photograph of my mother 'n' me. Later in the book there'll be a photograph of my father incorporated in the book. All these things are meant t'call attention to the fact that A'm making use

of a set of ideas that I'm not expecting anyone to take literally. I think that as one read the book one forgets of course that your reading about anything other than people, and this dynamic pulls you up short, makes you think about the ideas I'm playing with.

*What did your family and father think of Maus?*

My father really wanted to put the War behind him as best he could and start his life over. Uh at best he couldn't do that all that well, he would wake up with nightmares almost every night – couldn't sleep well – and had many psychological and physical ailments that stemmed directly from his experiences in concentration camps. Nevertheless he never really wanted t'talk about it all that much. My father was never one of the Jews that felt the need t'bear witness the same way that many other survivors had felt that need.

Uhm OK my father by growing up in Poland 19 circa – you know being a child in the early part of the twentieth century – did not have much exposure to comic strips and never really learned to read them or to understand them. As a result he never had a very clear idea of what it is I do. Sometimes it would sort of slip his mind that I was doing anything other than taping, and even that wasn't that clear to him. In chapter six I relate the experience of reading a bit of the work in progress to him and he responded. What I'll try to do is getta xerox of that –

that's a chapter I'm working on now – so you can take a look at that.

My mother kept like diaries of her experiences and after the war she reconstructed those diaries and I remember seeing notebooks around the house when I was a kid, that were written in Polish. I didn't have much interest, but of course when I wanted to do this project I tried to find them – they were important. And as it is related in *Maus* my father at some point after her suicide destroyed the diaries, something I don't think I can ever forgive him for.

My stepmother seems to have had a much clearer idea of what it is I'm doing, and seems to be quite supportive. It was she that translated the document on the history on Sosnowiec Jews from Polish to English for me, and has tried t'help in whatever way she could think.

The only member of the family that I'm in touch with is Lulic, who figures in chapter five of the book – my mother's nephew. I didn't interview him and his vantage point on the book is 'well why dwell on all this stuff?' And, 'this is a hopeless project in that it's fraught with the impossibility of saying anything real or accurate.' All of his responses reflect his background and his orientation as an engineer for concrete things – someone who doesn't have all that much use for the humanities.

Since this interview was completed Art Spiegelman has published *Maus* in the United States where it has sold 45,000 copies and has been a critical success. Penguin and Deutsch were sold the British and Commonwealth rights, however when Spiegelman signed the contract he deleted "South Africa". In a letter to his London agent, he wrote that he would not 'compromise with fascism' and wished to uphold the ANC boycott of all works of art. This stand

led him into conflict with the publishers. In correspondence with Tom Rosenthal, Deutsch's co-director, he explained:

Though I have faith in *Maus*' message, books are commercial as well as political artefacts of culture. I feel that I must respect the ANC's request for total cultural boycott ...since the ANC represents the best hope for change there. I'm in the odd position of only wanting the book to get into South African bookstores if it is banned by the Government...

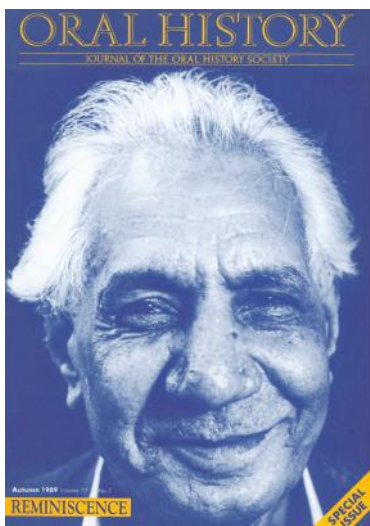
Both Deutsch and Penguin argued that refusing to publish in South Africa amounted to self-censorship, however Spiegelman maintained his position.

They're talking about business as usual, with criminals, and that's a problem for me. I just can't allow my book to be sold by distributors and bookstore owners who, one way or another, have made their peace with the regime.

With the publishers refusing a deal which excluded South Africa it looked like the British edition of *Maus* was doomed. However when Spiegelman approached the ANC in New York for advice they offered a way out of the dead-lock:

To my surprise and pleasure, the ANC do see the significance of *Maus* and its relationship to their battle with racist oppression. They are currently arranging for a movement publisher within South Africa to publish it and make it available there. All profits would go to the ANC.

This has left Deutsch and Penguin with no option, but to allow the striking out of South Africa in the contract. *Maus* will be published in Britain this spring.



# Oral history as a social movement: reminiscence and older people

by Joanna Bornat

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Looking at an article which I wrote thirty years ago I'm reminded of the excitement and enthusiasm at a time when it seemed as if oral history was powering a movement of community and social change. History became the motor for community participation and

creativity, an exciting process inclusive of its oldest and often most frail citizens, in an increasingly diverse society. When a visitor to Exploring Living Memory, the large-scale festival of life history in London's Royal Festival Hall, was heard to ask, 'Can anyone join this history lark?' it really felt

as if we were connecting with people's desire to know and be recognised for the times they had lived through and knew about. We were responding to care workers and community workers who were looking for ways to legitimise the memories of people they were

working with. We were supported by new insights into the psychology of late life and by the writing of older people themselves which pointed to reminiscence as a helpful process in the recognition of identity and individual achievement, combating stereotypes

of ageing and old age. Looking back from the present where, in the UK at least, older people now stand accused of

hanging on to a utopia of the past, oral historians might yet again hear reminiscence as a search for continuity and

recognition and a way to breach twenty-first century intergenerational rupture.

**Joanna Bornat, Emeritus Professor of Oral History, Open University**

In a recent radio programme<sup>1</sup> the poet Stephen Spender, who is now in his eighties, described himself as feeling like a spaceman landed on Earth from another planet. He has knowledge he can't communicate because all his contemporaries are left behind.

To hear Stephen Spender talk is to be reminded of the distance which sometimes stretches between generations. It's a distance which can feel painful if it means a feeling of exclusion and the loss of a sense of value. But it can be a distance to be appreciated if it helps to understand differences in experience and if it makes us search harder for continuities between generations.

It seems as if Stephen Spender has somehow missed out on the widespread interest in reminiscence and oral history which has spread throughout the British Isles. It is so widespread and so much a part of working and living with older people that, for someone like myself who has been carried along in the midst of what seems like a social transformation, it is difficult to realise how anyone could still be untouched by it.

In what follows I want to chronicle this movement and to evaluate its importance for older people, particularly those older people who are given care and support. Inevitably my examples are going to come from Britain because that is where I live and work and inevitably what I talk about is liable to be translated through my own experience.

What I want to talk about is a movement with very recent origins. Fifteen years ago or so there was little to show in history books, in social work textbooks or in publishing, of any idea that ordinary older people's life experience might be of interest or of any value. There were few exceptions. Writing in 1960, Susan Hale a retired psychiatric social worker, told of her delight in listening to elderly people in the Brixton area of South London talk about their memories of fifty to sixty years before. Noel Streatfield, the children's author, felt it was important in 1956 to let her readers know about life 'fifty years ago' and Stephen Peet in his late 1960's BBC television series *Yesterday's Witness* pioneered the filming of ordinary people talking about their memories of events, some forgotten, some only partially remembered.<sup>2</sup>

About ten years ago there were three rather isolated areas of work which quite separately were beginning to make an impact, but which had yet to influence each other. In history, psychology and in community publishing during the 1960s and early 1970s some new and challenging ideas were beginning to take shape. They generated ideas which, when they came together in the early 1980s, were to change care work practice with elderly people, widen learning

opportunities across the age range and produce a rich yield of historical evidence from all corners of the British Isles. I want to begin with a brief account of the development of those three areas of work.

### Oral history origins

Oral history, treating recollection of experience as valid evidence, has its own long history, as Paul Thompson has shown.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, and until the mid nineteenth century, historians regarded spoken testimony with as much reverence as they treated documents recording events, laws and customs. Indeed the recollections of the famous, rich and influential in society have always had a place in accounts of wars, political change and custom. The place of the diary and of memoirs of politicians and opinion leaders has rarely been challenged by historians whose skills include deciphering documents and piecing together the past from written records. This practice left us with a history that was narrow in content and often uncritical in method. The personal accounts which remained to us represented only a narrow range of social and economic viewpoints tending to concentrate on what was public and political at the highest levels of society. Daily life, insofar as it was chronicled through parish and census records, and the detailed surveys of Booth and Rowntree was passed through the filter of bureaucratic form filling or of record keeping of observers external to the daily lives under scrutiny. There were few accounts from women, from minorities, from deviant groups and in content the bias neglected accounts of family life, social customs, working life, old age, neighbourhood, community and undocumented events hidden from history.

Oral history turns the historian into an interviewer and changes the practice of the historian into a personal interaction with the past within living memory. Listening to someone describe their first day at work, school days, participation in unofficial strikes, childbirth, courtship, housework, historians have learned to broaden ideas of what history is about. It was in the late 1960s that oral history began to establish itself in Britain. At that time, two large surveys, at the Universities of Essex and Kent<sup>4</sup> used interviews with a large sample of older people as respondents. These led to many other research projects<sup>5</sup> and to writing which made use of the memories of elderly people to explain areas of the past previously unrecorded. It was significant for the development of oral history that the more successful and long lasting of those two universitybased initiatives was in a department of sociology. This theoretical context gave oral history in Britain a distinctively humanistic bias which contributed to its later broadening out into less





Centerprise coffee bar, c 1975. Photo: Centerprise.

formally academic areas of work and research.<sup>6</sup>

For those of us who were involved in the early days of the mid 1970s, it was an exciting time. The search for oral evidence made research a lively and emotional experience. Documents like newspapers, census reports and minute books seemed dull in comparison with the 'words of eye-witnesses to the past. Studs Terkel, in his autobiography, evokes that electricity of personal contact when he describes meeting Bertrand Russell and 'shaking the hand of the man who shook the hand of the man who shook the hand of Napoleon'.<sup>7</sup>

Looking back to the early seventies what seems remarkable now is the fact that we oral historians took so long to realise that what we were involved in was a two-way process. It was a relationship with people who were parting with something which was personal and often very private. Too many of us saw the interviewee as just another source of evidence to be extracted.<sup>8</sup> We turned on the tape recorder and we encouraged an outpouring of the past. The content of our training was in techniques akin to managing the atmosphere of the broadcaster's green room. We were to put interviewees at ease, we were to be sensitive to their needs, we were to preserve an atmosphere of hospitality and never to forget our thank you letters. It was well intentioned but with one aim in mind: the eliciting of 'usable' material.

Inevitably it was the interviewee who reminded the historian that this was a shared experience. The retired West

Riding textile worker who thanked *me* for asking her questions about her days as a young factory worker made me realise that oral history can be enjoyable and exciting on both sides of the microphone. In the second edition of *Voice of the Past* Paul Thompson acknowledges this shift in awareness amongst some oral historians. Writing ten years on, he brings out the importance of the interview in the life of an older person and points up the responsibility of the historian to understand and empathise with strong emotions which an interview may evoke.<sup>9</sup>

### Community publishing origins

At about the same time as oral history methods were beginning to have an impact on the world of historical research, there were other developments going on. Community publishing evolved in the early 1970s with a form and content which opened up new possibilities for access to audiences and to new writers. In many respects community publishing represents the 1970s expression of the University Settlement movement of over a hundred years earlier. In the 1970s teachers, graduates, community activists living and working in the more deprived areas of inner cities encouraged working class people to write and produce their own art and literature. The Centerprise Publishing Project is one such enduring example. In an account of their first five years' work, Centerprise showed how people in the London Borough of Hackney devoured the pamphlets of



autobiography and reminiscence which, amongst others, a dressmaker, a shoemaker and a cab driver had written.<sup>10</sup> Dot Starn's *When I was a Child*, published in 1973, sold 1000 copies in its first three months. Arthur Newton's *Years of Change* sold 400 copies in four years. Other community groups in Bristol, Manchester and Brighton were at the same time publishing local people's writing and finding a mass readership amongst people who could identify with childhood experiences of family life, growing up, migration to England, finding work and struggling through, when it was written by their contemporaries and described streets, experience and even individual people they could remember. Ordinary people became their own historians and biographers and many took an active part in editing, designing and promoting their books.

These community publishing projects and countless others since have been funded by a variety of sources, by local government, charitable trusts, commercial sponsors, and latterly and most ironically, as a response to widespread unemployment, by central government, thanks to the Manpower Services Commission's short lived Community Programme. They developed and refined a medium for reminiscence, the cheaply produced illustrated booklet. From towns and cities the length and breadth of the British Isles, there is now an enormous literature of people's history published in this format.<sup>11</sup> Almost exclusively this has been written by older people or edited from accounts recorded with their help.

Community publishing projects trace their history in England back through 300 years of pamphleteering, through the radical and dissenting tradition of debating political and social issues. Publishing short and cheaply produced booklets which are easily distributed and written in a style which is immediately understood and responded to has involved community publishers in challenging the official version of who the book-buying public is. When Centerprise opened its doors to the public in 1971 there was only one bookshop in the borough of Hackney. In Tower Hamlets and Lambeth there were none at all. The example of Centerprise was followed in many towns during the 1970s and following their example, libraries and museums have now taken on themselves the function of book producers and distributors. The network of outlets for community publishing continues to grow.

### Psychology of old age origins

The third area in which new ideas were taking shape during the 1960s and 1970s was in the psychology of old age. This change has been discussed in detail by people more qualified than I, elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> Starting in the United States, psychologists interested in the ageing process began to question the idea that reminiscing was an abnormal or pathological activity, something to be discouraged. Robert Butler published a paper in 1963 which was to excite and interest those working with more frail elderly people.<sup>13</sup> He used the idea of 'life review' and argued for a perspective which accepts looking back over a past life as a normal and universal experience in old age. Rose Dobrof a New York social worker has described the impact of these ideas on practice:

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 their reminiscing through activities like bingo and arts and crafts.<sup>14</sup>

Partly in response to the very great enthusiasm which Robert Butler's work gave rise to, Peter Coleman's later influential study, *Ageing and Reminiscence Processes*, argues for a more qualified perspective on reminiscence as therapy.<sup>15</sup> His research found older people who were unwilling or unhappy reminiscers.

### The emergence of recall

During the 1970s three areas of work were emerging. Each of these involved older people and each emphasised the importance of recalling the past. These three areas might have developed independently, they might have had little impact beyond the boundaries of influence of their various practitioners. In order for the qualitative and quantitative leap forward to have taken place, something else needed to happen.

What was needed was some kind of evidence that older people willingly took part in recalling the past, that there was enjoyment and that change and development could be observed as a result of this activity. This evidence needed to be witnessed and be reproduced by people working with groups of older people or with individuals on a one-to-one basis.

Without wanting to sound too dramatic, or monocausal, I want to argue that the one event which was to draw attention to oral history with older people was the publication in November 1981 of Help the Aged's tape/slide programme *Recall*. The simplicity and apparent comprehensiveness of sequences of images and sounds covering the first eighty years of the twentieth century made *Recall* an instant success. Hundreds of sets of the package sold in the first few years and it continues to sell well today, even in the face of several competing formats and versions.

*Recall's* immediate origins were in none of the three areas of work so far described. It began in 1977 as the Reminiscence Aids Project run by an architect, Mick Kemp,<sup>16</sup> in what was then the Department of Health and Social Security. His particular responsibility was the environment of elderly people with mental infirmity. Funding for the project lasted until 1979 when a change of government brought an end to qualitative and long term research not only in the DHSS but also arguably elsewhere in the British Isles. It was at that point that Help the Aged took over.

# Festival of London's past brings memories to life

## An eye for nostalgia



MEMORY BOX: Louise Savage and Brownie.



REMEMBERING: Kathleen Bridger, of Fulham.

by Peter Gruner

LONDONERS will be able to recapture lost memories and wallow in nostalgia when an exhibition of old photographs opens at the Royal Festival Hall next Friday.

Ninety groups are taking part in the second annual event entitled Exploring Living Memory—with scenes and reminiscences of the Blitz.



LABOUR MOVEMENT: hop pickers queue at London Bridge for a train to the Kent fields. Photographer, Kathy Peters.

Regrettably I cannot go into the whole story of *Recall* here. I simply want to stress why I think the package has become such a milestone in the development of 'reminiscence work', as it has come to be known. Firstly, because of the way it originated, *Recall* encouraged an open-ended approach to the whole process of oral history work with older people. Secondly, because of its format, the package made it possible for anyone, whatever their background, to become an oral historian of some kind.

*Recall's* origins lie in the arts. As an architect, Mick Kemp was interested in the meaning of the environment for mentally frail older people. His project workers were art students with an interest in images and self-expression. For them history was something which older people generated or could be encouraged to create, given the right cues and stimuli. The philosophy behind *Recall* was very much one which gave equal validity to the memories of all older people. As an historian who came in at a later stage in the development of the packages I well remember conflicts between those whose main concern was to evoke responses, and those people, like me, who wanted both to evoke and *inform*. Thus an early version of the First World War sequence focussed almost exclusively on life in the trenches since this was what the elderly men they met talked about. After discussion amongst members of the production team and further testing with groups of older men, and women, the sequence finally included images of women's work and life on the home front. *Recall* in its final form invites recognition of past events and experience, but

it also stirs up what may have been forgotten and it introduces the idea of differing experience and perspective on the past.

The second point I want to draw from the *Recall* experience concerns opening up opportunities to more people to become oral historians. Care staff and community workers with a background in historical research can reasonably be expected to be few in number. And even those who have an interest in local history find that they have no opportunity to follow their interest within working hours. History is not a subject area for social or health services training. What *Recall* provided and still provides is a technologically simple means to exploring the past. This opens up possibilities to residential, community and hospital care staff and to anyone else who can find a slide projector, cassette player and a screen or white wall. Slide/tape production has, in my opinion, many advantages over video. It allows for larger images, it can easily be interrupted with a clear still picture and it requires fairly low level technology.

Equipped with *Recall's* slide/tape packages, staff-led reminiscence sessions took off in homes and centres all over the British Isles. The idea caught on not just because the packaging was simple and the images and sounds *highly* evocative. The impact of *Recall* lay in the responses of the audiences and groups of older people. Very quickly the issue became not just one of how to show *Recall*, but how to manage and develop work with groups convened to watch and take part. The evidence that reminiscing is stimulating and enjoyable was immediately available.

## Reminiscence: a movement

*Recall* is not the whole story of course. Oral history, community publishing and life review were having their own impact with groups of workers and older people at this time. *Recall* had captured a market of interested people who it seems were awaiting an opportunity to explore the memories of the older people they knew. What followed over the next eight years in Britain at least was something like an explosion of interest in reminiscence work with older people. There have been several local editions of *Recall*, there have been television programmes, radio programmes, videos, training packs, large scale exhibitions like *Exploring living Memory*, workshops, journal articles, conferences, courses, booklets, plays, films, almost every possible medium has been explored. Inevitably reminiscence work developed a systematisation and 'reminiscence therapy' became the talking point amongst workers caring for older people. Courses emerged with freelancing practitioners offering training in this new area of work.

The impact on oral history, community publishing and in psychology has been selective. Perhaps because some of the most enthusiastic proponents of reminiscence work with older people were also oral historians, it's possible to say that in Britain, with some exceptions, oral historians have taken a rather different approach to colleagues in other continental European countries. We'd like to think we've sustained an awareness of the meaning of reminiscence in the lives of older people. For some of us the separation between oral history and reminiscence risks the distancing of older people in the process and weakens their control over what is produced. The pursuit of oral history is a goal which we all share, whether we work as individual researchers of any age or in groups with older people. Reminiscence work implies a more active role for those whose memories are sought and it introduces goals and objectives which can be personal, social and, of course historical.

Community publishing contributed a format and a basis for the dissemination of the outcomes of reminiscence in the early days and it has continued with this role. For about five years the extra cash and energy which unemployment projects like the Community Programme injected into the scene have made sure that there is scarcely a town in the country which has not had some kind of reminiscence project. Now that the Community Programme has been replaced by a less flexible and less generously funded scheme, many of these projects have been literally shelved. Still, in some towns and areas local authorities and arts bodies continue to direct cash towards reminiscence and oral history groups.<sup>17</sup>

## Reminiscence: the debate about therapy

Within psychology and in work with more frail elderly people debates continue. Surprisingly, given the extent to which reminiscence work has been taken up in homes and hospitals around Britain there has been very little research and evaluation into its outcomes for older people. But perhaps it is because of the general level of

enthusiasm and the sense of being part of something akin to a social movement that there tends to be strong claims for the positive benefits of the work, and very few pauses for comparison or reflection.

A recent paper brought together in a critical review much of the evidence from the work of psychologists working in the field of reminiscence with older people. Susan Thornton and Janet Brochie looked at clinical and experimental evidence for therapeutic outcomes for reminiscence activities with elderly people<sup>18</sup> Their conclusions confirm what some of us had suspected. Based on available evidence there is no safe case to be made for reminiscence on its own bringing about change in the mental abilities of elderly people who may be experiencing depression or low self esteem as a result of organic illness.

Early in the days of the Reminiscence Aids Project there had been a hope that somehow by encouraging the use of memories, mentally frail people would somehow improve their grip on reality. More recently experimental research has shown small improvements in some measures of functioning amongst non-confused elderly people<sup>19</sup> but it isn't clear that the results can always be shown to be directly the result of reminiscing. The strong case for a therapy status for reminiscence has yet to be found or proved.

Does the lack of status as a therapy matter? As Andrew Norris points out, simply awarding reminiscence work the title of therapy would only mean that it joined a number of other similarly dubiously labelled activities. Within the context of hospitals, gardening has become 'horticultural therapy', reading is 'bibliotherapy' and listening to or playing music is 'music therapy'.

There may be good reasons for avoiding the label therapy. Again Andrew Norris argues that 'the main function of labelling.... seems to be to validate (these activities) as legitimate activities in which professional people are entitled to engage'. Taken further, Mike Bender argues<sup>20</sup> it could mean that only professionally qualified people are entitled to take up activities labelled as therapies. This would certainly have unhappy outcomes for the practice of reminiscence work.

One of the strengths of reminiscence work with older people is its openness in terms of process and skill base. Following Andrew Norris it is possible to see reminiscence work as being utilised in a range of therapeutic approaches. He argues for a role for a reminiscence approach in bereavement counselling, insight based psychotherapy, in cognitive therapy, in reality orientation with people suffering from dementia, in providing stimulation for confused elderly people and in goal planning in more behavioural models of psychotherapy.<sup>21</sup> By avoiding the label of therapy we can continue to enjoy the advantages of working flexibly and in a variety of settings.

I'd like to go on to develop this point further in relation to three areas of work: reminiscence activities in residential homes and hospitals, older people's learning and finally, enhancing the understanding of issues facing some older people.

## Reminiscence work in residential homes and hospitals

Psychologists, nurses and occupational therapists working in hospitals and residential care workers and social workers in community based settings have all found reminiscence work useful and appropriate with groups and with individual elderly people.<sup>22</sup> Approaches vary. John Adams talks eloquently about the way his continuing care ward was transformed by the introduction of posters from the First World War as talking points. The elderly women on the ward talked about their experiences of the Blitz, visitors stayed on, maintenance men lingered to hear stories. Many of these women had only a fragmentary account to give of their past lives because of their present confused states. It was through the stimulus of reminiscence and by staff and relatives picking up on comments about their pasts that a more detailed, and more sensitive picture of their earlier lives began to unfold.<sup>23</sup>

At Claybury Hospital in north east London, people with depressive illnesses have been encouraged to write scrapbooks and include photographs of themselves as a means to self-discovery and restoring confidence and renewed insights into themselves and family members.<sup>24</sup> Mel Wright and Martin Truelove, social workers in South London and Bradford have used reminiscence projects with housebound elderly people. In South London a newsletter focussed on life on an inter-war housing estate and encouraged a small group of housebound people who otherwise had little contact to share memories of the early years of the estate. In Bradford, volunteers were recruited to take down the memories of housebound elderly people. In one case this resulted in 10,000 words of testimony from a post-war refugee.<sup>25</sup>

Groupwork with elderly people has become incorporated into the life of some homes and hospitals. It is perhaps inevitable, if regrettable, that reminiscence has occasionally been left to become just another panacea or passing time activity in some institutions. Now that it's possible to buy boxes of photographs and reminiscence stimuli, in some homes there is a fairly routinised approach to reminiscence. The 'memories' group tends to take its place alongside bingo and crafts. I want to go on to talk about learning aspects for older people shortly. At this stage what I would prefer to highlight are what can be positive outcomes for older people and staff in a caring context.

Early on in *Recall's* development it was suggested that the programme could have some use in training staff.<sup>26</sup> It is probably true to say that the implications for caring relationships were not fully realised at first. Eight years later things look very different. Most people who have responsibility and involvement in training care staff and others agree that insights gained from reminiscence sessions have had a profound effect on the relationships of staff and the elderly people they work with. As far as one senior nursing officer is concerned reminiscence work is even seen as an opportunity to reward grades of staff whose jobs are undervalued and unpaid.<sup>27</sup> Working on training days and workshops with carers in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors, time and again there are reminders of just how



Recording memories at Middle Park Community Centre, South London. Photo: Chris Chart.

valued and rewarding reminiscence group work has become.

Amongst the best and most committed carers, interests lie in de-routinising reminiscence activities. In group sessions these workers are their best enthusiasts and resourcers. Some have become part-time researchers into memorabilia and local history, others give accounts of sessions which have brought out the most reticent group member. In some homes and hospitals, knowledge of individual past lives has led to outings and visits, closer staff and relatives involvement and shared experiences from personal histories.<sup>28</sup>

Successful reminiscence work depends less on the accurate remembering of the past and more on the process of exchange and listening. It is this understanding which has captured the interest and commitment of people working with more frail and dependent elderly people.

## Older people's learning

Within educational gerontology debates concentrated at first on the rights of older people to participate in learning and have more recently moved on to look at issues which are related more closely to practice and to the curriculum. One type of practice which is argued as having most relevance and attraction for older learners is the self-help group. It is seen as being appropriate because it encourages reflection and negotiation.<sup>29</sup> The self-help approach correlates well with the life styles and experience of older learners since it assumes:

a non-prescriptive attitude, issue centred curricula, problem posing, praxis, continuous negotiation, shared responsibility for learning, valuing process, dialogue, openness, mutual respect and integrated thinking and learning.<sup>30</sup>

Within adult education circles, the advantages of self-





Woodbury Down Memories Group, North London.  
Photo: Cultural Partnerships.

help, learner directed work are widely accepted. To what extent older people have wholeheartedly adopted these ideals is less certain. For many, the experience of formal learning is likely to have been along the lines of the transmission model. This is the model which operates with the assumption that the teacher has knowledge and the learners are without knowledge.

It may be the case that some older learners find it difficult to recognise educational processes in the open structure of selfhelp, with its emphasis on the validation of personal experience and a shared negotiation of what is to be learned. However, it has been my experience along with others that reminiscence work offers almost unequalled opportunities to older people to successfully incorporate self-help and learner led work into their learning.<sup>31</sup>

During the last few years reminiscence work with groups of older people has developed sufficiently to the point that there now exist models of work which leaders and group members can borrow from. In particular the learning processes which tutors from the adult literacy movement provide, show insights into the kinds of dialogue and mutual exploration which a group leader might hope to encourage amongst older learners embarking on some kind of reminiscence project.<sup>32</sup>

There are examples from varied contexts, including continuing care wards of hospitals, groups of more active older people, the role of drama and inter-generational work.<sup>33</sup> In almost all cases, the characteristic which I quoted earlier have been guiding principles. Reminiscence work is observably an encouragement to people to define their own scope of work, to focus on issues which directly affect their lives, to share the need to organise and progress the group, to value each other's contributions and to develop personally and as group members. My experience

working with a north London group which has produced its own publication brought out all these aspects of learning.<sup>34</sup>

Of course it would be unreasonable to pretend that reminiscence work does not still raise issues and problems. There is the problem of maintaining group solidarity while attempting to include conflicting and sometimes divisive memories and experiences.<sup>35</sup> Many published projects are superb testimonies to the effective solidarity of white working class culture. Some of the best and most challenging work has been carried out by groups who have a strong message to put across. And as reminiscence work is now successfully developing with encouraging and inspiring outcomes amongst members of minority ethnic groups, it is true to say that the range of perspectives has never been wider.<sup>36</sup> Exploring Living Memory, which on three occasions hosted an across London exhibition and festival of life-history, illustrates the powerful impact of displaying co-existing perspectives of the past. Groups which produced exhibitions came from all over London and from many ethnic and culturally distinct communities. Exploring Living Memory events are compulsive viewing and certainly represented a will to acknowledge and celebrate differences.<sup>37</sup> It is within groups that there seems to be persisting boundaries to a closer sharing of some aspects of the past.

It is however in the development of groups, in the management of dominating versions of the past, in the resolution of conflicts and, above all, in group response to expressions of pain and the revival of past griefs that much of the real tension of reminiscence work with older people lies. For some people it may become too much, they may withdraw from a group or refuse to participate. For others, it's important for the painful experience to be re-lived and shared. Group leaders have to be alert and sensitive to changes in mood. And there may be times, when a 'non-prescriptive' attitude has to be shed, if racist and excluding comments are to be outlawed.

Reminiscence work with older people when viewed from a learning perspective offers opportunities for personal and group change. With a focus on reminiscence, curriculum development in adult education follows. The cookery class may decide to explore and try out shared knowledge of recipes. The crafts class may decide to work together on a wall-hanging which depicts change in their community or memories of childhood. The north London group which I worked with found that they had a common interest in the preservation of local open spaces of land and water. The result, an additional summer short course on ecology included visits to a reclaimed area and to offices of Thames Water.

### Understanding issues facing some older people

I want to conclude with a brief look at interesting developments in using reminiscence, or a life history approach, with older people who may be facing problems in their lives.

It is becoming more widely accepted amongst people caring and working with older people that knowledge of an

individual life history makes an important contribution to their care plans. The gerontologist Malcolm Johnson has argued the case for a biographical approach to assessing preferences and choices in community care.<sup>38</sup> In a current action research project he and colleagues at the Open University are exploring ways of incorporating a life history approach into assessing appropriate decisions for older people requiring support in the community. The project has identified a number of areas in which this approach could be useful. These include eliciting older people's attitude to, for example, residential care, understanding family relationships, finding out about relationships between carers and the older person, discovering kinds of help which would be unacceptable, relating to and understanding people labelled 'difficult' and learning how people coped with past difficulties and hardships.<sup>39</sup>

Some research which begins from a similar position has been carried out by Andrew Sixsmith who looks at the meaning of 'home' for older people. He describes his motivation as being to find out what older people want, rather than treating their lives as a series of problems to be solved. Interviewing people about their feelings about home, he concludes that home plays an important part in older people's sense of having a history. It presents a resource for coping and it has symbolic value for the preservation of independence, individuality and identity.<sup>40</sup>

These two projects are examples of work which values reminiscence and which consequently is helping to focus attention on the older person, centering them, their feelings and emotions, when it comes to negotiating change and understanding choices and preferences.

## Conclusion

Underlying the argument in this article is the assumption that recall of the past is a normal part of human mental activity. It is something people do throughout their lives. In old age, however, it has a more developed role and perhaps more significant outcomes.

With more of life to be recalled the range of reminiscence activities is of course possibly greater amongst older than amongst younger people. There is a greater range in terms of content and possibly too, in terms of process, since at a later stage in life reminiscences may be imparted to the young as part of one's role as an older person in society, as part of normal ageing and as part of that process of resolution and self-recognition which seems to accompany the later stages of life.

But there is another reason why it is important to acknowledge the role of the past in older people's lives. The past has a habit of recurring and older people's witness enables us to understand the lessons from this. The past recurs in two ways: it recurs within individual lives and it recurs over time within all our lives.

Within lives, the past may recur in painful recall. Recently a picture in the social work journal *Community Care*<sup>41</sup> illustrated a short story about young ex-offenders from Birmingham who, as an alternative to custody, were burying symbols of their past in a remote part of South-West Ireland. Setting aside the symbolism of this act in

terms of Anglo-Irish relations, the story struck me with its hopeless trust in the idea of a rootless present or a clean sheet for the future.

In their old age, will these young people still be able to bury their past mentally as well as physically? Another recent press article suggests that this may not be easy. Eugene Heimler, a psychotherapist working in north London, has spent time listening to the stories of elderly Holocaust survivors who still need to meet and talk about their experience. More recently he has found himself talking not just to people who went through the death camps as he did, but also to their children who, now adult, need to understand their parents' experience for themselves.<sup>42</sup>

In common with other oral historians in interview situations, Freda Millett of Oldham in Lancashire found herself confronting bitterness and resentment when she interviewed one elderly man. She was interested in children's homes which had been set up in the early years of this century and was struck by the degree of control which Boards of Guardians held over the lives of children and parents. The man she spoke to was in his eighties and had lived in one of the homes. He had only the memory of a young woman who visited him until he was three. He had one postcard from Australia signed 'mother' and quite late in life heard that his mother had left him a bungalow in Australia in her will. He was bitter and felt all his life that he had been abandoned. Freda's work with the records of the Boards of Guardians and her interviews with staff and children helped her to be able to convince this man that his mother had quite probably been unable to go against the powers of the Guardians. Her apparent abandonment was an unwilling act. It was Freda Millett's sensitive work which helped him, later in life, to finally overcome some of his bitter feelings towards his mother.<sup>43</sup>

My final point relates to the way the past recurs within all our lives. One thing which reminiscence enables us to do is to recognise forms of repetition in history. Making links between the past and the present is more than an academic exercise sometimes. Amongst the group I worked with in north London was a woman who had lived in temporary accommodation at the end of the second world war. She was amongst thousands of Londoners who were put into requisitioned flats and hotels while they waited to be rehoused. She told us about their struggles, demonstrations and final delight in being given new flats. The significance of her story was not lost on the group. Their housing estate has many empty flats which are boarded up and unlet. Only yards away are homeless families living in cramped and unhealthy conditions in hotel bedrooms. It almost seemed as if history was repeating itself were it not for the fact that today there is no large scale public housing programme to solve these families' accommodation problems.

It seems to me that we ignore the communications of spacemen like Stephen Spender at our peril. Reminiscence is an activity which has outcomes which may go far beyond individual memory if we can all develop the capacity to listen and learn.

Paper given as a keynote speech at the Oral History Association of Australian biennial conference, Perth, September 1989.

## NOTES

1. The programme was an edition of Desert Island Discs originally broadcast on 7th April 1989.
2. Susan Hale, 'The Horse Buses Stopped North of the Rye', *Case Conference*, 7, no 6, 1960; Noel Streatfield (ed), *The Day before yesterday: firsthand stories of fifty years ago*, Collins, London, 1956; James Cameron, *Yesterday's Witness: a Selection from the BBC series*, British Broadcasting Corporation, London, 1979.
3. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978.
4. The two surveys were set up and run by Professor Theo Barker at the University of Kent and by Paul Thompson at the University of Essex.
5. See Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover (eds), *Our work, Our lives, Our Words: Women's History and Women's work*, Macmillan, London, essays draw on oral history research projects at the University of Essex. It is one amongst many examples too numerous to list here of oral history work which followed from the original Essex survey. See also back issues of *Oral History*.
6. See Ken Plummer, *Documents of life: an Introduction to the Problems and literature of a Humanistic Method*, Alien & Unwin, London, 1983, for a discussion of the development of a life history approach in sociology.
7. Studs Terkel, *Talking to Myself: a memoir of my times*, Harrop, London, 1986, p 64.
8. See for example discussions noted in Louis Moss and Harvey Goldstein (eds.), *The Recall Method in Social Surveys*, University of London Institute of Education, London, 1979.
9. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, second edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, pp 159 & ff.
10. *Local Publishing and Local Culture: an account of the work of the Centerprise publishing project, 1972-1977*, Centerprise Publishing Trust, Centerprise, 136 Kingsland High Street, London E8, 1977.
11. The list of publications is too long to be included here. See back issues of *Oral History* for titles, places and dates of publication.
12. See Peter G. Coleman, *Ageing and Reminiscence Processes: Social and Clinical Implications*, Wiley, Chichester, 1986; Andrew Norris and Muhammed Abu

- El Eilah, 'Reminiscence groups: a therapy for elderly patients and their staff', *Oral History*, 11, no 1, 1983; John Adams, 'Reminiscence in the geriatric ward – an undervalued resource', *Oral History*, vol 12, no 2, 1984.
13. Robert Butler, 'The Life Review: an interpretation of reminiscence in the aged', *Psychiatry*, 26, 1963.
14. Rose Dobrof, 'A time for reclaiming the past', in *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, Special Double Issue on The Uses of Reminiscence, vol 7, nos 1/2, 1984.
15. Coleman, 1986, Chapter 10.
16. *Recall – a Handbook*, Help the Aged Education Department, London, 1981.
17. Examples of local and central government funding include £5000 funding for a project in Yate, Bristol and full-time posts for oral historians at Bradford and Southampton Museums and Art Galleries and at the National Sound Archive.
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**34.** Joanna Bornat, 1989.

**35.** For an anthropological view of these conflicts see Haim Hazan, *The limbo*

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**36.** See for example, Writings by Asian Women, *Breaking the Silence*, Centerprise, London 1984; Caroline Adams (ed), *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: life stories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain*, THAP books, 1987; Juliet Duff and Linzi Watson, *Boris the Studio Photographer 1900-1985*, Museum of the Jewish East End, London, nd.

**37.** Ken Worpole, 'The History Lark', *Oral History*, vol 12, no 2, 1984; Joanna Bornat, 'Exploring issues', in Pat Holland and Jo Spence, *Domestic Photography*, Camden Press, London 1990.

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**39.** Brian Gearing and Tim Dant, 'Doing Biographical Research'. in Sheila Peace, (ed) *Social Gerolllology: the research process*, forthcoming.

**40.** Andrew J Sixsmith, 'The meaning and experience of "Home" in later life. Paper presented at the British Society of Gerontology annual conference, University of Swansea, 1988.

**41.** *Community Care*, 18 August 1988.

**42.** Christopher Driver. 'Life after the Death Camps'. *Guardian*, 1 May 1989.

**43.** Freda Milieu's paper 'Scattered Homes' was presented to the Oral History Society's annual conference at the University of Bradford. 1988.





# German war memories: narrability and the biographical and social functions of remembering

by Gabriele Rosenthal

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First let me express I feel really honoured that you intend to include my article...[which] was really important for my further work on generations, the Nazi-period and, in general, on traumatisation... Thanks to my research on the contemporary significance of past

experiences during the First and Second World Wars, under National Socialism and in the Holocaust, when I published this article 27 years ago I was already convinced that sociologists need to adopt a historical perspective and to investigate social

phenomena in terms of their development and history. For me, these topics were also bound up with my personal and family history (see my interview with Roswitha Breckner and Monica Massari, 'Past, present and future of biographical research', *Biography and Society* [Rassegna

Italiana di Sociologia (RIS), Special Issue], vol 60, no 1, May 2019). My biographical approach, a diachronic micro-sociological perspective, which makes it possible to reconstruct people's everyday patterns of activity and interpretation, together

with their genesis and historical context was also close to oral history. This approach, my interest in the relationship between experiences, memories and self-presentations within biographical-narrative interviews, and also an interest in the social consequences of traumatisation and

phenomena connected with collective violence still remain central to my current research. One change is that I have become increasingly interested in the social norms and characteristics of different 'we-groups' in the sense proposed by Norbert Elias (see *The Civilizing Process* (Elias,

1939/1994) and especially how they evolve across different socio-historical generations. In addition, for a number of years now my research has focused on countries in the Global South (Palestine, Uganda, Ghana, Jordan and Eritrea). Here, too, questions repeatedly

arise as to what can be remembered, what can be talked about, and what are the rules of the dominant discourses, which, for example, prevent people from talking about their experiences of collective physical violence.

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When German witnesses of World War II narrate their life history, stories about the war period account for a disproportionately large part of the total narration. Biographical narrative interviews – be they focused on the 'Third Reich' or on life history – produce long, epic and dramatic stories about war. The Second World War is still undoubtedly a private as well as a public theme which is frequently and easily expanded upon, with seemingly few problems of memory.

One explanation of this phenomenon is that important and widely experienced historical events, or phases which have had extreme and painful effects upon the everyday lives of people in a certain region or country, generate narration. Common experience and suffering leads – it is assumed – to the formation of groups in which common stories and myths are traditionalised. Where this process has occurred, as we will assume it did for World War II, then it is possible to externalise former suffering, to distance oneself from it and to cause the pain to recede into the background, possibly with the help of anecdotes.<sup>1</sup> Yet although the narration-generative effect of the collective suffering and experience of World War II has an empirical basis,<sup>2</sup> it is quite impossible to maintain this assumption in general. While it may be possible to argue that some sort of togetherness is created by narrators,<sup>3</sup> the converse assumption that togetherness produces narration applies only to specific structures of experience. In fact, two empirical examples show by contrast that painful events which are commonly experienced can become inexpressible.

For many people who were persecuted by the National Socialists, who were in hiding during WW II or were forced into ghettos, or who survived concentration and extermination camps, a great deal of effort is necessary for remembering and narration. Since their liberation, a few have spoken frequently of their experiences, but the vast majority have tried to forget. Among those who are beginning to speak now, and who are trying to remember the crimes committed against them, many have narration gaps and are almost completely unable to give themselves over to a stream of narration or to a re-living of experience. While the narration difficulties of these people are partly due to the traumatisation they have undergone, another

factor is revealed by analysis of the narrations of bystanders and perpetrators of national socialism: the partial speechlessness of the victims contrasts to the verbosity of the non-persecuted German, whose narrations serve, paradoxically, not to uncover the injustice of the national socialist system and their own involvement in it, but to cover it up with stories. Holocaust survivors, on the other hand, want to talk about their traumatic experiences as a reaction against tendencies to forget Nazi crimes, and against the thesis of the 'Auschwitz-Lie', but their experiences are so much more difficult to relate. For persecuted and non-persecuted Germans the possibilities of narration about the period of National Socialism depend upon different, and differently realisable, social functions of remembering.

My second example is that of veterans of World War I who say hardly anything about their experiences in the trenches. Common soldiers who had little part in the creation of the literature of the war are especially notable for speaking very little about their time at the front.<sup>4</sup> WW I in no way resembles WW II in the generation of narration. The presentation of the former in speech is confined to images, metaphors and limited reports about personal experiences.<sup>5</sup> The difference in the verbal presentation of the two wars is connected to differences in the conditions for experience of the wars, and above all to the contrast between a war of immobility and a war of mobility.

In this article I wish to discuss the thesis that the narrability of WW II – that is, the structural possibility of generating narrations about the war experience during the period of National Socialism, and the accompanying readiness to narrate – is conditional upon the structure of the war experience, the biographical necessity for narration, and its social function for the Germans. My argument is based on analyses of biographical narrations which were gained in various projects.<sup>6</sup> In one collective project, 'Biographical Working Through of War Experiences', my colleagues and I examined 21 non-persecuted witnesses of the Third Reich born in the years 1890-1930.<sup>7</sup> I will also consider another 15 interviews I conducted with men who had been soldiers in both wars. Twenty life stories from Israel, of European Jews whose lives were affected by the Holocaust, furnish the contrasting group. In all these interviews people were asked to tell their life stories in accor-

dance with the method of the narrative interview. The aim of this interview method is to elicit and maintain a full narration by the interviewee, with the help of a set of non-interfering techniques applied by the trained interviewer. The method is based on the assumption that the narration of an experience comes closest to the experience itself.<sup>8</sup>

### The structure of war experiences

As I have already indicated, there were significant differences in our interviews between narrations about the First World War and those about the Second World War. The most extreme example of the non-narrability of the former period occurred in the narrations of a man who had described in detail his basic training and first days in the barracks. The minute he wanted to start telling me about the time in the trenches, he had a complete blackout and could recall nothing. All my questions were to no avail. He was only able to continue his narration when I asked him to talk about the end of the war.

There are few such dramatic memory lapses in narrations about the war; the following quotation from an interview with Herr Heinrich, born in 1897, is more typical. With a few sentences he reaches his time at the western front in 1916:

I was 18 years old, when I was called up. I entered the 40th Regiment in Baden. For half a year I trained there. After my training I was sent to the western front on New Year's Day in 1916, into the field. We had big attacks. That was in France, near Amiens. This I still remember, we had a big battle there and there I was wounded, here on my arm, can you see?

After this short report about the front there followed a detailed story about being wounded, his stay in the field hospital and his eventual return to service in his homeland.

The briefness of this war narration might be explained as due to the old age and poor memory of the interviewee, but that explanation can be rejected on several grounds. We found that limited narration about the time in the western front trenches was a general phenomenon in interviews. Our interviewees were quite able to relate stories from their childhood and adolescence, and were able to narrate more expansively about WW II, using the texttype of narration rather than the short report. In this regard there were no differences between the stories about WW II or WW I veterans, and those of younger soldiers. The terrible experiences in the trenches of the First World War still afflict the veterans in dreams, and this affliction was felt deeply by the interviewers. Recollection of wartime events reveals accompanying feelings: the fears, the pain and the sorrow emerge from the memory of the autobiographer and are often expressed in their tears. The following textual features are found in the self-presentations of WW I veterans: an orientation upon external dates, as well as places, army units and dates of conscription; an abundance of short reports or descriptions of laces; and evaluations of experience (such as 'one felt as if one was imprisoned') rather than narration of stories of interactions. War operations – the entire time spent in the

trenches – are blocked out, in contrast to the narrative working through of time before being sent to the front, during hospitalisation, and at the end of the war.

Comparisons with presentations about WW II reveal definite differences. These presentations are usually epic narrations continuing for many hours, that is, narrations following the linearity of the events. There are dramatic stories embedded in these narrations which deal with situations like a battle, or being taken prisoner, and which lead to a climax. From veterans of WW I we found out nothing about situations in which people died, and could only imagine them from utterances such as, 'They fell like flies'. The veteran of WWII tells at least one or two stories about death. These are usually stories which are not connected to the routine of the war: for example, how someone died unexpectedly from a 'civilian' sickness or how one found a comrade killed by the partisans. As an interpreter of this kind of text one often had the impression that these stories serve to thematise death while covering up terrible events which are more painful to the autobiographer. Such 'cover-stories', as I name them with reference to Freud's concept of 'cover-memories', do not appear in the narrations of the soldier of WW I.<sup>9</sup> What were the death situations that were considered outside the routine of the war for him? The comrades who fell next to the canons, the many wounded, and the battlefield screams of the dying: these were phenomena he associated with the everyday routine, and they could hardly be covered by other stories.

I do not wish to create the impression that the soldier of WW II talks much about dying. More frequently he is busy with war anecdotes and presents himself as a brave and, more importantly, a clever soldier. Such a self-presentation hardly ever occurs in the stories of WW I veterans. The veteran of WW II renders a long narration about the war with descriptions of war tactics, including arms and vehicles, and stories about arrivals and departures, about peaceful experiences with civilian populations, and about the superiority of the Wehrmacht. Here, too, these are cover-stories which do not serve the autobiographer by making it possible to thematise painful experiences. Rather, they stand for something else, and do not deal with personal pain, with the friend who was killed, or the wounded and frozen soldiers who were left behind during retreats. Similarly, the sorrow which was caused by the German soldiers – the destruction of villages, cruelty towards the civilian population, crimes against prisoners of war, mass executions in the ghettos and the concentration camps – are hardly ever thematised; they are mostly denied.

Let us look at the sequential structure of the presentation of WW II. The sequentiality of the narration is oriented on the steady progress or subsequent retreat from place to place, that is, on the linearity of the events in their chronological sequence. I would like to show how narration proceeds with this quotation from Herr Sallmann, born in 1915. Shortly before the attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June, 1941, he was sent from the western front to the eastern front. This is what he says about the attack:

So we went into a state of alert, at night we moved to the points of departure and early in the morning at dawn the whole thing started, the big noise, all the artillery, from all the guns, deafening noise in the air. Those were the first air-battles and one could see how the Russian planes came up. And before they saw what it was all about, they went down like burning lanterns. That was, let's say, something pretty exciting.

'That was, let's say, something pretty exciting'; I cannot remember hearing this type of evaluation in accounts of the First World War. The narration of such an exciting event, which was outside of the routine of the everyday wartime situation, contrasts with Herr Heinrich's accounts of the First War, which were oriented around external dates. The difference is not an expression of the personalities of the narrators. Rather, the absence of narration about WW I has something to do with the ways in which experiences in that war were different to those in the other. One of the main differences between the two wars was the contrasting experience of a war in the trenches and a war of mobility.

The war of mobility between 1939-1945 was an experience of non-routine situations in different places with various people, and of confrontations with living persons, including both civilians and the enemy. In the trenches of the First World War it was impossible to orient oneself according to time, or to structure the days according to the sequences of an ordinary day. The veteran of WW I did not know when there would be breaks in fighting, or when he could eat or sleep. In theoretical terms, the iterative structure of everyday time was broken by the nature of trench warfare. The difficulty of narrating about the First World War is a result of the difficulty of putting into some sort of sequential order the diffuse and chaotic experiences of trench warfare.<sup>10</sup>

It is possible to support these ideas with gestalt-theoretical analyses. Empirical investigations of memory achievement show that what is already 'gestaltet' is remembered much better than the experience of chaos.<sup>11</sup> Chaos enters the memory as an impression of chaos, that is, without taking on meaning. For traces to remain in the memory the experiences must be structured: what is well remembered is what is found in the memory as organised units, and 'organised memory depends upon organised experience'.<sup>12</sup> If we follow further the gestalt-theoretical assumption that memory is organised along spatial rather than temporal or sequential lines, and is thus oriented upon change in the surroundings, the difficulty of remembering the time in the trenches is understandable. One trench looked just like the other. When our surroundings do not change we lose our consciousness of time.<sup>13</sup> The years spent in the trenches shrink into a single image or a brief evaluation, which attempts to express the feelings of dread and despair which are buried deep in the memory. In this situation stories are not told, though they could be developed with the help of a constructive listener. However, after WW I this was not the case; rather, the motto was: 'Try to forget the terrible things'. This advice was also given frequently by psychiatrists.<sup>14</sup> Over time this tendency of

denial became a behaviour pattern, and even today it is very difficult to break that pattern.

The conditions of WW I were more burdensome and traumatic for the soldier than the conditions of WW II. The experiences of immobility in the narrow trench and of the invisibility of the enemy were particular causes of neurotic reactions in the soldiers.<sup>15</sup> People will try to control their fears with activity and this was impossible for the soldiers in the trenches. They could not defend themselves actively in the trenches, they could only react by passively seeking shelter. This passive endurance can be compared with experiences in air raid shelters during the bombing attacks of WW II. In WW II, civilians were more passively exposed to the war than were the soldiers at the front. Narrations by civilians, usually women, show the same telling patterns of remembering as those of veterans of WW I. Like the men, the women speak freely about WW II; however they concentrate upon situations like the changing of shelters or dwellings, upon particular places, and upon expulsion and flight. The anxious hours in the shelters and the awful scenes after the air raids, which were repeated day after day, are not expanded upon in the narrations, and when the women do touch upon this subject it causes them difficulties. When they talk about bombing attacks they do not describe separate experiences; rather they describe how it was in general.

Like the presentations of the soldiers of WW I, WW II is presented by the women as a natural disaster. This might be explained as due to a tendency of women to see themselves as victims of powers beyond their control.<sup>16</sup> But this explanation disregards the material conditions of the civilian population, including men and women, which affected their experiences. These material conditions are, in a number of ways, structurally comparable with those of trench warfare. Firstly, there is the same break in the iterative structure of everyday time. One did not know when the attacks were coming, whether one could sleep at night, whether the electricity would function after the attack, or whether one's house would still be inhabitable. A response to living with such conditions was to 'act as if ...' nothing unexpected could happen<sup>17</sup> to live from day to day and not think about tomorrow; to plan for a day, but not produce long-term plans. A second comparable feature was passive endurance; one could merely seek shelter; one could do nothing for active defense. So one spent one's time waiting till the next attack was over. This passive structure of experience was hardly one to generate stories. Thirdly, the constant repetition of similar situations, disrupting the ordinary routine and at the same time becoming routine in themselves, was also comparable in trench experience and the civilian bombing experience. In narration these routine situations are not elaborated upon, at most they are described in what I call a 'condensed story', that is, a story compiled out of different events which may not have really happened.

What are the consequences for the witnesses of events about which it is impossible to produce stories to represent their suffering? Only with difficulty can they communicate about their suffering to others, and they will not receive sympathy from listeners unable to share their experiences. One may be able to share the experiences of others, but



only when they are related in detail, not when they are dealt with vaguely and in short reports. Telling a story means converting the strange into the familiar; through the act of narration the listener passes from a state of not knowing to one of knowing.<sup>18</sup> When it is impossible to relate experiences there is a danger that the individual will remain entangled in past experiences, unable to create a distance from them.<sup>19</sup> This also makes it impossible to experience the past as different from the present, and thus creates an orientational problem in situations which require action.

In my opinion the inability to talk about traumatic experiences leads to a second traumatising after the suffering is over. When it is impossible to turn experiences into narrations, the trauma accompanying the original experience is consolidated. Where narrating is met with little or no interest, as when the listener is unable to help the narrator in the production of stories, then further attempts at narration will become even more difficult and the feeling of isolation will be strengthened. As interviewers we should be aware of all this and should try to overcome the strange, but we often reveal a therapy-phobia from which many sociologists and historians seem to suffer. As a defence against a trend of narration which may open the doors of verbalisation, we often respond with a 'well-meant' attempt to shut those very doors by changing the subject, asking the next question on our interview questionnaire, or even comforting the narrator with 'but, after all, it was in the past and is gone now'.

It was in my interviews with Holocaust survivors that I became especially aware of how to overcome memory blocks and narration difficulties by constructive listening. Some of my interviewees were almost unable to talk without help about their time in hiding and in the concentration and extermination camps. Like the soldiers who experienced trench war, they dealt with that time with brief reports or images ('it was like a madhouse'). However, Holocaust survivors signalled much more clearly than the German interviewees that they wanted to talk about their experiences, and thereby perhaps to 'unload' something. An ordinary narration stimulus like, 'Could you tell me a little more about what your experience was?' would fail here. Here we were called upon to help the interviewee to return to the scene of experience, by asking detailed questions dealing with the emotion, not the cognition.<sup>20</sup>

### The biographical necessity of war narration

We might assume, therefore, that specific structural aspects of the experience of the Second World War conditioned its narrability. These aspects are different from ordinary experience; situations completely divorced from the less traumatic everyday routine are more easily remembered. For many of the women, WW II meant being bombed out, fleeing from place to place; for men it meant marching forwards or retreating. These non-routine events, with their memory-impressive changes of place, are advantageous for the process of narration. The biographical main-narration can follow these place changes chronologically. In this way the narrator is in control of a memory frame<sup>21</sup> which helps him or her to bring the past into the present.



Three photographs from the private album of a baker from Berlin-Wilmersdorf, in 1915. The postcards were posted to his family with the remark 'put into album!' Photographer unknown.

However, the narrability of WW II is neither a sufficient nor a necessary reason for it to be given such attention. We don't, after all, talk for hours about experiences simply because it is easy. We must have motivations: the experiences must be meaningful for us or for our listeners. In other words, there must be a biographical necessity for the narrator. Autobiographers tell about their lives because they want to reassure themselves with regard to their past, present, and anticipated future. They try through narration to bring their lives into some kind of consistency, and to explain to themselves who they are and how they got there.<sup>22</sup> It is not difficult to see that WW II had an enormous biographical meaning for many of its witnesses. That is why this particular phase in the lives of people is today still in need of attention. WW II had far-reaching effects upon the lives of men and women in Germany. It was not only the actual war years which changed the lives of these people. Many of the men spent more years as prisoners of war; families lost their homes; their property and their friends; and many people lost their *Weltanschauung*, their beliefs. After the war many women lost again the autonomy they had gained during the war, in the family as well as at work. As the soldiers returned from imprisonment they met with great difficulties as they tried to resume family and professional lives where they had left off before their service in the Wehrmacht.

The degree to which men and women experienced the war as an intervention in the course of their lives depends on which generation they belong to. According to our investigations, the life stories of witnesses who were born between 1888 and 1930 can be divided into three different generations: the Wilhelminian-youth generation, the Weimar-youth generation and the Hitler-youth generation.<sup>23</sup> These will be discussed more fully in order to clarify how the generation to which one belongs influences one's need to narrate.

The Wilhelminian-youth generation, including those born between 1890 and 1900, experienced their childhood and youth in the Kaiser-Reich. The men of this generation, who reached adulthood in the trenches of WW I, were and are especially deeply affected by the war. The men and women of this generation experienced their early adulthood, and the tasks of founding a family and building a career, at a time of a wild inflation in Germany and a worldwide economic crisis. In the beginning of WW II the men who had served in WW I, born between 1893 and 1900 and now in the middle age, were again sent to the front. Thus families which had been formed in the twenties and had developed routines of family-life, and in which the husband had established his professional career, were suddenly separated. This generation tended to be less affirmative about WW II than the younger generation, because of the implicit pacifism that resulted from experiences in the trenches of WW I.

Those belonging to the Weimar-youth generation (born between 1906 and 1919), were the first generation of Germans to spend their childhood and youth in a democratic republic. The generation-image, however, is affected more by the conditions pertaining during the phase of early and middle adulthood than by the phase of youth. During

the war years the women of this generation were able to advance considerably along the road of emancipation, only to have to return to their former situation after 1945. The men, from their eighteenth or nineteenth year on, led lives connected in one way or another with the military establishment. Most of these men were soldiers during the entire Second World War, and a part of this generation, those born between 1911 and 1919, were already called to service before 1939 in one or other of the paramilitary organisations of the National Socialist regime. Even without taking into consideration war-imprisonment, these men spent up to ten years of their lives in a military organisation. These are critical years in life when biographically relevant decisions have to be made in the familial and professional spheres. This is a time when the professional career is stabilised and the family established, but for this generation this was also a time of war, and of being a soldier. The men of this generation were unable to assume professional identity outside the Wehrmacht; the interviews we conducted, as well as those described by the research group of Lutz Niethammer,<sup>24</sup> show that the men of this generation regarded soldiering as their profession, to be attained step by step and conscientiously. Many of the members of this generation also married and became parents during the war years. This, then, was a generation of freshly married couples and young parents who could not partake of this status except in their thoughts and on short leave at home. These men hardly knew their wives or their children. The wives had to provide for all the needs of the families at home and were also called upon to perform war-time duties which had previously been performed only by men.

The members of the Hitler-youth generation (born approximately between 1922 and 1930), experienced their childhood and youth in the 'Third Reich'. In school and youth movements they were socialised in the ideology of National Socialism.<sup>25</sup> As children and youths these were, according to Nazi propaganda, the 'guarantors of the future', and they were raised to establish a new society. Their self-confidence was developed and strengthened by the establishment of youth movements which had not been available to previous generations. Hitler Jugend and Bund Deutscher Madel offered attractions – summer and ski-camps and training in certain professions – which had not previously been available, and especially not to the children of the poorer strata of the population. To be a BDM-girl or a Hitler-boy was central to many a young person's identity. National Socialist pedagogues were also successful in arousing enthusiasm in these young people for the Nazi *Weltanschauung* and the war. Many of these youngsters were glad to be able to join the auxiliary forces towards the end of the war. The older members of the generation were conscripted into the Flak-auxiliary, and then at the very end into the regular army. According to our analysis, these men came closest to the National Socialist ideal of the political soldier who was willing to fight to the end for the triumph of National Socialism.

Among the war narrations of these three generations, it is the members of the Weimar-youth generation, and especially the men, who narrate most extensively about

WW II and the succeeding period of imprisonment. They were also the ones upon whom WW II has had the greatest effect. These men served the longest period in the Wehrmacht, and their wives and mothers had to fend for themselves all these years as well as during the period of imprisonment. The post-war period was also biographically incisive for this generation, which had the greatest problems in readjusting to civilian life. After the return of the prisoners of war and the relegation of women to their former roles, these men had for the first time to obtain a real profession and face real life at home as father and husbands.

The members of the Wilhelminian-youth generation, on the other hand, were able to continue professional and family life which had previously been routinised. Their mobilisation had less biographical importance than that of the younger men. In 1939 these men were in a phase of life where they were secure in professions which gave the central meaning to their lives. Thus they were less likely than the younger men to strive for a career in the military, even if this had been possible despite their advanced age. They regarded mobilisation as an interruption of their professional lives. They were loyal to their country and saw their soldiering as an obligation to their fatherland, but although they gave up several years to this obligation, it did not call for the biographical balancing which was required of those who regarded soldiering as a profession. The obligation was over and done with in 1945, and they could pick up the threads of pre-war life.

By contrast, the coming of peace caused a biographical break for those soldiers who regarded their soldiering as a profession. They had difficulty in picking up the threads of a life which, although it had existed, had not been experienced for a long time. Members of the Weimar-youth generation needed to ask the following questions: What will I do now? What profession should I take up – should I continue what I had started or take up something new? Have all my plans and ambitions in the Wehrmacht come to naught? Will my children learn to accept me? Can I keep my marriage going? For women of the Weimar-youth generation the post-war period was marked by the return of husbands who reclaimed the role of 'head of the house', and by the loss of qualified jobs. For that reason the war period maintains biographical relevance even in later years. The women experienced the war as a time of active participation, even though this included suffering; they were able to cope with the vicissitudes of life in wartime, becoming more independent and self-reliant in the process. After they had to give up these roles and capabilities, the wartime period often became very meaningful biographically.

War narrations assume a lesser importance within the whole life story among members of the Hitler Youth generation than among the older age-groups. Even though they tell very detailed stories about the war, they are able to be even more expansive about their time in the Hitler Jugend. Their war experiences are less central to their biographical balance than their membership in the HJ and their enthusiasm for the NS ideals. After all, they were also the ones – according to our analyses, at any rate – who identified

with the 'Third Reich' for the longest time and for whom the defeat of National Socialism meant the collapse of personal ideals. The year 1945 posed different questions for them by comparison with those posed for the men of the Weimar-youth generation. These questions were related less to the fulfilment of biographical plans than to their revision. These women and men, who in 1945 were just beginning their family and professional careers, and thus were not returning to something that already existed, were able to begin a new life with relatively few difficulties. They were also much more future-oriented than the older generation. Thus these younger people suffered much less from biographical in the post-war period than the members of the Weimar-youth generation.

The crises of the younger generation were related to their ideological orientation.<sup>26</sup> It was not their professional career or their family life that was brought into question, but the *Weltanschauung* with which they had identified. Because of the youth amnesty proclaimed by the western allies, together with the liberating arguments prevalent in this generation – 'We were, after all, too young to understand...' – these men and women were able to verbalise more easily about their erstwhile enthusiasm for the Nazi regime, and much more easily than members of the older age-groups. They did not have such a need for war narrations in order to free themselves from membership in Nazi organisations or involvement in the Nazi regime.

### The social function of war narrations

We might accept that so much is narrated about WW II because it represents a phase of life which was and is of enormous biographical importance for people. Our investigations reveal, however, that war-narrations have an additional function in Germany today for those witnesses who were not persecuted by National Socialism: they serve in a process of the normalisation of the Nazi past. Through the narrative expansion of the theme of 'war', people are able to avoid the theme of 'national socialism', and to strengthen the idea that 'we also suffered a lot'. This unburdening argument, which equates the suffering of the speaker with that of an NS victim, is also the kernel of the avoidance of the theme of Nazi crimes which is part of the narration of war stories.

The strategy of telling stories about the war and not about National Socialism causes the condensation of the Nazi period into the depoliticised years of the war, and is one of several ways of avoiding the NS theme. This biographical strategy serves to repair a questionable Nazi past. It also leaves its mark on many life-stories, and on the wide public discussion taking place in Germany. This strategy gives the impression that the twelve years of the 'Third Reich' were war years. A manifestation of this phenomenon is that when there are referrals to the 'Third Reich' only the war years are discussed, although the Nazi regime began in 1933.

Reports about the persecution of Jewish citizens in the first years after Hitler's rise to power are placed into the 'war years'. In biographical narration this strategy determines the structure: the phase of life between 1933 and 1945 is narrated as if it took place almost entirely during

wartime. The time before the war is hardly mentioned. This makes it possible for men who were active in Nazi organisations to be able to avoid thematising this aspect of their life story. They tell about their time in the Wehrmacht, which to them has no connection to National Socialism and which also put an end – according to their presentation – to any Nazi party activities on their part.

As our analyses show, it is the activists of the 'Third Reich' who especially avail themselves of this biographical strategy of relating National Socialism to the depoliticised war years in order to mask their own or others' party-political involvement. The members of the Weimar-youth generation particularly use this strategy when narrating their life stories. They are able to tell about the eventful years of their youth in the Weimar Republic and then go lightly over the pre-war period which was the time of young adulthood in which routines of profession and family were established. Having more or less skipped this period, they are then able to narrate quite explicitly about the war years in which these routines were broken.

This presentation of the 'non-political war' conforms with the idea that this was a war just like any other war. The war goals of National Socialism, such as the conquest of new 'Lebensraum' and the proof of the superiority of the German race, are denied in this kind of argumentation, Germany's guilt for beginning the war is thus dethematised or even denied. In order to avoid possible difficulties arising from personal connections with crimes committed during the war, many of these witnesses shut out the criminal parts of the military operations during WW II.<sup>27</sup> This normalisation of the German war attack is still presented today. The Nazi crimes against humanity are thus included among war operations, with a justification which may sound like this: the Nazi crimes were committed during the war, and every war has its own laws. When, however, these crimes are admitted, they are presented as having been committed by the SS or the Einsatz troops. To this day, former soldiers assure each other that the Wehrmacht did not participate in or commit any crimes; they themselves certainly never experienced such events and had never even heard of such things till 1945. We have, for example, war narrations continuing for hours from soldiers who participated in the attacks on Poland and the Soviet Union, yet there are no references to any crimes.

One could ask whether this entire war narration is perhaps a cover-story, to cover something which was painful for the former soldier. We cannot under any circumstances accept the non-thematisation of war crimes as an indication of a lack of morality, or a lack of guilt-feelings. Rather, it is a sign of a painful burden which the speakers try to avoid. On the other hand, the war years do enable an unburdening by many other witnesses, because this was a period of suffering and time in which they were much less independent. Witnesses tend to feel less responsibility for a life governed by external factors than for one that is autonomous. In other words, they feel less responsible for events which happened during the war even if the events were connected with the Nazi policy, because they also suffered.

And so it is that the war years – which were experienced as a time of suffering, in contrast to the pre-war years which were a time of active planning – play an important role in the way Germans handle the question of political responsibility for National Socialism. Instead of deciding in 1945 that it was impossible to talk about the past because of the guilt-theme, the war-theme offered an opportunity for expansive narration which did not require denial of one's own biographical past. For many this was the dilemma: on the one hand, one could not present oneself as a being without a past, as an identity without a history; but on the other hand, the past was a burden. The solution was to sever one's own past and one's own involvement in National Socialism from its political context, and to tell about things which were at the same time both unpolitical and personally painful. This made it possible to identify oneself as a victim of National Socialism. 'We are all victims of National Socialism', came to be a feeling shared by many Germans.

The survivors of the crimes perpetrated by National Socialists needed a completely different strategy in 1945. After their liberation they needed to mobilise their entire strength in order to stay alive. Although there were some who spoke in private or in public about their experiences, or who wrote about them – both speech and writing were necessary for their continued living, as, for instance, with Primo Levi – most of these people chose silence. They wanted to forget or, perhaps, they did not want to undergo the experience of not being understood by their listeners or of being exposed to the latter's lack of interest. In addition, they did not want to burden their families, especially their children. One interviewee expressed it in this way, 'I remained silent a long time, I wanted to suppress it. I didn't want to burden others with it, and not to make life difficult for my children'.

But since memories do not allow themselves to be erased, but express themselves in nightmares and daily anxiety, and because panic-reactions may come out later in psychosomatic illnesses, the survivors have an ever-growing need to express themselves. In our time they are also more afraid of the forgetting or denial of the Holocaust. For some years now there has been an increase in Israel of life stories by survivors. In many families it is only now that grandparents who kept silent with their own children begin to tell about the Holocaust to their grandchildren. Their speaking has the opposite function to the dethematisation of the crimes. While the bystanders and perpetrators try to cover up with their speaking, the survivors try to uncover. They want to leave a testament, to prove with their personal experiences what kind of unspeakable cruelties were committed in Europe by the Nazis and their helpers. Often they are faced with the problem of uncovering and telling something which was so traumatising for them that it seems impossible to express and to include in a narration. Among the experiences of outstanding cruelties, they include those that were suffered daily, situations that had become routine: the humiliation and mortification, the death of fellow-inmates, standing at attention, the impossibility of washing oneself, the hunger and the cold.



## CONCLUSION

It is possible to prove empirically the following assumptions about narrability and the readiness to narrate about historical and life phases. Firstly, experiences which can be brought into a sequential order are more easily narrated than diffuse and chaotic experiences. Experiences which are easily remembered and narrated are those which are different from the daily routine, especially those connected to changes of place. Secondly, whenever a certain period of life influences the rest of that life by affecting the present and the future of the biographer, then this period must somehow be balanced. The greater the biographical rele-

vance of historical events and phases, the more this leads to a biographical self-assurance and thus to narration. The biographical necessity for narration is also dependent on the generation to which the narrator belongs. Thirdly, if certain periods of history require collective justification, and if one nation or group is faced with the question of political responsibility, then it is possible that cover-stories will appear which deal with personal suffering and serve to normalise the past. The mutual influence of these three components – narrability, the necessity for narration and the social function of the narrations – makes the collective thematization of historical phases possible.

## NOTES

1. K Koestlin, 'Erzaehlen vom Krieg – Krieg als Reise II', *Bios*, 2, pp 173–182.
2. F Schuetze, 'Kollektive Verlaufskurve und Wandlungsprozesse. Dimensionen des Vergleichs von Kriegererfahrungen amerikanischer und deutscher Soldaten im Zweiten Weltkrieg', *Bios*, 1, pp 31–109, 1989.
3. K Roettgers, 'Die Erznaehlbarekeit des Lebens', *Bios*, 1, pp 5–19.
4. Against these findings it has often been claimed that there is already so much war literature. Despite the metaphorical wealth of this literature, which is perhaps a substitute for stories, and the ability of any writer to invent stories, authors like Walter Benjamin (*Illuminations*, 1961, p 410) or Ernest Hemingway (*A Farewell to Arms*, 1929, p 198) complain of difficulties in narration (cf Koestlin, pp 175ff).
5. 'As for the different types of narrations, argumentations and description, see W Kallmeyer/F Schuetze, 'Zur Konstitution von Kommunikationsschemata', in D Wegner (ed), *Gesproechsanalyse*, S Buske, Hamburg, 1977, pp 159–274.
6. The procedure of hermeneutical case reconstruction (cf G Rosenthal, 'Wenn alles in Scherben faellt...' Von Leben und Sinnwelt der Kriegsgeneration, Leske and Budrich. Opladen, 1987; is based on U Oevermann et al, 'Die Methodologie einer 'objektiven Hermeneutik' und ihre allgemeine forschungslgische Bedeutung in den Sozialwissenschaften', in HG Soeffner (ed), *Interpretative Verfahren in den Sozialund Textwissenschaften*, Metzler,

Stuttgart, 1979, pp 352–434.

7. G Rosenthal (ed), 'Als der Krieg kam, hatte ich mit Hitler nichts mehr zu tun': *Zur Gegenwaertigkeit des "Dritten Reiches" in erzaehlten Lebensgeschichten*, Leske and Budrich, Opladen, 1990.
8. F Schuetze, 'Zur Hervorlockung und Analyse von Erzaehlungen thematisch relevanter Geschichten im Rahmen soziologischer Feldforschung', in *Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen: Kommunikative Sozialisationsforschung*, Fink, Muenchen, 1976, pp 159–260.
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10. E. Leed, *No Man's Land. Combat and Identity in World War I*, University Press, Cambridge, 1979.
11. K Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1963. (First printed: 1935).
12. *Ibid* p 520.
13. A Gurwitsch, *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1966.
14. WHR Rivers, 'The Repression of War Experience', *Lancet*, 1, 1918, pp 173–180.
15. M Maxwell, *A Psychological Retrospect of the Great War*, London, 1923, W.H.R. Rivers, 1918, pp 173–180.
16. A Troeger, 'German Women's Memories of World War II', in M Higonet et al (ed), *Behind the Lines. Gender and the Two World Wars*, Yale University, New Haven, London, 1987, pp 285–299.
17. W Fischer, *Time and Chronic Illness. A Study on Social Constitution of Temporality*, Berkeley (Habilitation Thesis), 1982; W

Fischer, *Alltagszeit und Lebenszeit in Lebengeschichten von chronisch Kranken*, in Hurrelmann, *Lebenslage Lebensalter Lebenszeit*, Beltz, Weinheim, 1986, pp 157–171.

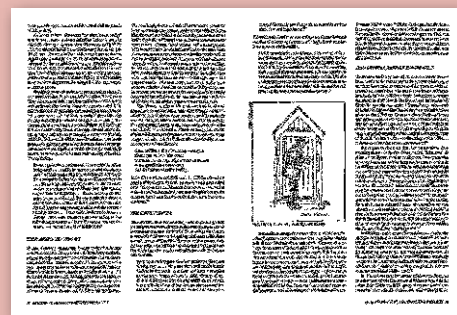
18. F Schuetze, 1976, pp 159–260.
19. K Roettgers, 1988, pp 173–180.
20. In questions of scenic remembering one should try to relate to sensory impressions or place-images in order to remind how something was handled or experienced.
21. M Halbwachs, *Das Gedaechtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1985. (First printed: Paris, 1925).
22. On the topic of the function of biographical narration see W Fischer, 'Perspektiven der Lebenslaufforschung', in A Herth and KP Strohmeier, *Lebenslauf and Familienentwicklung*, Leske and Budrich, Opladen, 1989, pp 279–294; M Kohli, 'Zur Theorie der biographischen Selbst – und Fremdwahrnehmung', in J Matthes, *Lebenswelt und soziale Probleme. Verhandlungen des 20 Soziologentages*, Campus, Frankfurt, 1981, pp 502–520; G Rosenthal, 1987.
23. G Rosenthal, 1990.
24. L Niethammer, *Die Jahre weiss man nicht wo man die heute hinsetzen soll*, Dietz Nachf, Berlin, Bonn, 1986.
25. G Rosenthal, 1987.
26. G Rosenthal, 8 May, 1945: 'The biographical meaning of a historical event', *International Journal of Oral History*, vol 10, no 3, 1989, pp 183–193.
27. F Schuetze, 1989, pp 31–109.



# Inventing Everyman: George Ewart Evans, oral history and national identity

by Alun Howkins

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This is a wonderful piece of writing from the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *Oral History*. Indicative of Alun Howkins' (1947-2018) breadth of understanding, knowledge and generosity of spirit, it offers much to readers now and also highlights important debates in oral history's own development.

This article takes us back to the dedication and output of George Ewart Evans, one of oral history's founding figures, whose 1972 article has already featured in this fiftieth anniversary issue.

Howkins provides further reflection on an author he considered his mentor. He reminds

us of the unique essence of oral history – the voice of those who experienced the past – and how Britain was changing too. Indeed, Evans' earliest recorded voices were from rural communities and economies that had already long disappeared. Howkins identifies Evans' working

methods, his idealism and the flaws, from various perspectives, in Evans' approaches; the ideological framing of his subjects, the romanticism and the disagreements with the academic establishment – historians, anthropologists and others. Howkins highlights how

circumstances and political beliefs affected how and where Evans lived, recorded and incorporated the spoken word of others in his fiction and non-fiction writing. In acknowledging how Evans drew upon art, literature and

politics, Howkins identifies his own insights into social and cultural history, as well as political and societal change.

In writing about Evans, Howkins reflects his own understanding of the rural poor, folk culture and he exemplifies the

craft involved in writing about lives neglected in written records of the past. In doing so, his own significant contribution to the unfolding traditions of Britain's oral history's scholarship is vibrantly highlighted. May such

individuality and intellectual insight continue to thrive and inspire.

**Heather Norris Nicholson, writer, researcher and community-based historian in West Yorkshire, UK**

George Ewart Evans is seen by many, myself included, as one of the founding figures of oral history. *The Times* obituary in 1988 described him in exactly that way while Colin Ward in *The Independent* called him 'both the founding father and the grand old man of the oral history movement in Britain'. For those reasons, if no others he deserves examination in the pages of this journal. However, his particular practice, represented in some ten books published between 1956 and 1987, came to influence many who followed him and it is mainly for that reason that I want to redirect attention at him and his work.

I should also say that I knew George Ewart Evans. Not very well but well enough to have drunk with him, visited his home and corresponded with him. I also admired him tremendously, and he was in some very basic sense my mentor. I wrote 15 years ago, when he was still very much alive, that *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* gave me new eyes. For the first time I looked at the old people about me and began to realise that they were the carriers of a culture and a history of which I had known nothing... This began a process which led me to see as essentially false the view of the world I had acquired from my adolescent forays into literature. *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* is in an almost literal sense the base on which all my subsequent work has been built.<sup>2</sup>

### Welsh origins

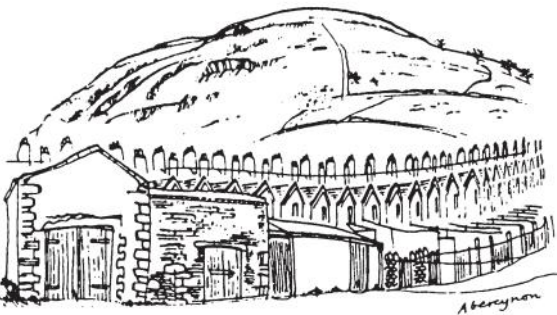
George Ewart Evans was born in 1910 in Abercynon in Glamorgan.<sup>3</sup> His father was a small shopkeeper and a native Welsh speaker, as was his mother and George himself. Although his father was a shopkeeper his fortunes, like those of the whole community, were tied up with the

pits which dominated it and provided an occupation for the vast majority of inhabitants. As a result, in the bitter years of the 1920s the fortunes of the Evans family fell. George's father became bankrupt and eventually ended up running the local Co-operative shop. However, the Welsh determination that children should better themselves and that whatever happened they should be educated, pushed George through county school as a scholarship boy and eventually through University College Cardiff, which he paid for in part by running as a professional.

He graduated in 1931 into mass unemployment and was to remain either unemployed or in short term jobs for the next four years. These years were vital, for the depression and especially its effects on South Wales made him the communist he was to remain, in many ways, for the rest of his life. It also awoke that other great Welsh gift, writing. Although most of his Welsh stories were not to be published until after he had left Wales they gave him an important place in the Anglo-Welsh literary revival of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

His literary work is now ably covered in a book by Gareth Williams<sup>4</sup> but I need to say something about it since it is, I think, very important to George's later life and work as an historian. Although he had published bits and pieces in the South Walian press it was in 1937 that his first important piece appeared in the Communist Party dominated magazine, *Left Review*.<sup>5</sup> It was written under a pseudonym to 'protect his by then hard won teaching post in Cambridgeshire'<sup>6</sup> In some ways the story is a conventional enough piece of socialist realism of the period, yet in others it is very different. It has, for instance, a genuine sense of the so called peripheries of working class life so often missed by historians and writers but central to work people themselves, which characterised his later oral history work.

In 1947, after ten years in which he published a large number of stories about South Wales as well as others about his life in the RAF, he produced a full length novel, *The Voices of the Children*. Although well reviewed in Wales it never got the attention George, his contemporaries and I think it deserved. Its failure in critical terms really marked the end of George's literary work until his collection of East Anglian stories, *Acky*, published in the mid 1970s. Yet in writing about his own community and people, about places he knew and experienced, George's literary work prefigured his historical practice. Where you did not 'know' you asked those who did, pitman or horseman.



Abercynon. From *The Strength of the Hills*.  
Illustration by David Gentleman.

## The impact of East Anglia

In 1935 George went to East Anglia as a physical education teacher at Sawston Village College in Cambridgeshire. In some ways the movement was a chance one – any job after four years scratching a living would have been worthwhile – but in other ways it had more importance than that. Sawston was the child of Henry Morris, Cambridgeshire Education Officer from the 1920s. Morris saw the 'Village Colleges' as centres for the revival of rural life. They were to be schools but also community centres, adult education centres, art galleries and libraries. Each college was to serve about ten villages and was built in a village central to the group. The rural bus was to provide the links between villages and, as George himself wrote, the colleges were to 'resuscitate some of the life that had already drained from the rural village into the town'.<sup>7</sup>

The village colleges were, in this sense, a part of a much wider movement to revive village life in the face of urbanisation which was a common thread in many areas of English intellectual, artistic and political life in the first forty years of this century, and it is within this movement, in the first instance, that the 'English' George Ewart Evans has to be situated. In *Strength of the Hills* he writes with deep sympathy of Morris' aims and achievements, and in some ways his experience in the village college opened up rural England to him as a 'real place'.<sup>8</sup> It also prefigured, probably unconsciously, his own concerns with revitalising village life which are so much a part of his work from his first English book *Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay* onward. In the introduction to that book he writes:

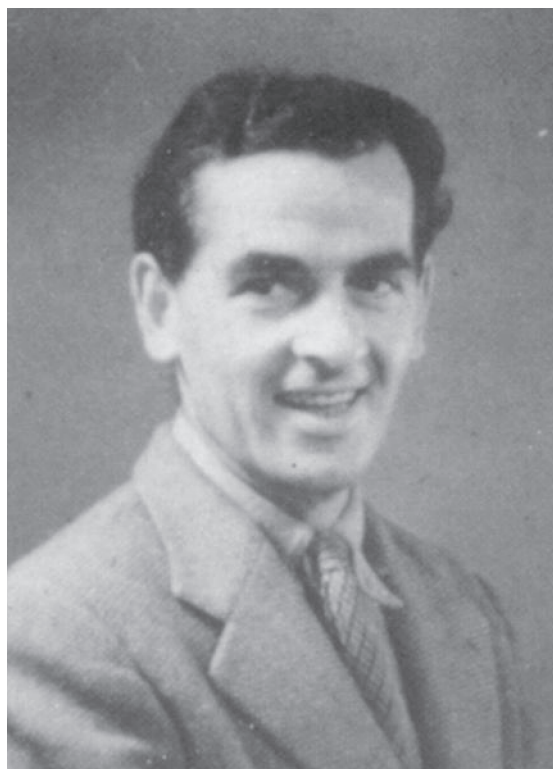
... the old community was organic, at however low a level; since its fragmentation village life, and therefore the life of the nation, has suffered because nothing comparable has taken its place; and while it would be foolish to wish for its return, the gap it left nevertheless emphasises the need for a conscious attempt to build up a new community to replace it.<sup>9</sup>

These concerns never left him and shaped many of his attitudes both to oral history and village life.

It was, however, his move in 1948 to Blaxhall, a strange straggling open village between heath and sea on the Suffolk coast, where his wife, Florence, had become village teacher, which fixed these ideas and their importance to him. However, initially George's problems grew worse.



Blaxhall. 'The Ship'. From *Spoken History*.  
Illustration by David Gentleman.



George Ewart Evans as a young man.

The first contacts with Blaxhall were difficult and fraught with ambiguity. As a Welshman and a Communist, rural England was not obviously a happy home. 'Even in primary school', he wrote later, 'I realised that Wales had been given Cain's portion'.<sup>10</sup>

His sense of exile was clearly still very strong at this time and added to by his own personal isolation. This isolation was also closely linked to his writing. He was, after all not only a Welshman but a Welsh writer whose published work was politically and intellectually set within the Anglo-Welsh revival associated with Keidrich Rhys. However he was beginning to feel that this had become 'windy, flatulent and adipose',<sup>11</sup> a view shared by his wife and supported by a personal break with Keidrych Rhys. Further he felt that his writing, based centrally as it was on personal experience, was getting further and further from Wales: 'My writing about Wales was a product of the Twenties and Thirties; the country had changed during the intervening generation.'<sup>12</sup>

The resolution of these problems came from his practical sense of 'doing something' about the village community. In 1951 a 'Festival of Britain' Exhibition, linked to the school and started by George and Florence, produced a local revival of interest in village history. Walking around the village with his children he had already built up contacts with many of the older villagers and had thought of them as objects of his literature. The exhibition, and his first attempts to ask the villagers about the way of life it tried to show, changed him. The objects and photos that the ordi-



nary people of the village brought to the school, along with the conversations about them, gave George a new sense of the potential of the place in which he lived.

As he wrote later, 'the phrase "the historic community" was to me a mere textbook definition before I came to Blaxhall; after my early years there it became a reality'.<sup>13</sup> He also, and characteristically, put his discovery to practical 'political' use. The organisations of his new home could and should be used to perpetuate the historic community into the village of the future which lies at the core of *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*. He became first a Parish Councillor and then Parish Clerk of Blaxhall. He ran successful local campaigns on water provision and street lighting as well as taking a key role in raising money for village facilities, especially a recreation ground.

Outside his own village the most public result of George's new attitude to East Anglia was *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, which was published by Faber and Faber in 1956. It was well reviewed: *The Sunday Times* for example called it 'A unique picture of English rural life', although as George wrote 'sales were very modest at first'.<sup>14</sup> *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* established a style and an approach to writing that George was to rework but never essentially alter. The core of this was a relationship between language, that is between the oral account, and the actual material culture. The Blaxhall exhibition had started it all because old implements made old people talk and when they talked they used the old language and these two put together revealed the lost (or vanishing) historic community. As he told an early meeting of the Oral History Society:

Before I go to him (an informant) I have a fair idea of his background ... and I take along a material object connected with his work which I think will lighten him up. In the countryside I often take along an old serrated sickle... 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 tommy-box. As a matter of fact I started off with this method just over forty years ago, with a luck that was born out of ignorance ... I was writing fiction at the time ... Though I was more interested, as story writer, in the cultural super-structure, I knew I'd have to start on the ground – or under the ground in this case.<sup>15</sup>

## Literature and history

Despite his change of emphasis, literature rather than history remained central to George's method. His training and inclinations were those of the creative artist rather than the historian, a distinction which he recognised in his rejection of the term 'oral history' in favour of the more experiential 'spoken history', or his insistence that the real origins of what he did lay in folk-life studies with its links, especially in Ireland, to the great literary revival. This position was constantly reinforced through the 1950s and early 1960s by the simple lack of contact between George and the historical 'profession'.

This was largely because of lack of interest on the part

of the latter, for George attempted to make contact with academic historians and was indeed at the founding conference of the British Agricultural History Society. However, in the world of radio features George found support and encouragement. With its strong 'literary' connections like the Irish poets WR Rogers who used taped material and who George admired, as well as producers like David Thompson and Charles Parker whose formation, like George's own, was in creative writing, he found a ready ear for his version of the recent past. Just before he left Blaxhall in 1956 he borrowed from BBC Norwich a portable tape recorder and recorded eight tapes. His purpose was that of a broadcaster, and although they were never used for that, the effect was to add a vitality and power to the work that had begun with *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, which had relied on the less accurate notebook and thus relied more on recreated as opposed to recorded speech.

The 'literary' origins of his work was (and is) of vital importance to understanding both what George's achievements were, and why so many people, especially academic oral historians, have misunderstood what he was trying to do. George's project, it seems to me, was twofold. At one level he saw himself as a chronicler. Characteristically, his careful choice of literary quotations to preface his books constantly suggests his role. *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* comes from a poem of Ezra Pound's:

From a different line of work, my colleagues,  
I bring you an idea, You smirk.  
It's in the line of duty. Wipe off that smile, and  
as our grandfathers used to say:  
Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay.

In the film *A Writer's Suffolk* made in 1979 he talks of the people of Blaxhall as 'books', but books which nobody had read. 'The people were historical documents – books that walked. I realised that nobody was recording this history, the customs, beliefs and farming methods that were in essence medieval'.<sup>16</sup>

## The prior culture

His chronicles were selective and, more importantly, based centrally on the notion of work as the defining experience of human consciousness. Craft and skill, the things which characterised the 'old' way of doing things, had fixed within them a whole system of 'folk life'. The ways a job was organised, the way skills were passed on, the way tools were used were the visible tips of a massive cultural iceberg. Of his informants he wrote:

They were the last generation in a continuous line since farming began ... The generation stood out, for in their lifetime in this arable area there had been a complete revolutionary change, a break in which virtually all the work in farming was now done by machines. As a result, it meant the break-up of the close country communities. For it is an axiom that once the character of the work is changed, inevitably you change the nature of the society where the work is performed.<sup>17</sup>



Sam Friend

Sam Friend, horseman, from *Spoken History*.  
Illustration by David Gentleman.

This notion of a break was another key one. George believed that the end of horse agriculture and the beginning of machine farming was a vital transition.

I felt it especially important to record the feeling of farm people about the new era that was just beginning, for the reason that they were living through the greatest revolution in farming since Neolithic times. As well as recording their thoughts about the new farming, it was my idea to make a record of the era that had already vanished, if only to demonstrate the massive continuity that inhered in so many practices and customs linked with the tradition and hand tool farming that was now disappearing.<sup>18</sup>

In these ideas George discovered what he called the 'prior culture', a culture based on hand tool/horse agriculture

which existed from Neolithic times and which, if examined carefully, shows traces of that antiquity. His best known work in that area was the work around horse magic. This is not the place to recount that work, and the body of it is extremely impressive; rather to comment on aspects of it. To George the survival of a group of quasi-magical practices in East Anglia and elsewhere, particularly the 'toad's bone' - a bone which found, subjected to ritual and then carried by the horseman gave him control of horses - were used to present an essentially unified British if not European 'horse culture' based on the 'horseman's word of the whispers' which stretched back to 'Romano-British' times.<sup>19</sup> This is clearly problematic. There is no *a priori* reason why these beliefs should not exist in Romano-British culture but that is not the question. The interest in these belief systems lies not so much in their origins as in their historical function - what they meant at different times to those who believed them or performed the rituals. At his best George recognised this absolutely, but on other occasions he did not.

### Art and myth, history and politics

From chronicler George moved, via accounts like the ones of horse magic, to the second part of the project which was, in my view, the creation or recreation of Everyman as a kind of national democratic hero who was the real bearer of history. Constantly he talks in his East Anglia books about continuity and about the 'real' history. The farmers and farmworkers of Blaxhall, especially the shepherd Robert Savage who dominates *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, were the embodiment of craft and skill but also the real carriers of history. Savage used the language of the Middle Ages or of Tusser in the same way that the colliers who told the story of Guto Nyth Bran carried through the tradition of epic story telling. In this guise what he says in his moving tribute to Charles Parker is as true of himself: 'he had a wide and absorbing vision which... embraced a celebration of the common man'.<sup>20</sup>

But it goes further even than on occasions. In a revealing chapter in *Spoken History* called 'Influences' he picks out two figures, or rather one figure and one group, who were key influences on him. They are, he knows, writing in the 1980s to an 'academic' audience, going to cause trouble; they are Robert Graves and 'modern artists'. The key issue for George, as for Graves and his 'modern artists', is explanation and above all, myth: 'This raised the ire of the inhabitants of Academe who are notoriously resistant to any different treatment by someone who does not accept unquestioningly the *received* way of interpreting the distant past'.<sup>21</sup> For George, in this position at least, it is myth which 'instead of pin-pointing the truth in exact referential terms circumscribes an area where it is certain truth lies', which is what history should be about. In the same way he had insisted in *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* that 'history is not merely the mechanical acquisition of knowledge about the past: it is more than anything else the imaginative reconstruction of it'.<sup>22</sup>

In this Graves and Braque or Picasso who went 'back to the primitive for inspiration and have found guidance'<sup>23</sup> are better historians than those in the academy because they see both the 'reality' of the experience of the 'ordinary'

man and women and the continuities these people and their culture represent. To George 'spoken history' did that. In the 1979 film he consciously compared what he was doing in Blaxhall with Braque and Picasso's interest in 'primitive' art – 'they recognised its fruits and were not disappointed. Neither was I.'<sup>24</sup>

In this, as in many other aspects of his work, George is revealed as an artistic figure more at home perhaps with the artists of the 1940s and 1950s grouped together as the 'neoromantics' than with the tedious and narrow history of the same period. Indeed George appeared in an anthology edited by Henry Treece, with whom he again has much in common, called *A New Romantic Anthology*. If I wanted a direct comparison with this aspect of George's work it is to David Jones, whom he admired, and who is also in the Treece anthology, that I would turn. Jones 'powerfully integrated landscape, people, mythology and language in fusing the past and present of The Welsh'; George particularly admired Jones' *Anathemata*. In this Jones, like George, puts forward the 'notion of the "modern break" which brought the prior culture to an end.' More than that according to Gareth Williams:

Jones sought to integrate anthropology, archaeology, comparative mythology and literature in a search for the ancient 'deposits' – a Jones keyword – in the Welsh-British social memory. It was comparable accretions, slow moving historical silts and strata, that George Ewart Evans believed he was unearthing in his patient excavation of oral tradition.<sup>25</sup>

This leads to another source of George's inspiration – his politics. He joined the Communist Party in Cambridgeshire in the late 1930s and although his membership lapsed he never really changed his position. He defended the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia to me in the 1970s and his son Matthew recalled George's grave doubts about Gorbachev in the last months of his life. Yet like the Communism of those other East Anglian exiles, AL Morton, the group around AS Niell's school Summerhill at Leiston and even Edgell Rickword and the Australian Jack Lindsay, his Communism was of a particular and very British kind. To many socialist and communist intellectuals the immediate post war years were a time of great hope. The victory of fascism was seen as a victory for the left and a victory which had relied upon the mobilisation of the working class. As a result they sought to typify and heroicise the worker in literature, paintings and especially photographs.

This was not a 'socialist realist' project of a Stalinist kind, although it had some of those elements in it; rather it looked for, and found, particular human, cultural and historical values within working class life and communities, and elevated these to an ideal. This ideal was personified in the characters in the historical novels of Jack Lindsay, the ballad plays of MacColl and Littlewood; in AL Morton's picture of the Ranters or Bunyan as English utopian revolutionaries; in the photographs of Brandt and Hardy and finally in George Ewart Evans' horseman.



Robert Savage, Shepherd. From *The Strength of the Hills*. Illustration by David Gentleman.

### Oral history?

These two sides of George's project, the chronicler and the 'myth maker', sat uneasily together especially when, during the late 1960s, he began to get some of the academic recognition which he had so long been denied by the historical profession. Oral history, the use of recorded interview material at its crudest, came to England, under that name at least, from the USA in the late 1960s. By chance its two most able protagonists at this stage, Paul and Thea Thompson, were at the University of Essex, only an hour's drive from where George had finally settled in retirement at Brooke on the Norfolk/Suffolk border. Coming across his work early on in their own studies they visited him. His account written in the 1980s of their meeting is perhaps more aware of the problems which came later than he was at the time, but it does contain a sense of difficulties which were always there:

They had just come back from a conference in the USA. It was the first time I had heard the term 'oral history'... At that time I felt a bit like the Frenchman in Molière who had been speaking prose for most of his life without knowing it... In spite of what I thought was an unsatisfactory title I was very interested... If anyone at this time asked me to state what I had been writing about in my books, I would have said it was an attempt at recording the folk life of a community, using the word folk as the Scandinavians did, to describe the whole people.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless his contribution was fundamental. To any member of the Oral History Society, especially anyone who was a member in the late 1960s or 1970s, George Ewart Evans was above all a pioneer and an inspirer of our craft. He spoke at the founding meeting of the Society in 1969 and was a member of the 'founding' committee. His paper at that meeting, called characteristically 'Flesh and Blood Archives', recounts his early experiences in East Anglia. Like all his work it is dominated by his deep empathy for his informants and their way of life. It is they who control the situation. George talks of 'learning as I went along' or being a 'patient catalyst' to those who 'know'. Here is also humility in the fact of 'ordinary' men and women. Not the false humility of a later generation of workerist historians, but a sense born of mutual respect for the project in which they were taking part. As he says of craft, 'the work had become part of him (his informant) and to give a wrong description would have been an offence against his own person.'<sup>27</sup>

There is the real mark of 'oral history' on his books of the mid-1970s, especially *Where Beards Wag All* and *From the Mouths of Men*. In those books the chronicler stands out. Here was unsurpassed and unsurpassable account of working life. His account of the horseman, the shopkeeper, the marshmen and of 'going upwards' to Burton are not only extra material in the mills of history; they transform what we know and what we need to ask about the past. His account of going to Burton in *Where Beards Wag All*, for example, does a number of different things. At a basic level it adds to simple knowledge by telling us about a migration route which was virtually unknown before his study. But that is only a beginning in George's account. We learn how migration fitted in with the family economies of both the home village in Norfolk and Suffolk and the receiving community in the Potteries. This serves to make the communities of the past much more complex and interesting. However, it also throws a spanner into the works of simplistic accounts of family life and village structure which stress the nuclear family, stability and continuity. Finally we hear the past, we hear those who lived migration tell us of their problems, their laughs and above all their skills and work patterns, in a way no other historical source could ever provide.

Almost as if his final recognition and status cleared away the difficulties and problems of the 1940s, George returned in the late 1970s to record in, and write about, Wales. Here in the land of his birth he came back to the concerns of his youth. In *From the Mouths of Men*, he brought the skills and methods honed to perfection in East Anglian to the pit villages of his childhood.

### Problems and criticism

Yet there were problems. Oral history as an academic discipline was prepared for George as a chronicler but was less at ease with his growing sense of myth, in which his work on the hare reinforced his earlier work on horse magic and the horse cult. Basing himself on Morgan's anthropology and on Engels he sought to elevate historical continuities above time and place. The results in George's work were challenging if not always comfortable. This work in particular continued to be savaged by academics. Edmund

Leach, the Cambridge anthropologist, wrote of his book, *The Leaping Hare* that it was 'a jumble of fantasy and misstatement', but all that did was to convince George that he had been right about Cambridge intellectuals in the 1930s.<sup>28</sup> More generally his insistence throughout his work on the continuities of agricultural life drew attacks from among others his fellow South Walian Raymond Williams, who curiously in his own last novel, *People of the Black Mountain*, takes on a mythic subject of which George would have approved. But he persisted. In his last book he chides 'oral history' for ignoring these continuities, stressing the oral, as he puts it, at the expense of the history.<sup>29</sup> It also gave him a breadth which I for one miss desperately in so many modern historians. He was at home with Vergil and with Terence, as befitted the classical scholar he was. He loved 'old Tusser', the sixteenth century agricultural writer, as he did John Clare's eighteenth century farmer, because it was a source of 'wisdom' on farming as well as proof of continuity. But he was equally at home with the writers of his own generation, and was an acute commentator on contemporary literature.

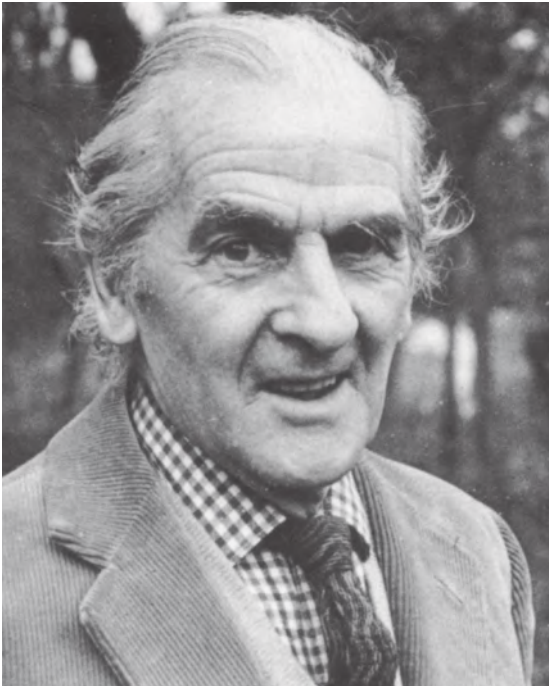
In the last few years a new generation of oral historians have produced further criticism which while not specifically directed at his work bring into question, via notions of subjectivity, whole areas of what George Ewart Evans did. As the 'Popular Memory' group from Birmingham and especially Graham Dawson and later Al Thomson have pointed out, this now traditional approach has real problems. As Judith Okley has written in a review of the influential volume *The Myths We live By*:

Oral history can no longer be understood as a simplistic cross checking of the facts for these may be myths, inventions, fantasies, wish fulfilments or repressed fears ... so the oral account can also be analysed as a construct. The creative challenge is how to detect and explain the construct.<sup>30</sup>

This is, in a sense, a direct challenge to George Ewart Evans' whole project which saw the material he collected as embodying the 'truth'. Where he moved away from this view it was down a path which few would now accept - essentially a mixture of Jungian psychology and Frazerite anthropology which, if typical of his time and place, would find little academic support outside the wilder shores of folk life and folklore studies. Yet in a way the circle moves towards a closure. George's insistence that language was the unknowing carrier of meaning outside the 'obvious', and his recognition of the centrality of myths to everyday life, contain elements which prefigure the work of Passerini and especially Portelli, and he would certainly have been more at home with them than with Cambridge anthropology.

The actual work that George did was a source of weakness as well as strength. For example he moved the study of work from the dead old tools of a museum cabinet to the complicated and living social relations they embody. His accounts of the horseman, or the shepherd, or the miner are a unique contribution to the history of working people. Yet again, as I have already said, I think aspects of





George Ewart Evans in later life.

that distorted his (and for that matter my own) view of rural areas. For a communist, or at least a socialist historian, there is remarkably little struggle in George's work and class is a term only of praise as in 'the working class'. The reasons for this are clear. He had a harsh view of parts of the past, as his tapes with for example George Messenger in Blaxhall in 1956, show. However at a more general level he saw the prior culture as classless and organic, especially in its shared culture of skill. The Suffolk horseman, according to George, did not, like his Scots brother, use his magic control of horses to weld ploughman together into a primitive and violent trade guild, rather it was part of an intraclass respect for skill shared by master and man alike.

The emphasis on work, or rather wage labour, especially in his later books also produced a masculine world, although it must be said this is not so true of *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*. He was personally sympathetic to the political women's movement and some of his earliest interviews were with women, notably Priscilla Savage, yet the emphasis on men's outdoor work pushed women to the back of his world. Where they occur they occur firmly within a Victorian world of separate spheres, their work celebrated within the domestic space of 'home'. Again this

fits with some of the ideas of the pre-war 'peasantist' and rural settlement movement which sought to 'revive' country skills. There was in his work, as in the work of many of his socialist and communist contemporaries, a glorying in the masculinity of labour. Here, as in some of the photographs of the 1940s there is a heroicising tinge which reminds one of the work of Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker's *Radio Ballads*, although George always pulled back from the extreme neoStalinist aspects of that work, especially 'The Big Hewer'.

### Our inheritance

Fifteen years ago, in *History Workshop Journal* I wrote of my own debt, as an historian of the East Anglian farmworker, to George Ewart Evans. This essay is a revision of some of those thoughts and a building upon others. Yet some things remain unchanged. First, a method. I am not sure what kind of an 'oral historian' I am or will be but I do know that I learned from George how to listen, and to listen to the printed word as well as the spoken. Without that I would have missed much of what I regard in my own slight contributions. Few historians approach the material of their study with sufficient care; as a result nuance, tone, and complexity are missed.

Second, a tradition. Not here and now in George's use of the word to mean a handed down way of doing things or thinking about the world, but the tradition which he himself represented, the tradition of the activist writer, researcher and teacher who linked the past to the present and even the future. In *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* he insists that 'the village of the future' would have to 'know the past' to give it real strength and permanence. Again in the 1979 film he spoke of this at length, arguing that modern ecological concerns had shown that over-mechanisation was causing erosion and soil compaction just as the old horseman he had interviewed, Sam Friend, had said it would.<sup>31</sup>

George Ewart Evans was, I think, the nearest I have known to what Gramsci meant in that much abused phrase, an 'organic intellectual'. Although university educated it was his 'second academy', as he called it, the village of Blaxhall, which shaped his life. 'I learned from this experience', he wrote, 'that the main components of history are not things but people.' In these post-postmodernist days this probably sounds romantic. If so then I plead guilty to the same crime. Oral history moves on. Our work, or its works become ever more complex and analytical and that's as it should be, nothing can stand still and survive. But we must beware of losing sight of George's vision, whatever our practice, for if we do lose it we will have lost the unique essence of oral history – the voice of those who experienced the past.

This essay was written for oral presentation at a day school at Cyfartha Castle Museum in 1989 organised to mark the opening of an exhibition of George Ewart Evans' life and work. It subsequently travelled with that exhibition and was given in Norfolk and Manchester. Finally it came

home to the work-in-progress seminar at the University of Sussex. On all these occasions it benefited from comments from those present but I owe special thanks to Gareth Williams, Glyn Jones, Nick Mansfield, Rob Perks and George's family. Huge thanks also to Al Thomson

and Joanna Bomat from *Oral History* for their careful editing. Finally thanks are due to David Gentleman and Faber and Faber for allowing us to reproduce the illustrations which were produced for George's books, and to Sue Gentleman for providing photographs of George.

## NOTES

1. *The Times*, 13th January 1988; *The Independent*, 18th January 1988.
2. Alun Howkins, 'George Ewart Evans', *History Workshop Journal*, 1976.
3. The information on George Ewart Evans' life comes, unless otherwise stated, from his autobiography, *The Strength of the Hills*, London, 1983.
4. Gareth Williams, *George Ewan Evans*, Cardiff, 1991.
5. 'Red Coal' published under the name George Geraint, *Left Review*, 3, no 1, February 1937.
6. Williams, p 13.
7. *The Strength of the Hills*, p 102.
8. *Ibid*, pp 105-6.
9. George Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, London, 1956, p 15.
10. *The Strength of the Hills*, p 98.
11. Quoted in Williams, p 38.
12. *The Strength of the Hills*, p 155.
13. *Ibid*.
14. *Ibid*, p 154.
15. *Oral History*, 4, 1972, p 56.
16. *A Writer's Suffolk*, BBC TV, 1979.
17. George Ewart Evans, *Spoken History*, London, 1987, p 33
18. *Ibid*, p 172.
19. George Ewart Evans, *The Horse in the Furrow*, London, 1967, chapters 21-24.
20. *Spoken History*, p 149.
21. *Ibid*, p 215.
22. *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, p 16.
23. *A Writer's Suffolk*.
24. *Ibid*.
25. Williams, p 74.
26. *Spoken History*, pp 34-5.
27. *Oral History*, 1, 1971, p 3.
28. Quoted in Williams, p 73.
29. *Spoken History*, p 39.
30. Judith Okely, 'Review of the *Myths We Live By*', *Oral History*, vol 19, no 1, 1991, p 71.
31. *A Writer's Suffolk*.



# Narratives of Cambodian refugees: Issues in the collection of refugee stories

by Nicola North

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Conflict, war, persecution and human rights violations displace increasing numbers of people each year and that global trend continues to rise. While media turns briefly to expose the anguish and complexity of different situations and agencies

strive to respond to different humanitarian crises, at some point, some survivors feel able to, and are prepared to share their stories. Journalists put themselves increasingly at risk as they bring to their audiences the immediacy of testimonies

from people whose lives and families are being torn apart by forced displacement and the need to seek asylum, but others have more reflective opportunities to encounter and bear witness to often forgotten narratives of survival and loss. Online sites also

seek to re-engage wider audiences and provide digital spaces for recognition, commemoration and validation of lives caught up in past turmoil and catastrophe. Nicola North's article takes us to the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the

legacy of resettlement that involved millions of people from Cambodia and Laos, still two of the world's poorest countries and explores issues involved in trying to understand displacement from the refugees' perspective. Her writing displays reflexivity as she devises and adjusts her ethnographical

approaches. She develops interview techniques and acquires the sensitivity needed to work via an interpreter with people who have experienced trauma and continue to remain very vulnerable. Her honesty in identifying the challenges of such work reflects integrity and detailed background cultural knowledge. North

makes a strong case for inter-disciplinary approaches that continued to underpin a long and varied career. Her early work on refugees and resettlement led on to community health and rural development and for years she also brought varied perspectives to the study

of health care provision, labour markets and nursing policy and practice. Her article in *Oral History* was very early in a life all about listening with care.

**Heather Norris Nicholson, writer, researcher and community-based historian in West Yorkshire, UK**

This article focuses on the process of collecting narratives with the assistance of interpreters from members of an ethnic minority community. The ethnographic method was employed, characterised by unstructured in-depth interviewing and participant-observation. I conducted my research among resettled Cambodian refugees whose language, the Khmer language, I don't share, requiring that I work with an interpreter. It is a community whose members have been severely traumatised, who are vulnerable with regard to their minority linguistic and ethnic status, as well as their experiences and status as refugees.

In this paper, I first describe the method of ethnography, commenting on my relationships with participants, which in this study were mediated by my interpreter. I go on to describe how I went about the process of cross-linguistic interviewing and recording of data, and how I handled this data. The conventions and codes governing social research among human subjects are severely strained in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research, particularly when the community is vulnerable by virtue of their minority and refugee statuses, issues that are discussed at length. To conclude I discuss the politics of a person from the dominant culture conducting research among an ethnic minority which is disadvantaged socially and economically.

## Background

During the 1960s and 1970s the Vietnam War dominated world news, a war that spilled over borders into neighbouring Cambodia and Laos. In its wake millions of refugees of the former Indochina drifted on the high seas and fled through the jungles, seeking initially asylum in refugee camps hastily set up in nearby countries, and eventual acceptance for resettlement by Western countries. In common with developed countries such as those of North America and Europe and neighbouring Australia, New Zealand became host to large numbers of refugees of Southeast Asian origin, an unprecedented influx of Asians into its existing population mix of predominantly Maori, European and Pacific Island peoples.

Refugees who resettle in other countries have lost country and home, family and friends, lifestyle and livelihood. It is contingent upon them to adjust to alien ways of

organising society and the lives of its members. More fundamentally, their familiar ways of explaining and dealing with phenomena, which characteristically make sense in the context of the place from which they fled, lose relevance, necessitating an adjustment of their world view. This process of acculturation, which intimately impinges on values, beliefs and practices, is for the refugee accompanied by mourning the lost culture, country, and frequently family members and life-long friends. At the same time, refugees frequently wish to preserve and revive aspects of the lost culture in their adopted country, giving rise to the development of ethnic minority cultures. The process of resettlement, therefore, is complex and intense, the nature of which is poorly understood.

In order to better understand the phenomenon of refugee resettlement from the perspective of the refugees themselves, an ethnographic study was undertaken over a three year period from 1992, documenting the life-stories and experiences of Cambodian refugee families who had settled within the previous decade in a provincial city of New Zealand in which between 350 and 400 Cambodians reside. As a medical anthropological study, the principal interest was in collecting narratives relating to illness experiences and healing both prior to and after settling in New Zealand, which were interpreted in the widest possible contexts of their refugee experience. Their accounts of events leading up to and including their flight to refugee camps in Thailand were therefore recorded, along with their experiences as they endeavoured to adjust to New Zealand conditions. In spite of pressures to integrate with mainstream society and the provision of sponsorship and English language services, a majority of these Cambodian adults of peasant farming backgrounds had not acquired sufficient English to converse without the assistance of interpreters.

The study demonstrated that to migrate to and settle in another country demands far more than adjustment to, even conformity with, alien values and ways of seeing and doing. It became apparent from discussions with participants, and by interacting with other members of the Cambodian community over that period of three years, that they do not exist in a single place (a particular city in New





As most participants spoke little or no English, interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter (centre), and usually in the presence of other family members. Interviews were tape-recorded, and translated. Photo: Nicola North.

Zealand), nor time (the 1990s). Rather, their consciousness is occupied intensely and simultaneously with multiple places and times. These geographical and temporal reference points reflect where their kith and kin now reside, or had resided until they were lost to them, and where they themselves experienced life events and crises of a severity that is scarcely credible. It is not the findings of the study which are presented in this paper, however, but the methodological challenges to the collecting of narratives, posed by researching cross-linguistically and cross-culturally, among a traumatised and vulnerable community.

### The ethnographic method

Ethnography is described simply as a process of closely observing, recording and engaging in the daily lives of those of the culture being studied.<sup>1</sup> In the process, I as researcher needed to continually recognise and make allowance for my own presuppositions and biases, and indeed that my very presence and questioning did themselves affect the social phenomenon I was seeking to interpret. It has been pointed out that the philosophical difficulties related to the researcher's being in fact part of the phenomenon under study can be resolved by acknowledgement of the reflexive nature of research, a reflexivity which can be an added advantage when the ethnographer is able to exploit her/his role and person for the benefit of participants and the study.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, personal characteristics of the interviewer that contrast with those of the participants can limit both the kind and quality of

data offered, as for example when ethnic and cultural backgrounds and educational levels differ.<sup>3</sup>

My interest in collecting narratives on health and healing, including the persistence of traditional beliefs on causation of illness, and of traditional healing practices, entailed the risk that I would be given the picture the informants believed would be acceptable to the ears of a white educated person, and legitimate in the context of New Zealand society. In this case, I exploited my experience of having worked in community health development in rural Asia for over a decade. My familiarity with beliefs regarding the supernatural in both illness causation and cure effectively opened up that significant area of information which otherwise may have been concealed out of fear that I would consider them 'superstitious and ignorant', as my translator phrased it. On the other hand, some participants exploited my familiarity with the health system and Western medicine for their benefit, a reciprocal arrangement I willingly concurred with and one which greatly assisted in strengthening the moderately long-term relationship we shared.

The processes of collecting oral histories and conducting ethnographic interviews share much in common, with each employing similar techniques of interviewing, analysing and verifying narratives.<sup>4</sup> Oral historians of the Anglophile West are cautioned, however, on the difficulties encountered in interviewing those with sensory disabilities, ill-health, and for whom English is a second language.<sup>5</sup> In the case of this ethnographic study, the participants were

characterised by being in poor health and unable to converse in English, which was particularly demanding of interview techniques and required the development of strategies to overcome these difficulties.

The principal method of collecting data was in-depth interviewing, unstructured interviews which are best described as 'focused conversations', carried out with the assistance of a Cambodian interpreter. The usual form these took was that after the preliminaries were over, I would focus the discussion by asking a question or introducing a topic. Most of these conversations were tape-recorded, tapes subsequently translated and transcribed by independent bilingual Cambodian research assistants. The narratives thus recorded were supplemented by limited participant-observation, mainly in domestic and social service settings, on festival and life-cycle occasions, and as my contact with them went on, increasingly as a friend who calls to visit. I recorded these at times by photographing the scene, but mainly in the form of descriptive notes, for example:

Old man squatting smoking by fire (fire smoking and home too warm). Grandmother trying to put one baby to sleep. Daughter with another child. Daughter-in-law perched on arm of chair suckling the infant born last week and entertaining her older one (there really are a lot of people in this room for the available seating). This young mother looks very pale, sallow even. Garlic outside drying in sun, on step. Eight adults and four kids live here, four bed-roomed house, their own. Into the midst of our conversation came another elderly couple who turned the place into a market; set out their produce on a cloth on the floor and began to sell surplus vegetables! Is this New Zealand?! This often happens, Sok says. They brought news of the sick infant, very serious apparently, in ICU.

This particular study was complicated by my need of an interpreter, whom I call Sok, thereby introducing another major dimension into my task of interpreting the phenomena. Sok's involvement in this study and the effect she had on the social world that was its focus was considerable. The potential for her to overlay my questions and participants' responses with her understanding and experiences was very high, yet at the same time her centrality to the study process facilitated the interlinking of stories. I was reliant on her to identify suitable participants and make the initial contacts, and it is likely that her personal circle of friends are well-represented. I do not see this as a problem in that it doesn't result in misrepresenting the phenomena under study, that of refugee experiences and health.

My reliance on an interpreter meant that I had less control on the direction these conversations took than would have been the case in a monolingual interview. There were times when the conversation drifted off the topic, and we did not return to the point of interest, but in most instances this could be remedied at our next meeting after I had reviewed my notes made during the interview. On other occasions my low level of control proved to be an advantage, as when the conversation ranged onto a

subject that I hadn't previously considered, yet was highly relevant. An example was when I was trying to uncover the concept the Cambodians translated as 'allergy', which triggered a discourse on 'fright', a concept I hadn't previously been acquainted with.

### **Methodological issues in research among an ethnic minority**

This research was carried out in co-operation with members of the Cambodian community, which assisted in addressing many of the problems encountered in research among ethnic minorities. The problems of conducting studies of ethnic and linguistic minorities, and specifically Southeast Asian refugees, has received some attention. Problems that particularly plague survey methodologies include those of sampling, non-response and response errors, conceptual and linguistic non-equivalence between researcher and subjects, and problems in recruiting and training interviewers.<sup>6</sup>

These problems are not altogether overcome by avoiding questionnaire surveys, as responses even to open-ended questions may lack validity because of the way a question is framed, and because social and cultural factors militate against answering fully or truthfully. While my choice of an ethnographic approach sidestepped some of the difficulties listed above, there remain the subtle cultural differences that influence disclosure, as Liu intimates:

A Chinese proverb says, 'before a stranger it is better to express only one third of your opinion'. For immigrant populations, perhaps the proverb should be changed to one fourth ... For refugee populations, one's whole opinion should probably be entirely withheld.<sup>7</sup>

In the light of this discussion of ethnic minority research, my inability to converse directly with participants that forced me to work with an interpreter proved serendipitous. Together as we struggled to find the meanings attached to phenomena, even our difficulties in finding linguistic and conceptual equivalence forced a deeper exploration of the issue. Frequently I needed to rephrase a question to ensure that my interpreter grasped the point of it. Similarly, as I reread transcripts of tapes there are recorded many times her attempts to ensure I understood.

'Have you got it?' she would demand. 'Have you got that about the *dtos*?' And then would follow more discussion among all of us taking part, as I was often slow in grasping such concepts.

### **Selection and roles of interpreter and transcribers**

The choice of interpreter was most important for the process of generating data. Obviously I required someone fluent in both Khmer and English, able to translate both language and concepts. This narrowed the field to a relative few, mostly young, members of the Cambodian community. Moreover, this person needed to be available at the times which suited the participants, which as it turned out was during the day in week-days. I wanted someone who was fully part of the Cambodian community and their

history, sharing a common background and therefore able to empathise with participants both young and old. Thus were excluded young bilingual Cambodians who had grown up and were educated mainly in refugee camps and in New Zealand. I did not want a trained health care professional such as a nurse, as this would be likely to affect disclosure of traditional beliefs and interpretations, and risked an overlay of their accounts with an 'educated' view.

In the first instance I approached the leader of the Cambodian Association for assistance in selecting an interpreter, who suggested three possibilities. Of these, Sok met my criteria, and was both available and willing. This choice did not go unchallenged by the transcriber/translators of tapes. Their concerns included that there were other Cambodians whose English was better; she didn't know some of the more technical English terms; did not confine herself to only translating questions and responses; and that a more educated interpreter would in their view have obviated the need to tape interviews which then needed to be translated.

It subsequently transpired that other social and ethnic issues underlay these objections, such as the mutual antagonism that at times emerges between ethnic Chinese (as these young people are) and ethnic Khmer. Reflected here too are the political factions that are a feature of the Cambodian community, and conflicts between Cambodians of urban and rural origin, as well as between the educated and less educated. Finding myself in the position of defending my choice heightened my awareness that the Cambodian community is not a homogeneous group, but on the contrary is characterised by ethnic, political and increasingly, inter-generational differences.

The choice of translator/transcribers was equally important to the success of the study, and these were located through networking. Again, I first requested assistance from the leader of the Cambodian Association, pointing out that this person needed to be highly-literate in both English and Khmer. Young people who grew up in South-east Asia but were educated in New Zealand I thought would be suitable. A young man whom I call SomNaang, a student completing his degree at university, agreed to assist, and he in turn recruited a second suitable person when he found he couldn't single-handedly complete the task within my timeframe. When it came to translating words and concepts for which there was no corresponding English term, they furnished me with detailed explanations, supported by dictionary references, drawing from the leading Khmer and Khmer-English dictionaries.

The interpreter, Sok, and the translator/transcribers of tapes, particularly SomNaang, themselves became key informants. This was particularly the case with Sok, who was intimately involved in selecting participants as well as in every interview, and inevitably influenced the data through her two-way interpreting. Furthermore, as we drove away from participants' homes she would frequently add her interpretation to what we had been discussing, or contribute stories of other experiences, her own or others she was acquainted with, all of which was most useful in establishing the linkages among individual stories and

contexts. She was also my principal sponsor to my participating in Cambodian festivals and meetings, and took it upon herself to instruct me in social mores and conventions, and the expectations participants had of me, thereby smoothing my ongoing relations with participants.

An example follows of the interplay among myself as interviewer, the participant BoPa, Sok as interpreter, and SomNaang's clarifications and comments. SomNaang devised a system of brackets, denoting spoken and translated Khmer (in round brackets), and distinguishing his own additions or comments for clarification by [square brackets]. I had asked about a recent investigation.

*BoPa:* (They said nothing was wrong, just that [my] blood was not circulating properly. Nothing was wrong.)

*Sok:* She said her brain that's okay; her blood and her nerve for the blood running, [is] not normal.

*BoPa:* ([They] said nothing was wrong. All were normal. But just told [me] not to 'think too much', because that one [is] like you said.)

Here followed BoPa being advised at some length by Sok, together with another woman present, as to how she should stop herself 'thinking too much' (the literal translation of a common Cambodian mental process, usually regarded negatively). At the end of this SomNaang offered one of his personal opinions, an example of his interaction with material throughout the transcriptions:

[I think it can be quite dangerous for some (untrained) self-appointed counsellors to deal with or offer advice to people like BoPa in cases like hers. From my own experience with this problem there would be nothing wrong with 'thinking', if it was forward-looking, if the 'thinking' was complemented with action ...]

Although the tensions between the interpreter and the translator/transcribers required sensitive handling on the few occasions when these became overt, there were positive effects. Issues that may otherwise have passed by unnoticed were highlighted, and the contrasting perspectives on a given issue of the traditional, often older, Cambodians and their young, Westernised fellow-refugees came into sharp focus. Far from being better avoided, as SomNaang had suggested, the painstaking process of recording, transcribing and translating taped interviews, often conducted in the presence of family members and friends and with their participation, effectively verified data derived from a variety of narrators.

### **Ethical considerations**

Research among ethnic minorities, especially of refugee origin, has particular ethical considerations. Ethical issues in this study fell into three areas. The first and most general relates to research involving human subjects, the underlying principle being to 'do your subjects no harm'.

This is complicated by the second consideration, that the Cambodian community is a vulnerable population.

Cambodian refugees are vulnerable in their newness to the country, that they may not be fully conversant with their rights to decline from participating in part or totally at any time, and/or by their desire to please those of the host country, including stranger researchers. They are also vulnerable in being ill and classed as 'refugees', which in combination is likely to give rise to a perceived and real dependence on those about them as they endeavour to find their way in an unfamiliar health care system, compromising their own sense of control and self-determination. This vulnerability and dependence affects their capacity to freely continue their participation, in fact may be a factor in their consenting in the first place.

The third ethical concern in this study is in respect to the likelihood that the participants included victims of torture, and all had suffered trauma and loss. Although these experiences were not the focus of the study, a number of participants did themselves raise them in the context of discussions on current health problems. The few psychiatric centres that specialise in treating Southeast Asian refugees, mainly in the United States, have had mixed experiences in applying Western psychiatric therapeutic approaches to highly traumatised refugees. For example, experiences have been documented in the United States in which attempts to resolve past trauma through revisiting trauma experiences have exacerbated symptoms, and disturbed and demoralised therapists.<sup>8</sup>

Being therefore mindful that revisiting a very traumatic past can worsen rather than alleviate distress, and considering that the locality lacked professionals and facilities with expertise in working with distressed Cambodian refugees, I was initially anxious lest I thereby harmed my participants, even though I did not specifically probe into their trauma. After one disclosure of truly horrific experiences, in this instance of flight to Thailand, I inquired of the narrators as to whether recounting that episode was problematic or distressing for them. They assured me it wasn't, and in fact that daily they remembered these events, frequently talking about them among themselves. They went on say:

From the stomach thank her for wanting to know such. The misery is such, the Khmer's misery, our plight when we escaped. We don't mind, we want her to know. It is all true, true from the heart, and [we] want everyone to know about that too ...

My experience in this was similar to those of other ethnographers, who in contrast to experiences of psychiatric clinic workers, have commented on the compulsion among traumatised Southeast Asian refugees to recount their stories and that these should be made widely known.<sup>9</sup> The clinical nature and intrusiveness of the psychiatric interview may well account for the exacerbation of distress in trauma and torture victims, especially when these bring to mind experiences of being interrogated. However, the collection of narratives in the nonthreatening context of ethnographic interviewing, conducted in familiar domestic and community settings, seems rather to bring relief to those carrying unshared personal histories of a horrific nature.

A major provision to protect participants in their vulnerability was my briefing of my interpreter, reminding her to allow participants not to respond to certain queries. On one occasion my questions about people in a photograph, whom I later learned were close relatives who were missing, presumed dead, were rebuffed by the interpreter. Much later, when I read the transcript, the way she protected participants became clear in her explanation of the interchange to them:

She seems very intrigued, but just now she seemed too curious. And I said, 'Why do you want to ask? It is not the sickness'.

Similarly, advantages of working with a person of the group being studied also lay in the more sensitive issues that the nature of this study occasionally uncovered. For instance, on one occasion when I was asking an older chronically ill woman what she thought caused her illness, she and Sok chatted away for a long time. Eventually I butted in, and the response to my query of what the chatter was all about was, much to my annoyance, that they were 'talking about [their] own affairs'. As we drove away, Sok explained that the woman had been disclosing a matter of deep shame to her, to which she attributed the exacerbation of her illness, and Sok did not want to add to her embarrassment by translating then and there.

The matter of requiring written informed consent has been questioned in respect to research on Southeast Asian refugees.<sup>10</sup> Existing cultural and ethnic difficulties in ensuring that consent is truly informed and free is complicated by their vulnerability, as discussed above, and further compounded by the deep fear and suspicion that many refugees have with respect to signing papers. In the view of some researchers, the procedure of using a consent form ostensibly to protect potential participants could in fact be injurious, generating high anxiety.

As I embarked on the preliminary phase of this study, my intent was to comply with university human research ethics requirements by obtaining written consent. However I was strongly discouraged by Cambodian leaders not to do so for the very reasons outlined above.<sup>11</sup> I therefore proceeded (with the somewhat reluctant agreement of the university Human Ethics Committee) on the basis of informed verbal consent. In certain populations, such as this Cambodian community, the procedure described here proved not only more appropriate but safer. The experience of this ethnographic study demonstrated that the spirit behind the normal requirement of obtaining written consent need not be weakened by instead obtaining verbal consent, provided this is informed, free, and ongoing.

I regarded consent as a process, initiated at the outset of the study, when they were given a written description, in both English and Khmer, of what I intended to do, together with a personal introduction and contact addresses and telephone numbers. This description included the expectation that I would spend some hours spread over several visits interviewing them with Sok, at a place convenient to them (which in most instances was





A participant explaining how to protect oneself from bullets and other threats, an area of expertise in high demand in Cambodia, but seldom in New Zealand. Photo: Nicola North.

their homes). I also sought consent specifically for tape-recording interviews, and for taking photographs. Consent covered not only the collection of narratives and other data, but the use of that information for scholarly purposes, the nature of which was explained. Their right to decline answering particular questions, and indeed to withdraw from the study at any time, was made clear, facilities which were taken up by participants from time to time.

Process consent has been suggested as preferable to written informed consent when studying vulnerable populations. Particularly is this so with an approach to research that is responsive to emergent data, when the study involves interviews and participant-observation over an extended period of time. In the case of ethnographic research when the borders between participant-as-researcher and participant-as-friend tend to become blurred, process consent is particularly appropriate.

Assuring satisfaction of ethical requirements with respect to confidentiality of participants and storage of data was less problematic. Throughout the study, all data has been boxed and kept safely in a private facility. At its conclusion, this material will be destroyed. I replaced names with a code (eg F3a) to label tapes and notes, used pseudonyms rather than proper names throughout the report, and eliminated identifying information which was not essential to the narratives and conclusions.

Finally, participants' rights regarding the final form of reports and their use is enshrined in New Zealand in codes and conventions of social research among human subjects, for example that governing oral history.<sup>12</sup> The issue of ownership of data and of publications arising from research is complicated when participants do not share the language in which reports and publications are written. I have endeavoured to satisfy the spirit of these codes and conventions within the constraints posed by the study population by submitting drafts of reported findings to the principal translator/transcriber for comment, comments which I have fully taken into account in finalising reports. Concerning those who willingly gave of their time in recounting their life stories, every indication is that they remain willing for me to use these as initially explained. It has been my repeated experience over the past few years that participants have solicitously inquired as to my progress toward completion, conveying their interest in seeing their stories in print.

I required the interpreter and transcriber to abide by confidentiality agreements, and to indicate this by signing a letter to that effect, one copy of which they retained. We refrained from passing details provided by one individual or family to another. Even so, as the study progressed, I became conscious of cultural differences between the Cambodians as an Asian community and middle class New Zealand regarding confidentiality. It is fair to say that to a far greater extent than is general in New Zealand society, one person's business is everyone's business among Cambodians.

Although in this study my co-researchers willingly complied with requirements to respect confidentiality, this did constitute a cultural imposition. While it can be argued that it is reasonable to apply New Zealand ethical require-

ments to all research conducted in New Zealand irrespective of the ethnic group being researched or conducting the study, there is equally a case in respect to ethnic minorities for negotiation and resolution of the issues between the parties concerned.

In concluding this description of the process of ethnographic study, I would like to address the issue of a person from the dominant culture conducting research among a minority language and ethnic group. Questions have been raised and objections voiced, particularly by the Maori people, about researchers who advance their academic careers 'on the backs of minorities', while the ethnic minority stands to gain little or nothing.<sup>13</sup>

The obvious way around this dilemma is for people from the ethnic minority to conduct research among members of their own community. In the case of this study, there are equally obvious reasons why this would be unlikely to happen. First, only now are young educated Cambodians graduating from tertiary educational institutes, and the few known to me favour courses in business and technical fields over those of social inquiry. In time this may change, but in the meantime the opportunity to describe the process of modifying traditional beliefs and practices and of adjusting to a very different society as it is actually taking place will be lost. Added to this is the apparent, and understandable, priority of Cambodians to adjust to the New Zealand way of life and to be financially and socially secure, which is likely to militate against their conducting a study along the lines of this one.

In the case of the present study, the very fact of collecting and verifying the narratives in association with members of the Cambodian community simultaneously addressed the complex of concerns outlined. My involvement as an outsider provided a critical interpretative perspective as we painstakingly inquired into the multiple worlds of the Cambodian transitional generation. In this I worked principally with Sok, and with the invaluable intermediary role of the translator/transcribers. This study, therefore, occupies transitional territory, on the one hand between an outsider (myself) doing research on Cambodians, and on the other Cambodians doing it on their own people, to our doing it in informal partnership.

## Conclusions

Resettled refugees are vulnerable due to their marginality as an ethnic minority and as refugees. Cambodians, the subject of the ethnographic study described in this paper, are among the most traumatised of refugee communities. In their discussions on recent developments in Cambodia, Cambodian New Zealanders describe the persistence of conditions that led them to flee in the first place, which continue to keep the country unsafe and poor. It is their belief that they have little choice but to remain in exile, difficult and lonely though the experience is.

The process and experience of resettlement for the refugee has been unevenly researched, and remains poorly understood. While the reasons for this relative neglect may be multiple, methodological problems are an important reason. In this paper I have identified some of the difficulties encountered in the conducting of research among a

resettled refugee community, and described ways in which these may be resolved. These include procedural issues related to cross-linguistic and cross-cultural research, and ethical concerns when a vulnerable ethnic minority community is the subject of the research.

The conducting of interviews among members of linguistic and ethnic minorities is carried out by both social anthropologists and oral historians. Each discipline can

enrich the other through a sharing of research experiences on the interface of their respective disciplines, interfaces which are of growing significance as cultural, geographical and disciplinary boundaries that once demarcated them become porous. In such work the respective techniques of ethnographic interviewing, by anthropologists, and oral histories by historians, have much in common, although the purposes for collecting data may differ.<sup>14</sup>

This article is based on a paper delivered at the 1994 Conference of the New Zealand Historical Association, in conjunction with the National Oral History Association of New Zealand.

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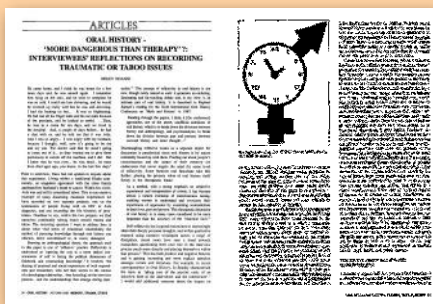




# Oral history – ‘more dangerous than therapy’?: interviewees’ reflections on recording traumatic or taboo issues

by Wendy Rickard

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I remember what we wore, where we were, how curious it was, how awkward but liberating. I am still a little uncomfortable taking credit for this piece when it was a collaboration set up by me, but organically created by those involved in the conversations. The article was written at a time when our health

system was properly challenged by people with HIV to work in partnership. This moulded me as an oral historian and passed into other oral history work I did around sex work and other things. Oral historians have always been better at it in many ways than the public health workers I mixed

with in other parts of my world. What we ended up with here was perhaps a flawed but naively artful twist on power. Strangely refreshing still, though I remain stumped about many things.

An interviewee recently told me about Irvin Yalom's notion of the 'rippling' effect (see for example, *Staring at the*

*Sun: Being at peace with your own mortality/ Overcoming the Dread of Death*, 2009): things that we've done that we're not entirely aware of. Hearing that people read this article and it meant something is such a nice surprise. I raise sheep and vegetables now. Every time I dip my toe back into oral history



I love it. I've recently been interviewing on the 'AIDS Era' oral history project on UK healthcare workers by Sian Edwards and team. To again have been witness to this evolving HIV story, in a small way, is just extraordinary. I think still about how I'm going to write up the mountain of stories I've got from the past. Maybe it's time to get on with it and come up with the perfect idea for sharing hard truths, difficult realities, uncomfortableness and amazing tenacity, in a creative way. That's what I'd like to do next.

**Wendy Rickard, independent scholar, currently working with London South Bank University and Kings College, writer and Devon farmer**

This article raised myriad questions which are still pertinent twenty years after its publication about the wider impact and long term effects of recording and archiving

oral history for the narrators and their family, friends and communities. This article also asks questions which address the very essence of my work as an oral history curator. Who listens to archived oral history? How might this affect them? What do interviewees and researchers think about the life stories they have recorded, once the intensity of the initial project has subsided? How can we balance these ethical considerations with our duty to make recordings publicly available for researchers? Following the OHS' mission statement to preserve oral histories for the future, I think we all need to discuss in more depth the longer term impacts of the recording, archival and analytical processes in our discipline. This is timely as with digitisation and wider internet access myriad archived oral histories are being liberated from archival

storage, which is a great opportunity but one potentially fraught with ethical dilemmas.

**Mary Stewart, Curator of Oral History, and Deputy Director of National Life Stories, British Library**

This is such an important article in making oral historians aware that not only can our work be read as 'therapeutic' for some interviewees, but that this is not always a force for good. Methodologically, Rickard heightened our awareness of the potential for the oral history interview to unsettle interviewees through the retelling of traumatic or culturally 'taboo' issues. Indeed, her careful analysis of the cultural sensitivities around HIV – how different ethnic and religious cultures responded to the virus in personal and gendered forms – remind us of the importance of keeping in mind the different registers that our

interview topics have across a diverse set of interviewees.

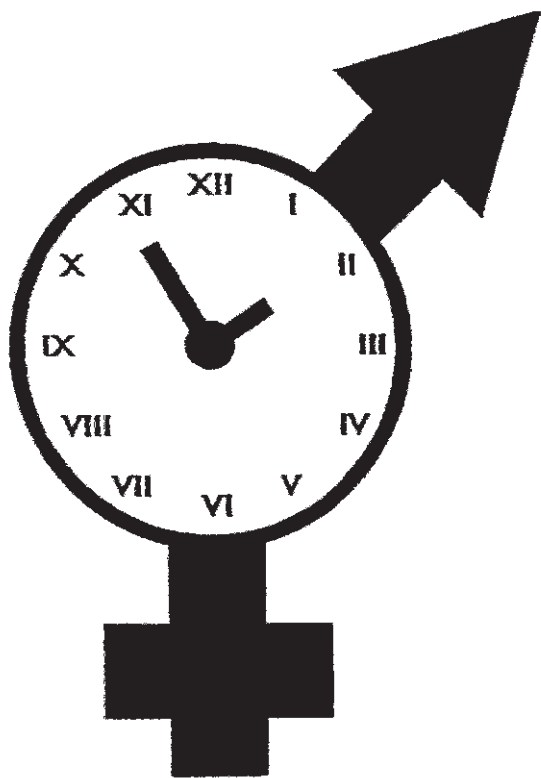
This article has encouraged me to be more reflexive, and to try and be aware of the very real potential for my interviewees to become upset during our discussions about HIV/AIDS. Most importantly, Rickard has cemented in my mind the importance of analysing the different cultural registers the virus had across communities (and for different groups within communities).

This article has many important contributions to oral history more generally, but perhaps chief among them was placing the problematic notion of the cultural taboo on our radar in a methodologically robust way.

**George Severs, PhD student at Selwyn College, University of Cambridge, working on a history of HIV/AIDS activism in the UK c 1982-1997**

He came home, and I think he was home for a few more days and, he was unwell again. I remember him lying on the sofa, and he used to complain he was so cold, I could see him shivering, and he would be covered up really well but he was still shivering. I had the heating on but... It was so frightening. He had lost all his finger nails and his toe nails because of the psoriasis, and he looked so awful he was in a coma for ten days, and we lived in the hospital. And, a couple of days before... he had a chat with us, and he told me that it was AIDS. And I was so angry... I was angry with my husband, because I thought, well, now it's going to be me and my son. The doctor said that he wasn't going to come out of it... so they wanted me to give them permission to switch off the machine, and I did. But I knew that he was even... he was dead... he must have died ages ago, you know, in the last few days.'

Prior to interview, Daxa had not spoken to anyone about this experience. Living within a traditional Hindu community, an unspoken agreement with the close family attributed her husband's death to cancer. Within her circle, AIDS was and still is considered taboo. This is one emotive example of many disarming traumatic experiences we have recorded on two separate projects, one on the testimonies of people living with an HIV or AIDS diagnosis, and one recording the life histories of prostitutes. Needless to say, within the two projects we find ourselves continually raising issues around trauma and taboo. The recurring question I want to address here is about what vital areas of emotional vulnerability the method of pursuing knowledge through oral history can obscure, leave uncontained or, at worst, damaged. Drawing on anthropological theory, the approach used in this paper is one of 'reflexive' practice.



The logo for the September 1998 Conference held in London, 'Sex Work Reassessed'.

Reflexivity is understood as 'opening the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge'.<sup>2</sup> It involves 'the sharing of personal and social experiences of both respondents and researchers, who tell their stories in the context of a developing relationship... thus focus(ing) on the interview process... and the understandings that emerge during interaction'.<sup>3</sup> This concept of reflexivity in oral history is not new, though rarely named as such: it generates an enduring, fascinating and far-reaching debate and, in my view, is an intimate part of oral history. It is described in Raphael Samuel's reading for the Sixth International Oral History Conference on 'Myth and History' in 1987:

Reading through the papers, I think it [the conference] approaches one of the secret, unofficial ambitions of oral history, which is to break down the divisions between history and anthropology, and psychoanalysis, to break down the division between past and present, between outward history and inner thought....<sup>4</sup>

Disentangling reflexive issues as a separate object for discussion is paradoxical since oral history is by nature intimately bound up with them. Finding out about people's consciousness and the nature of their memory are endeavours that never negate the need for some level of reflexivity. Some feminist oral historians take this further, placing the

primary value of oral history itself firmly in the therapeutic frame:

As a method, with a strong emphasis on subjective experiences and interpretation of events, it has become almost a natural extension of consciousness raising, enabling women to understand and overcome their experiences of oppression by examining contradictions in their lives, past and present. This therapeutic dimension of oral history is in many cases considered to be more important than the accuracy of the 'historical facts'.<sup>5</sup>

Self-reflexivity has inspired researchers to increasingly share their deeply personal thoughts, and within qualitative research using narrative techniques across a range of disciplines, recent years have seen a trend towards researchers questioning their own role in the interview process much more directly and placing themselves within that process.<sup>6</sup> This has both positive and negative features and is gaining increasing and more explicit attention amongst current oral historians. For example, in recent correspondence in *Oral History*, Jo Stanley characterised the issue as 'taking care of the psychic costs of an interview both to the interviewer and the interviewee'.<sup>7</sup> I would add additional concerns about the impact on family, friends and employers of interviewees (surrogate witnesses), the difficult decisions facing archivists in accepting and holding sensitive data and the ethical behaviour of the users of archival sources where interviews are made available to a wider public (public witnesses).<sup>8</sup> One aim of this paper is to explore at a deeper level what is latent in the routine of interviewing people around traumatic issues and taboo subjects in relation to this spectrum of interests.

Considering trauma and taboo in oral history embraces issues of ethics, methodology and copyright. In January 1998, a day seminar on these issues organised by the Oral History Society served as a valuable opportunity to explore areas that have not yet been successfully subsumed within formal ethical codes of conduct.<sup>9</sup> An early draft of this paper was presented at the seminar. Within these broader frames, identity and disclosure issues are paramount, particularly because of oral history's open-ended nature. Oral history offers the possibility of both affirming and destabilising a personal narrative. Part of its value lies in its subversive potential, which comes out of 'its performative nature as well as the destabilising influence of the interviewer's presence'.<sup>10</sup> Intricate parallels with therapeutic concerns are inevitably drawn, and, in terms of the interview process, this has implications for the robustness of both interviewer and interviewee. It has implications too for the kind of historical record that oral history provides and what it is possible to do with that record. Importantly, it involves questioning to what extent the recording of oral history around traumatic and taboo issues is contributing towards social change itself, potentially acting as a crucial conduit by which trauma is being returned to the public domain. A second aim of this paper is to explore these areas.

There have been a few interesting pieces that isolate key issues in the reflexive process from the interviewees' perspective. For example, Lynne Echevarria-Howe exam-

## Figure 1: Group guide sheet

### BEING INTERVIEWED: REFLECTIONS ON ORAL HISTORY

In one sense, an oral history interview involves simply recording a life history at a particular point in time and preserving it for the future. In another sense it is a complex process – consenting to be interviewed, being interviewed, hearing or reflecting on what was recorded and thinking about what will happen to the tapes in future can raise different feelings and different questions. Oral history offers the possibility of both affirming and destabilising your own personal narrative. Its 'subversive' potential emerges from its potentially unstable and open-ended nature. Sometimes this may be a liberating experience, sometimes it may leave you feeling deeply unsettled or just blank. Also, the interviewer's presence and contribution to the dialogue is acknowledged to affect the resultant recordings and you may feel differently about the interviewer and what you need or expect from them at different points during and after the interview process. The purpose of today's session is to explore some of the positive and negative feelings and ideas about ethics that arise from the experience of being interviewed.

Some guiding questions might be:

How did you feel:

1. Before the interview?
  - about consenting to be interviewed?
  - about what you expected?
  - would you have liked more preparation? What kind?
2. During the interview?
  - about what you found yourself saying?
  - between sessions?
3. After the interview?
  - about what would happen to the tapes?
  - about things you felt you missed out or included too much about?
  - about having continued contact with the interviewer? Was that important? Did you feel a need for some kind of support?
  - about your contribution and about why you did it?
4. About recording traumatic or distressing parts of your story?
  - did the interview dig up anything that left you feeling uncomfortable?
  - did you feel deserted with these feelings in any way?
  - how might it be best to deal with this?
5. In what way do you think oral history is different to a therapeutic situation?
6. In what ways do you feel happy or anxious about your recordings? What concerns do you have about ethics, access or copyright issues?

ined interactive responses within the narrative process by discussing issues of process and product in life history with two African-Canadian women she had interviewed.<sup>11</sup> Yet opportunities for interviewees to have reflective input in oral history are rare, except where it is an intimate part of the method used, such as in reminiscence work<sup>12</sup> and perhaps in social work.<sup>13</sup> Many oral historians do usefully subsume reflective discussions with interviewees about the interview process as part of their wider work or discuss issues privately, off-tape, but these rarely reach a wider audience. Aside from the valuable reflections of oral historians who have been brave enough to be interviewed themselves, I have looked fruitlessly for accounts written spontaneously by interviewees on how they felt about being interviewed. I could find no recorded examples of interviewees talking to each other about the interview experience away from the presence of the interviewer. This indicates a gap in existing work which has clear personal and political implications. For example, at a recent meeting to discuss ethical codes of practice in qualitative research<sup>14</sup>, in a room full of professors and researchers of the highest calibre I was struck by the lack of invited input from people who give the data. In a naive sense it offended the principle of democracy that, for me, underlies oral history. Oral history is a shared experience and I feel that as much in matters of process as in matters of content, interviewees are experts. A third aim here is to step back from a position of dominance as an

interviewer to explore the tensions that interviewees recognise and respond to. This is part of a wider aim to facilitate improved dialogue between 'researchers' and 'the researched'. A September 1998 conference entitled 'Sex Work Reassessed' was set up to create a non-judgemental forum within which prostitutes could influence the conference agenda and speak alongside researchers, policy makers and service providers. It aimed to have a direct impact on the way prostitution is understood and represented in medical, ethical, legal, health and public debates.

### 'Discussion group' method and co-respondents

I tentatively approached five people I had interviewed asking whether they would be interested in getting together for a discussion about the interview experience, focusing explicitly on trauma and taboo. Four people agreed.<sup>15</sup> Each had undertaken a life history interview with me some time during the preceding three years. None of them knew each other prior to the meeting, but each had an on-going acquaintance with me. Each had revealed traumatic issues during his or her own interview which are intimately bound to issues often considered to some extent taboo within wider society at the present time. Coping with an AIDS diagnosis, dealing with the suicide of family members, domestic violence, drug addiction, 'coming out', self identity and prostitution, family friction, sex abuse and the internal life of organisations like the Church number amongst such issues.

To provide some background about the people in the group, Anna is Spanish, was born in 1959 and moved to England about ten years ago. She was educated to the equivalent of Secondary School Level. Paul, Jane and Mandy are all English and born in 1962, 1963 and 1965 respectively. Each is educated to degree level and Paul is currently undertaking post-graduate study. It is also important for me to locate myself as the interviewer. I am English, born in 1967. My background is in clinical psychology and I have had some counselling training. In what became a primarily research-based working life, I have worked closely with and for a broad range of statutory and non-statutory health agencies in the AIDS sector, in mental health and in health promotion, more recently working for specialist outreach agencies responding to the needs of people working in prostitution. Amongst my peer group, several friends are living with AIDS and others are working in prostitution: for me, both are professional and personal concerns.

For the discussion group meeting, I wanted to make some attempt at creating a neutral setting and arranged for the group to gather in a meeting room at the National Sound Archive of the British Library. I gave out an introductory information sheet (Figure 1), and then left them alone in the room with the tape-recorder. With no initial time limit placed on their discussion, they recorded a session of about an hour in length. It was agreed from the start that everyone would receive a copy of the resultant recording and copies of the transcript, and all would be offered the opportunity to have editorial input on the written paper that we aimed to prepare.

This paper aims to highlight the dialogue and sharing that occurred. It is important to emphasise that we recognised at the outset that our method was experimental and we were not seeking conclusive resolution of the issues, nor to be prescriptive. In editing the account, I initially tried to select material that might prompt further discussion amongst oral historians. The co-respondents then provided input that shaped the entire presentation and provided additional reflections which I have included mainly in the concluding section.

## Imaging and controlling what happens to tapes

Oral historians have increasingly recognised that in an interview situation, interviewers and those who are interviewed do not share one purpose.<sup>16</sup> The extent to which both sides declare what each wants and gets from the interview varies enormously. Not surprisingly, our discussion revealed that people had a complex range of reasons for deciding to be interviewed and a need for differing amounts of information prior to interview. The primary and on-going concern was about the use of the material and the subsequent deposit of tapes within the archive. For Anna and Paul, their AIDS diagnoses gave them an urgency to set down a record of their lives and at the outset, both made assumptions that they would not have to think too much about what might happen to their tapes in the future as they would probably die soon.

## ANNA:

I said to Wendy, 'Don't explain to me nothing... I want to do it... just get on with it.' ...Sometimes you have to do things without thinking, when you have the gut feeling more than anything... I was dealing with this [AIDS], and just wanting to leave the tapes somewhere and forget about it... I now don't think that way I thought in the beginning...

I thought it was the end, but a short time ago, I don't know why, I'm starting to get very paranoid with what I have done. I'm starting to think, ah! because I said seven years [restricted access], and I was sure I will be dead by then... I wasn't sure, but I don't like the having done it suddenly. But then I became a bit paranoid about many things in life... But I would like to have more information about [access restrictions].

Anna was interviewed in 1995, before the availability of new treatments and at a time when the implication of an AIDS diagnosis was generally thought to be certain, imminent death. With the availability of protease inhibitors and combination drugs over the subsequent few years, a new climate of optimism has emerged and AIDS has come to be viewed as a chronic illness rather than a terminal disease. Being reminded of the tapes by taking part in the discussion, Anna realised that she had become anxious about her deposit instructions. Paul was interviewed in 1997:

## PAUL:

My health improved enormously and it became clear to me that this (my recorded life history) was going to take on a life outside me. It wasn't going to complete my life in some sense, it was going to stand apart from me, and that was very strange, having to work out whether or not to go through with it...

I didn't really ever discuss it with Wendy, but I thought a lot about it, partly because a lot of what I wanted to put down is very much in conflict with the organisation that I belonged to as it were... That's why I thought through how I would give access, and I have said that I want to be able to give permission while I'm still alive, and then for ten years after my death, I want my partner and my executor to have at least some scrutiny over who has access. Then I don't care... my ghost will have gone by then so, like you, I found myself, my situation, changing over the period.

For Jane, access restrictions were foremost in her mind from the outset and, like Anna, on reflection after the interview, she wanted re-confirmation of what had been agreed.

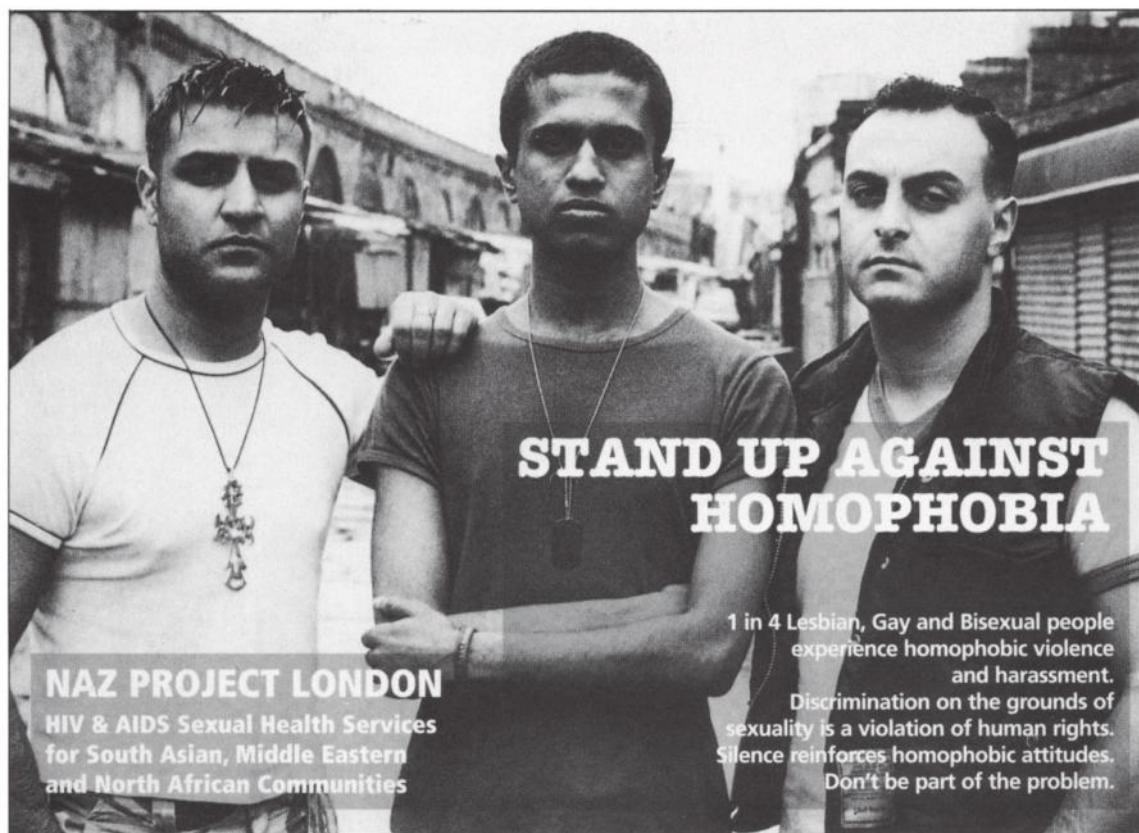
## JANE:

I think that was my main anxiety as well, who's going to hear it, when and how long afterwards, and I asked loads of questions before I did it. But immediately afterwards,





A section of the Wall of Love, an AIDS memorial.  
Picture: The Terence Higgins Trust.



A postcard produced by Naz Project London. Picture: Naz Project London and Parminder Sakhon.

I can't remember half of it now, so I want to know it all again.

Unlike Paul and Mandy, neither Anna nor Jane had wanted to have copies of the clearance and deposit instructions or their tapes, partly due to the exposing nature of the material that they had recorded and associated fears that it or documents associated with it would be discovered by friends and family if they kept their own copies, but also through a desire to just leave the story somewhere and get on with life. This is a poignant reminder to me to review the way we provide information about access restrictions and the need to repeat it. It also has implications for the need to stay in touch with interviewees for long protracted periods.

It was after beginning the recording that Mandy had doubts about going through with the interview.

#### **MANDY:**

... I felt very uncomfortable after I did the first lot of tapes with Wendy, because I talked about my family an awful lot and maybe in the same way that you talked about your organisation, I said lots of quite critical things about my family, and then thought, I can't... it's just not fair to talk about other people. It's fine to talk about me, and to leave that record of me, but to kind of describe my father in a

particularly kind of unpleasant light for example isn't very nice, because there's all kinds of other sides of my father.

#### **JANE:**

Did you use names, real names?

#### **MANDY:**

I tried not to, but I'd slip up and they'd pop in. And, I mean I know I could have got those edited out if I'd really wanted to, but I ended up saying to Wendy, actually I want to start from the beginning and not talk about my family at all, which she agreed to. And, I felt much easier about that, even though I couldn't help but refer to some people, but it was mainly about myself... When I listened to those first tapes, I realised in fact that I hadn't been half as negative as I thought, but still was glad because there were names and it was very specifically my family ...so many details and everything.

What Mandy gained was control over her own presentation. Even though I believe her account is invaluable as it stands, what I lost was a full life history account. It opened up questions for me as an interviewer about how to leave an explanation of the reasons for this with the six hour long

tapes that we did deposit and, whilst empathising with her choice, some frustration at knowing that I will never be able to put together a comprehensive interpretation of that material.

### Changing narratives over time

Changing your own personal narrative over time and across different life-stages was another associated anxiety the group identified.

#### PAUL:

I know I was very conscious... that, when I was retelling my life experience as it were, how very differently I would have told the story from other vantage points in my own life, and how radically I've changed as a person, particularly, I mean I'm now thirty-five, I could not have foreseen being the person I now am at, say, the age of twenty-five or twenty, and I was very, very conscious of that.... trying to be faithful to who you were, as well as who you are.

#### MANDY:

I can just change from week to week, really really vehemently ...and yes, over years, I can get completely different ideas about politics and right and wrong and good and bad and all those things, can all completely change.

#### JANE:

I wonder if that matters though, because I was wondering that afterwards as well. It's kind of bound to happen in a way isn't it, because that's what we're like, and in a way I thought, well maybe it's sort of up to whoever listens to it, because it is supposed to be about history, and history is down to the interpreter.

As an interviewer, I have become increasingly aware of the extent to which the dialogue established during an interview changes throughout the course of recording it, but have struggled to conceptualise meanings beyond the 'frozen' moment of that interview. Al Thomson's study of Fred Farrall's Anzac memories is useful to consider here. Drawing on the work of the Popular Memory Group, he suggests that 'we compose our memories so that they will fit with what is publicly acceptable, or, if we have been excluded from general public acceptance, we seek out particular publics which affirm our identities and the way we want to remember our lives... what is possible to articulate and remember changes over time and this can be related to shifts in public perception'.<sup>17</sup> It seems that as oral historians we have an added responsibility to reassure interviewees that especially in relation to 'marginalised' individuals and groups, this is a natural feature of oral history and should not become a source of anxiety.

### Putting yourself under a microscope

There was general agreement amongst the co-respondents that the process of recording the interview was draining and people felt they relaxed more into it as it progressed

and as the relationship with the interviewer developed. This is probably true of all oral history interviews regardless of the subject matter, but perhaps particularly important to recognise for those who consider their lives within a frame of chaos and who divulge traumatic or taboo experiences.

#### MANDY:

... I wanted to present myself as somebody who wasn't in chaos but who actually... [laughs]... has a proper life... I managed to relax about that quite quickly... [Throughout the recording], I went through the whole gamut really of feeling incredibly self-conscious and then feeling actually quite nice and relaxed, and then feeling terribly self-conscious again... I think particularly when we were talking about really intimate things, like sex... I'd kind of say all these things incredibly straightforward, and you know, no messing about things, and then get to the end of it and think, 'God! How did I do that to somebody who I've only met about four times and don't really know anything about?'

#### PAUL:

It's a very curious experience I found.... I once or twice thought, she [interviewer] must think I'm absolutely crackers, because you know ...there have been a number of changes in my experience, and ...that was odd, I found that strange.

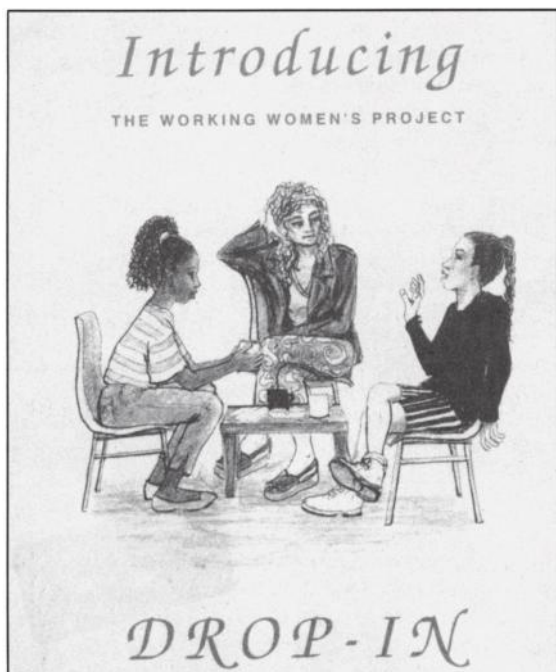
While confirming a high degree of self-consciousness in the way we talk about trauma and subjects that are still widely considered taboo, these accounts also confirm a more general feeling I gain from other interviews that the use of language itself is changing. Some of the taboos themselves are muddled and the boundaries of the language in terms of 'frank usage' are changing. Living in a 'post-modern' world, perhaps perceptions of the stability and sense of linear continuity that may have characterised the narratives of older generations are broken down so it is now increasingly common to present fragmented or contradictory experiences as part of a life story account. This supports wider sociological evidence that the public realm has become a repository for an increasing range and depth of personal material.<sup>18</sup>

I am aware that my interviews would turn out very differently if I was not a thirty-something woman who is often interviewing people around my own age and this itself has knock-on implications for better understanding my role as interviewer and conceptualising the kind of record that this form of oral history is moving us towards. It was interesting that my co-respondents specified that my gender and sexuality as interviewer were important factors in the decision to go through with the interview.

#### ANNA:

Of course I don't think I will have talked to a man, ... I think I am very fussy in a way about the people I will tell.





An image from an old 'Streatham Working Women's Project' leaflet. Picture: Mainline.

#### PAUL:

...I think with a man, and especially with a straight man, I would have found it very difficult to say the things that I wanted to say, which was odd, because I thought, well I have no control in the end over who listens to this...

This raises an interesting point about interviewing people in the context of trauma and taboo. What is often understood as the 'marginality' of my co-respondents (as sex workers, people with AIDS, lesbians or gay men) means that the construction of their history is tenuous or problematic. The interviewer is implicated in this instability. In interviewing the 'less powerful' about whom historical narratives have already been constructed, the interviewer is working within a generally accepted framework, even if he or she is working against it to disprove certain mythic features of the general narrative (such as the idea that all sex workers are victims or were sexually abused as children). Together interviewer and interviewee bring into the open secrets which in a certain way are already known but ignored, thereby threatening to expose knowledge as ignorance (whores are bad girls; gays are abnormal), and so withdrawing the implied absolving of responsibility that ignorance allows. In this sense, the interviewer 'gets into a closet' with the interviewee and it is important that they can identify by virtue of their own gender, sexuality and socialised experiences. This can be an affirming and unsettling experience for both.

#### Comparisons and contrasts with formal therapy

The peculiarity of the experience of putting all the details about your life in one place is also common to all oral

history interviews, but it again perhaps takes on greater weight in the context of lives that are compartmentalised by having to be very careful about to whom one reveals certain aspects, such as your sexuality, drug use, lifestyle, illicit activities or experiences of violence. It is well documented that an oral history interview in this and other harrowing contexts can give the interviewee affirming insights about connections and meanings in their life.<sup>19</sup> The co-respondents re-emphasised these aspects and went on to draw parallels and contrasts with formal therapy. Anna, Jane and Mandy reflected on their experiences of formal therapy (recognising of course that this is an over-generalisation relating to different schools of thought within the therapeutic movement which we didn't explore), whilst Paul acknowledged that he had resisted becoming involved in therapy.

#### MANDY:

...and actually listening back to my tapes gave me quite a few insights which were very rewarding..., insights that I hadn't managed to have while I was having therapy... It was just from listening and hearing myself. But then when you have therapy you don't get that opportunity to listen back to yourself in your session with your therapist, so, it's very different.

#### JANE:

That's interesting. So you think it was more therapeutic than the therapy in some ways?

#### MANDY:

No, I think it's a lot more dangerous than therapy: ...the whole thing about therapy and the way in which it is contained, and you have got somebody who's very responsible for you, because they're being paid to be...

In fact in my therapy, my therapist did used to tape the session in order to then be supervised by her therapist on what was happening between me and her.... She said 'I'm not going to let you take these tapes away'. And I felt quite angry and like a child and so forth. But it kind of gradually made sense over the years, that she felt that if I went off and took these tapes off on my own, then everything that was valuable that happened in that room, in that hour of that week, would then be gushing out into the rest of my life, and I could come to all kinds of damaging conclusions about things, and just not have her to help me while I was listening to myself uncovering quite distressing material I suppose.

#### JANE:

...I wonder if it makes a difference how emotional one feels about it, in a way, because, I felt that most of the things that I talked about, I'd talked about before, so I knew that I wasn't going to burst into tears over something, or suddenly get really angry and start throwing fur-



niture around, or whatever... I suppose there's that fear that if there are things that you haven't really talked about ever. How are you going to feel?

# PAUL:

...They sent me to a psychotherapist at the hospital and he phoned me up about two days later and I said I'm not coming again, not in a bad way, but it was just silly. I was very conscious of the fact that I didn't want it [the oral history interview] to be or resemble anything therapeutic. I had so many people who were trying to get me into therapy at the time and I didn't want to see it like that. I didn't think I needed it. ...I think when you are ill, ...other people have a need to care for you, especially organisations and institutions, but they have developed their own means of doing that, so you have to conform to... their way of doing it for you.

And I felt much freer with this, I wasn't having to fight Wendy, to say, you know, 'No I don't want you to ask me those questions,' or, 'No I don't want it to proceed in this direction'. It actually unfolded in a way that seemed very proper, it seemed to belong to me in a way, and in a way that I was finding other institutional involvement in my life very intrusive or, at that time very threatening: this was something which was actually the reverse of that.

# ANNA:

...It is good you can say everything in bulk, and, without stopping. Because, me, I've been in therapy but it was so slow and so... being here [being interviewed] was like, phew... nobody stop me please.... Therapy, it's not about what you want, what you do: you have to be confronted. And you cannot be everything in one minute, you always have a time limit and a clock... And maybe one day you think you are going to say something, but then maybe you retract yourself and you never say it.

For me, therapy was good because I needed it somehow to reach somewhere, a line of thought or whatever... I tried to discover and uncover things. But this [the oral history interview] was like the finish, it was like, OK, now let go...

It [the oral history interview] makes me proud sometimes in a way... It's like a small contribution we've done. It takes courage... I sort of felt always, and that's not to a psychiatrist or to a psychologist, I always felt the need, and I realised when I finished the tapes, not before, that I needed to shout something, ...the good part of it is like, wow, done it...

The issue about the importance of oral historians being cautious in assessing the emotional robustness of interviewees, is shown to be a thorny one. As Mandy suggests, moving trauma outside the contained, professional spheres of therapy in an oral history context can feel dangerous. And I think as oral historians, we are incredibly aware of

that tension and unsure about how to deal with it. But Paul and Anna's observations warn the oral historian not to be overcautious or to make assumptions about the meanings interviewees attribute to their own expression of a discourse that is potentially distressing or disapproved of in certain quarters of wider society.

Within such a context, oral history seems to have an important place in straddling the therapeutic and the need for creative, affirming expression. The interesting contribution of this paper is that, as Mandy remarked, even for those with experience in therapy, oral history can inspire different personal insights. This further convinces me that oral history has become a powerful medium for the transformation of trauma in the public domain. The recordings do not raise questions of therapy, rather they expose the way in which therapy itself is potentially used to defuse the subversive nature of those whose direct experience (whose own understanding of truth) is most at odds with truth as it is desired to be known (constructed through complex social media). When the phenomenon of trauma starts to move away from the status of private distress and to attract a creative, self-affirming and public life of its own, then psychoanalytic reduction appears to lose some of its impact.

The perception of the interviewees seemed to be that the oral history interview process, aside from the possible formation of natural supportive friendships, does not provide back up after the event to deal with any emotional fallout in the way that therapy might. Yet, it is a characteristic of my own practice that I will try to stay in touch with interviewees for a while after interview to make sure everything is OK or refer them on to formal counselling agencies or support groups if that is what they want. I certainly do always try to discuss with people the implications there might be for recording a life history in the context of my projects, but am aware that this is always a difficult task to achieve without alarming people unnecessarily and accepting that, as an oral historian with a deep fascination for the subjects I study, it is in my interests and the interests of the archive, not to discourage people from recording accounts or making them accessible. Since unlike others I have interviewed, none of the four people who took part in this discussion needed any extra kind of formal help, we cannot take speculation too far here. However, the issues of boundaries in oral history was usefully raised by the co-respondents in this context.

# MANDY:

...And I did feel this, whether or not to ask her [interviewer] questions about herself off tape, and as somebody who's done therapy and with a therapist who's very keen on boundaries and not revealing about herself, so I don't ask her any questions, I felt that because it was a pseudo-therapeutic situation that I shouldn't. But then as I spoke more and more to her, I thought, no, this is really silly, I should, otherwise I am just performing.

The boundaries set up between oral historian and interviewee are less formal and prescribed than those set up in a formal therapy situation, in that we tend to get to know



An image used for the HIV/AIDS Needs Assessment produced by Eating Social Services in 1996.

our interviewees on a more personal and reciprocal level than a therapist might. I can see quite clearly that this has implications that could be considered as both an advantage and disadvantage in different contexts. There always remains an issue for me about where we set those boundaries with each individual interviewed, why we often choose to set them very differently depending on the person, and how we maintain or change those boundaries over time, either consciously or unconsciously. Although it often seems to unfold naturally, I think it can be an area of difficulty and I am not sure I always get it right. Neither am I always clear whose need I am meeting, mine as interviewer or the interviewee's? To an extent this is where the interviewer themselves might be in need of therapy after so blatantly being implicated in a subversive event.

#### **After the interview: Listening to the tapes**

For most oral historians, it is accepted practice to return tapes and transcripts to interviewees, working through the process of editing and interpretation together. Yet this has sometimes proved a difficult feature of my own work. What the following accounts reveal is the extent to which just listening back to your own tapes has huge implications in the context of trauma and taboo. Mandy listened to her tapes all the way through. Paul asked for copies of his, but has not listened to them. Anna made a definite decision not to accept copies of her tapes and not to listen to them, a key concern being that she would see them as a mistake and would want to re-record them differently. Jane listened to some of her tapes and responded to Anna's rationale as follows:

#### **JANE:**

I was thinking, what would I say now. It would openly sound like an apology for what I'd said and you could go on and on apologising ad infinitum. But when I listened back to it, I thought it was actually really obvious that it was somebody who was talking at a moment in time and ....you could hear when I sounded nervous and when I sounded, like, flippant and all that, so, there's no point in changing it, it's only going to be the same again: to be wrong in a different way, or right in a different way, I suppose. And ...Actually some of it bored the pants off me. [laughs] ... But some of it was fascinating, and I was amazed how much I agreed with again... So, I think I wouldn't have changed it a lot.

#### **PAUL:**

I only got them [the tape copies] about six weeks ago, and, I don't know, I decided, it's a mixture of not having got round to it, and not wanting to just yet. I have every intention of listening to them. I'm not upset by anything I've put down and that surprised me. Now they are actually there, it will be good to have access to them.

#### **MANDY:**

When I listened to mine, I was in this great hurry to listen to it ...I listened to about an hour of it, and spent the

next twenty four hours feeling really depressed ...and just incredibly nervous, and very uncomfortable about these tapes being in my house and being physically there, and somebody coming to my house and being able to listen to them... And then when it got to the weekend... I was in a totally different mood and listened to them all the way through, and felt incredibly positive about them and thought, I'm so glad I've made this record .... And I wanted to do more things with them, I wanted to transcribe them and carry on writing about different things. ...But they are kind of sitting there, and it's funny, their presence, it's sometimes a really benign presence but it can suddenly be quite a malignant presence.

**ANNA:**

It is funny, really it is half and half and a very powerful feeling. Sometimes it's like a spy around the place. You feel, boof, I'm unsafe with this. ... No, but now I'm talking here, and it gives me a very nice feeling in the stomach to listen to them, like now is the moment. I don't know why I didn't before, it was good. But it's like for some things you have to be ready and in a certain mood. And now I'm getting curious of listening to them. But I think it's very frightening to me. Because I'm very judgmental with myself more than anything.

As an interviewer, I have not spent much time to date warning interviewees that owning a copy of your own life-history tapes and thinking about listening to them can be a disarming experience in itself. On one level it does seem to be something that interviewees are perfectly capable of making up their own minds about, but I liked a suggestion given by Jan Walmsley at the recent oral history seminar mentioned earlier, where she described her own practice of listening to tapes with interviewees. However, I know that at present we do not have the resources in terms of time to be able to achieve this and the point I raised at the seminar was that essentially it seems you have to be rich to be ethical: a scary prospect in the current resource-restricted environment. Yet, I think it raises serious issues about the important role that oral historians could potentially play on a collective level in challenging funders and alerting other qualitative researchers to consider ethics and good practice. In this role, again, oral history potentially plays a part in social change.

For interviewees, decisions about letting friends and family listen to the tapes and the implications for revealing to people the fact that you have been interviewed are also difficult.

**ANNA:**

It is weird when you talk to people about it. I say [have talked to friends about it], like three times or four. I thought, shut your mouth you are talking too much, because people get very curious ... sometimes you are not very sure about their interest. It's like you say, for some people you just think, no way.

**PAUL:**

Two people have asked me if they can listen to them. One is my partner and I would have no trouble about him listening to them. The other is my mother and I was able to say, 'No, because I put some very, very personal things about you on there,' and she said, 'Oh I want to know what they are, tell me'. Certainly not. And, I mean there are conditions I think under which I could let her listen to them, but we'd have to talk about it first, and I do now have a good enough relationship with my parents that I could do that, but five years ago ...I mean these people have thrown plates at me before now, you know [laughter]. But, yes I mean... there are very few people I should ever be comfortable with, very few.

**JANE:**

I think that's why I'm slowly coming to the conclusion to not tell anybody that I've done it. I don't really know why I've done it, so I can't explain to anybody else.

It seems again that people can work this through for themselves, but maybe best practice would mean that we as oral historians should raise this as an issue interviewees should think about before recording. In understanding and responding to the concerns raised above from an ethical standpoint, considering the context within which these issues are currently being raised in oral history is of key importance. 'Oral histories are typically, though not exclusively, done with two overlapping types of people: older and relatively powerless people'.<sup>20</sup> Yet in projects like ours, younger people are appropriately being interviewed. Interviewees' comments about concern for surrogate witnesses and about coexisting with their tapes relate to this issue. As yet, I see no straightforward answers outside of restricting access for much more extensive time periods and perhaps being more vigilant in ensuring that anyone who accesses the material (any 'public witness') first signs a legally binding declaration form about its use.

I am also nervously aware that, although it is a situation I have not yet had to face, it is here that there are potentially huge risks and dilemmas for oral historians in negotiating conflicting access requirements of interviewees themselves and of surrogate witnesses who are aware, or may later become aware of the existence of the tapes. Within the highly politicised context of AIDS and prostitution, there is also potential for libel action on the part of public but personally connected witnesses (both individuals and organisations), particularly those who have been mentioned and named on tape and perhaps described or presented in a manner or context with which they may disagree. I welcome further debate on how archival institutions would respond should this situation arise and how interviewers might warn interviewees to be careful in this respect, without unnecessarily influencing the way they tell their story.

## Public witnesses and the analytical frame

I have already mentioned above some of the issues I, as an interviewer, perceive to be problematic around 'public witnesses'. In contemplating this further, the group raised serious concerns about the ethical behaviour of those who use archives, particularly in relation to the aspects of their story that are currently considered taboo.

### MANDY:

...There's that whole thing about how the tapes can be manipulated in somebody else's hearing in all kinds of different ways, and subject to all kinds of prejudice.

### JANE:

People judge us anyway, don't they... But actually, I then find myself asking, well why, what's so bad about it. Why be ashamed of it, ...there's nothing that's going to kill anybody, it's not going to bring the walls tumbling down anymore.

### PAUL:

It's not the shame though is it? ... it's the construct that other people put on it. For instance if somebody who is an established writer of good biography got hold of it, I don't think I'd have too big a problem; I might even be a bit flattered, I don't know. On the other hand if the *News of the World* decided to serialise it, and comment on it, I am not really very sure how comfortable I would feel... the kind of light they're going to shine on the tapes or the text that is produced from the tapes, is not going to be a nice one. It wouldn't sell newspapers if it was... There is that curious thing isn't there about needing to be protected from other people's mischievousness.

### MANDY:

Once you've made yourself public in any, however small a way, then you are vulnerable.

### PAUL:

...Do you feel responsible for it?

### JANE:

Well I do, I think my biggest dilemma is this thing about not being naive about any possible impact that it could have, and at the same time sort of being very self-disparaging to say, well it's not interesting to anybody else, it's just my little life. I find that quite hard to judge, really.

The major concern that arises for me out of such self-evident vulnerability is what happens when myself and the archivist move on or are on sabbatical or sick leave. Thoroughly policing the use of tapes when you are still intimately involved in the project is one thing, but when access restrictions of thirty years or more are placed on tapes, I do have

anxieties about their subsequent use and interpretation. Three issues emerge: one is about improper and disrespectful use of material; the second is about not gaining permission from or properly crediting the originators of the material; and the third is about meanings and interpretation in the analytical frame.

In relation to the first issue, it seems that because of the open-ended nature of oral history, copyright forms cannot be designed to make specific declarations about exactly how the material can be used over time. As in Paul's case described earlier, some of my interviewees have drawn up legal documents to deposit with the tapes specifying long term access arrangements. In an ideal world, perhaps all of them should be encouraged to do so, but I accept that such an organised approach is not possible for most. It remains a source of anxiety for me that many users of archival material, I suspect, are often not fully aware of the sensitivities of the material. In my view better monitoring of users is required and that task ultimately falls on archivists. The flip-side of these debates is that as archivists, interviewers and interviewees, we are usually pleased that material is being used at all, since we champion the motives for taking this material into a public realm, and archivists are all too aware of extensive quantities of oral history recordings that are rarely accessed. It is sad that a wealth and depth of valuable material often lies ignored. Somehow, we need to improve procedures and make them more transparent so that both agendas can be satisfied.

In relation to the second issue, the relationship between the original interviewer and interviewee requires scrutiny. If you are a good oral historian, your interviewee often ends the interview believing that they could have completed the recording by themselves, if they had only had the time and inclination to get around to it. Quite understandably, the interviewer's role in the process of producing a good interview is often underestimated from the interviewee's perspective. To me, this is acceptable and in some sense flattering, but other issues about archiving the recordings are neither. Most interviewers work on a freelance basis and it seems to me that existing copyright arrangements very quickly write the interviewer out of the equation. It is not surprising then that public witnesses tend to treat archival material as if it came out of the ether, often crediting the institutional archive, but according no credit to the interviewer or interviewee. I am aware of my own vulnerability as an oral historian in relation to other people lifting and publishing material I have collected without permission or credit to the interviewees or to me. If archival material is misused and published without permission, the institutions which hold the archives are very reluctant to do very much about it, aside from seeking an apology, since they do not want to attract negative publicity. As a committed interviewer, I am aware of this additional aspect of my own vulnerability and would again like to see procedures tightened up.

On the third identified issue about subsequent analysis and interpretation, the group went on to discuss the shifting public historical meanings attributed to issues that were considered traumatic and taboo during the period when our interviews were recorded.



**PAUL:**

.... This is a public description of private spaces in which I have had a part, but in which I only had a part, and other people were also implicated in this. I'm thinking in particular of my life in the theological college, which is a very private space, and completely different from the way most people would perceive it, or the way in fact that the Church would like to present it... I was very aware that ...that would be explosive if it was published now, but it won't be in twenty years' time... They would have moved on themselves.

**MANDY:**

Apart from, anything could happen.... something amazing could happen which would mean a sudden upsurge in those organisations... or ... a backlash against any liberalisation, and then what you've said would be an incredibly interesting document, like a kind of, something that nearly happened and then it didn't.

We haven't actually specified exactly what we've been interviewed about, but particularly if what we talk about is really taboo, here and now, today, and may well remain taboo for years and years. I tend to think that the things that are most taboo in this society are the most crucial in a way, most crucial to examine in terms of how our society is developing and what the problems in our society actually are. So to have anonymous records from people who have been right in the middle of that taboo, of whatever kind, is an incredibly useful thing... It's like not the nitty-gritty of what you do or what you experience or what you've said, it's the fact that you say it within the context of the taboo that makes it frightening or exciting or very useful or whatever.

**PAUL:**

... The interesting thing for me is that in fifty years' time, I don't think we can predict what will be interesting and what won't.

**JANE:**

... And the bits that we assume will be, might not be.

**PAUL:**

... They might be more interested in what we were wearing than what we were doing [Laughter].

And here lies a key uncertainty in framing this paper within the guiding constructs of trauma and taboo. The effect of trying to objectify these constructs as separate issues, shows how the terms themselves are intimately

subjective, socially and historically situated and tied into other spheres of life.

## Concluding note

In one sense, the meeting itself did appear to capture the empathic attitude which 'enables' oral history to be recorded. At the end of the session all agreed that they had found the meeting helpful. Anna has since had doubts and although she has given permission for publication of this paper, she could not bring herself to read it. On reading the original transcript of the meeting, she felt her expression was inarticulate and her points less poignant than other people's. She also wanted to extend the time limit for access permission on the tapes of her original interview stored in the archive. It leaves me with the question, how many others would do the same if invited to be reflective about the kind of issues raised in this paper?

It has also made me increasingly aware that the practice of reflexivity may not always lessen the tensions: I think Mandy's final comment about the group not fully revealing to each other why they had been interviewed (that is, for which project) shows that we achieved a remarkable mutual recognition of the delicate line we had to establish in just talking to each other about these issues. We did not make ground rules as you might sensibly do in a more formal discussion. In retrospect, Mandy felt we should have made a promise of confidentiality and discussed the implications of publication of any of this material in much more depth. Selecting images to accompany this article has been another challenge following from a key concern to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

To me, the issues all the participants discussed were fascinating and I liked the way they actively shaped the telling. Building on the 'Talking and Writing' theme of the last issue of *Oral History*, the resultant paper is a further example of the challenges of reconstructing text outside of the 'spoken moment'. As with all my oral history presentation, I had dilemmas about how to present it or whether to present it at all. For fairly practical reasons to do with time, and trying not to encroach too much on other people's busy lives, my final decision was initially to work independently with the transcribed account of the meeting, and then to work through the process of interpretation and editing together. As described above, this attempt in itself was limited. Having the controlling hand, I take full responsibility for any errors in interpretation that remain, and declare that I have been dominant in the boxing and selecting of material to include.

The implications for my oral history practice are invaluable, especially in understanding how complex the exchange process of interviewing can be and how much there is to consider outside the moment encapsulated in the original interviews themselves. As part of this process, I am grateful for the opportunity to set out some of my own anxieties and to have benefited from discussing these with interviewees and presenting them to a wider audience of oral historians.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I express my sincere thanks to those who took part: although they wish to remain anonymous, they take credit for authorship. I would also like to thank Nigel Bewley at the British Library National Sound Archive for helping us engineer the recording of the discussion.

## NOTES

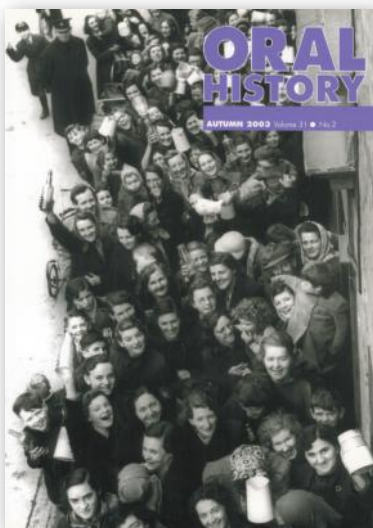
1. Tape C743/03/03 National Sound Archive. Interview with Daxa Volambiya, 1995: born 1959.
2. Helen Callaway, 'Ethnography and Experience: Gender implications in fieldwork and texts', in J Okely and H Callaway (eds) *Anthropology and Autobiography*, New York: Routledge, Chapman Hall, 1992, p 33.
3. Carolyn Ellis, Christine E Kiesinger and Lisa M Tillmann-Healy, 'Interactive interviewing: talking about emotional experience', in Rosanna Hertz (ed) *Reflexivity and Voice*, Sage: London, 1997, p 121.
4. Raphael Samuel, 'Myth and history: a first reading', *Oral History*, vol 16, no 1, 1988, pp 15-18.
5. Bridget Macey, 'Social dynamics of oral history making: women's experience of wartime', *Oral History*, vol 19, no 2, 1991, pp 42-48.
6. The text edited by Sherma Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, *Women's Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*, Routledge: London, 1991, has been particularly influential. More recently, themes connected specifically with the concerns of health and social welfare have been explored, such as in Pam Shakespeare, Dorothy Atkinson and Sally French's (ed)

*Reflection on Research Practice: Issues in Health and Social Welfare*, Open University Press: Buckingham, 1993, and publications of wider reflections on ethnographic work have been appearing such as Rosanna Hertz's *Reflexivity and Voice*, London: Sage, 1997 and cross-disciplinary collections such as that edited by Ruthellen Josselson, *Ethics and Process in the Narrative Study of Lives*, Sage: London, 1996 and Kedar Nath Dwivedi's *The Therapeutic Use of Stories*, Routledge: London, 1997.

7. Letter to the editors from Jo Stanley, *Oral History*, vol 24, no 2, 1996, p 25.
8. Though these issues do seem to have attracted more attention in the past. A valuable discussion in the American context is found in Amelia Fry, 'Reflections on ethics', *Oral History Review*, vol 3, 1975, pp 16-28.
9. Most ethical codes are terribly abstract, complex documents, written in small, tightly packed script that does not, for the most part, present inviting reading or provide much guidance on specific issues relating to trauma and taboo. Of the ones I have seen, the code of ethics published by the Oral History Society (Alan Ward, *Copyright, Ethics and Oral History*, 1995) is, rewardingly, the most easily digestible, yet like others can give us little guidance in better understanding how to respond to particularly distressing interview situations.
10. Steven Robins, 'White girl in search of the party: oral history, autobiography and gendered silences', *Oral History*, vol 26, no 1, 1998, p46.
11. Lynn Echevarria-Howe, 'Reflections from the participants: the process and product of life history work', *Oral History*, vol

23, no 2, 1995, pp40-46.

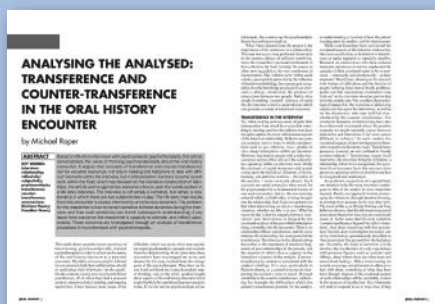
12. See for example, Joanna Bornat (ed) *Reminiscence Reviewed*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994.
13. Derek Clifford, 'Methods in oral history and social work', *Oral History*, vol 23, no 2, 1995, pp65-70.
14. 'Working Group on Confidentiality in Qualitative Social Research with Respect to Archiving', Meeting organised by QUALIDATA, Wellcome Trust, 7 October, 1997.
15. The fifth person was interested but was busy spending valuable time with his partner who was unwell at that time.
16. Joanna Bornat provides some particularly interesting reflections on this subject in her chapter on 'Presenting' in Shakespeare, Atkinson and French (eds), 1993.
17. Alistair Thomson, 'Anzac memories: putting popular memory theory into practice in Australia', *Oral History*, vol 18, no 1, 1990, pp 25-31.
18. Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, London: Routledge, 1995.
19. Work on the Holocaust is the obvious and most often quoted example, but there are many, many others and looking back at past issues of *Oral History*, rarely has an issue been published without some reference to oral history's self affirming aspect. For example, see Rob Perks, comments on conducting work with Ukrainians living in exile, in 'Ukraine's Forbidden History: Memory and Nationalism', *Oral History*, vol 21, no 1, 1993, p 52.
20. S Reinhartz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p 141.



# Analysing the analysed: transference and counter-transference in the oral history encounter

by Michael Roper

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Reading 'Analysing the Analysed' again it is clear how influenced I was by my situation at the time. I was then (and still am!) based at the University of Essex, where the historian and analyst Karl Figlio had recently established a Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies. Karl's 1988 piece in *History Workshop Journal*, 'Oral History and the Unconscious', had

made a deep impression on me, and through the Centre I was able to pursue my interest in psychoanalysis. I attended MA sessions on psychoanalytic methodology run by Bob Hinshelwood, whose *Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* remains unsurpassed in the clarity of its exposition of psychoanalytic concepts. Bob was

interested in the application of psychoanalytic thinking outside the clinic and got a group together to consider projects that might cross disciplinary boundaries. From these meetings the sociologist and child psychotherapist Andrew Briggs and I conceived a project on the history of Child Psychotherapy in the UK, based on intensive oral history interviews with

those – many of them women – who pioneered psychoanalytic work with children within the National Health Service after the Second World War. Twenty-two interviews from the project, which was funded by the Wellcome Trust, are now housed in the National Life Story Collection at the British Library (see <https://bit.ly/2Ye2opm>).

The interviews with the child psychotherapists were often difficult. Although I had a reasonable grasp of the theoretical differences between the two major trainings, Freudian and Kleinian, I found it hard to get a sense of their clinical work with children and how it was conditioned by their respective trainings. The interviewees helped me by enacting their techniques. One was an expert in a technique called sand play, and she got me to draw figures in the sand.

The interviews were also difficult because of the way our interests as oral historians in family backgrounds and personal relationships cut across theirs as clinicians. There were ethical issues. The Association of Child Psychotherapists numbered in the hundreds and was tight-knit. This made it difficult to anonymise, and the interviewees were rightly concerned that colleagues or possibly even their own clients might recognise them. For them, talk about the inner world and intimate relationships was

something that went on behind closed doors in the confidential setting of the consulting room. They were especially wary of answering questions about the personal factors that had led them into psychoanalysis and the profession, some having had traumatic experiences as refugees or coming from families that were separated during the war. I sent a draft of the article to 'N' and 'B', the two people who feature as case-studies. One of them expressed reservations about some of my interpretations but accepted my right to publish. I have a better appreciation now of the difficulties they experienced in managing the more personal aspects of our questions.

Reading the piece again, I see that it actually has two themes. One is a commentary on what it felt like to do oral history with people who had gone through a personal analysis and were professional practitioners of psychoanalysis. The other is a methodological

reflection on what psychoanalysis can contribute to our understanding of the experience of oral history, and how we deal with the unconscious aspects of the relationships we make with our interviewees. Much of what I said then still holds. In my view many oral history studies still take too little account of the experience of the encounter, from the very first contact by phone or letter to reactions to transcripts and publications. There is still a tendency to flatten out what Betty Joseph calls the 'total experience' of the interview into testimony and transcript, assembling the findings by cut-and-paste. Indeed, this tendency is perhaps even more marked today than in the early 2000s due to the emphasis – encouraged by funding councils – on secondary use. When the researcher relies mainly on the written transcript, the experiential context – of which talk is only a part – is largely evacuated. I continue to believe that that mistakes, miss-understandings and awkward moments, while

sometimes embarrassing and undermining, can function in Freud's words as a 'royal road to the unconscious', yielding clues about intersubjective communication. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki's edited collection *Oral History Off the Record* (2013) is full of fascinating insights about what goes on before and after the formal recording, but for me, everything must be considered 'on the record'.

I am delighted that my article has been included in this 50th Anniversary digital edition of *Oral History* and am pleased that its themes are still being pursued. I read Eileen Yow's 2018 piece in this journal, 'What can oral historians learn from psychotherapists' with great interest and would recommend the edited collection by Bob Hinshelwood and Kalina Stamenhova, *Methods of Research into the Unconscious* (2018).

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**Abstract:** Based on life-story interviews with psychoanalytic psychotherapists, this article demonstrates the value of thinking psychoanalytically about the oral history encounter. It argues that concepts of transference and counter-transference can be valuable resources, not only in helping oral historians to deal with difficult moments within the interview, but in interpretation. Contrary to some recent work within the field, which has focused on the narrative construction of identities, the article warns against too exclusive a focus upon the words spoken in a life story interview. The interview is not simply a narrative, but rather, a relationship in which there are two subjectivities in play. The life story that results from this encounter is always informed by unconscious dynamics. The problem for the researcher is how to remain sensitive to these dynamics during the interview, and how such sensitivity can enrich subsequent understanding. A key issue here concerns the researcher's capacity to tolerate, and reflect upon, anxiety. These concerns are investigated through an analysis of transference processes in two interviews with psychotherapists.

**Keywords:** interview relationship, reflexivity, subjectivity, psychoanalysis, transference, counter-transference, unconscious, Kleinian theory, Freudian theory



This article draws upon the recent experience of interviewing psychoanalytically trained psychotherapists in order to reflect on the nature of the oral history interview as a personal encounter. My title is of course playful. I do not for one moment think that oral historians should or could place their informants 'on the couch'. On the contrary, having now interviewed fifteen practitioners, all of whom have had a personal analysis, extensive clinical training, and ongoing supervision, I have become more aware of the difficulties which can occur when non-specialists export psychoanalytic concepts and methods from the clinical setting. At the same time, these encounters have encouraged me to try and observe the life-story method from the vantage point of the psychotherapist. They have on the one hand sensitised me to psychoanalytic ways of thinking, and on the other, sparked insight about aspects of the oral history interview which might fruitfully be considered in psychoanalytic terms. If we are not the psychoanalysts of our informants, this is not to say that psychoanalytic theory has nothing to teach us.

What I have learned from the project is the importance of the interview as a relationship. This may not seem a very profound observation in the current climate of reflexive sensitivity, when the researcher's personal involvement in data collection, far from 'tainting' the source, is often now regarded as the very touchstone of interpretation. This 'reflexive turn' within social science, prompted in particular by the influence of feminist methodology, has encouraged recognition that the knowledge produced in an interview is always situational, the product of interactions between two people. Rather than simply furnishing 'external' evidence of social life, the interview is itself a social relation, which can generate a variety of emotional responses.<sup>1</sup>

### Transference in the interview

Yet, when reading such accounts, despite their introspection 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. Reflexive accounts are certainly alert to ways in which considerations such as age, ethnicity, 'race', gender or class shape interactions within an interview. However, they tend to operate with a rather too-conscious notion of the self, as if the subjectivities operating within an interview were wholly the products of social structures and scripts acting upon the individual. Elements of desire, memory, and primitive conflicts – the realms of the psychic – seem curiously absent. Such accounts are rarely attuned to what would for the psychoanalyst be a fundamental feature of any such encounter; that is, the unconscious material which, on both sides, is being brought into the relationship. Karl Figlio has pointed out that when interviewing we are in a transference situation, whether we like it or not.<sup>2</sup> What he means by this is that the empathy between interviewer and interviewee is shaped by the emotional residues of the past which both parties bring, inevitably, into the encounter. There is no relationship without transference, and the more intimate the relationship, the more powerful the transference. Transference in the clinical setting thus refers to the enactment of emotional fragments of past rela-

tionships in the present, and the manner in which they reappear in the immediate situation of the analysis. Counter-transference by contrast is concerned with the analyst's feelings. It is seen, particularly in Kleinian theory, as a central resource in interpreting the patient's state of mind. Through sensitivity to the counter-transference, addressing for example the difficulties which the patient's transference presents for the analyst, an understanding is reached of how the patient is acting upon the analyst, and for what reasons.

Whilst oral historians have considered the emotional aspects of the interview relationship, they have usually done so in relation to interviewees or topics regarded as especially sensitive. Research on interviewees who have endured traumatic experiences in war has emphasised the capacity of their emotional states to be re-activated – voluntarily and involuntarily – at later moments.<sup>3</sup> David Jones, drawing on his research with victims of child abuse and the families of people suffering from mental health problems, points out that unconscious motivations may 'leak out' in the interview situation, just as they do in the analytic one.<sup>4</sup> He considers the psychological impact that the narration of distressing experiences has upon the interviewee, as well as on the interviewer, who may well feel overwhelmed by the counter-transference. The emotional dynamics of interviewing have also been discussed in research where the positive empathy we might normally expect between interviewer and interviewee is for some reason difficult to achieve.<sup>5</sup> In such studies the emotional aspects of interviewing present themselves in particularly intense ways. Transference processes, however, are not confined to 'heavily emotive subjects'.<sup>6</sup> Transference occurs in *all* interviews, the interview being by definition, a relationship. Once this is recognised, the question then becomes how the unconscious processes operating within an interview can best be recognised and understood.

As qualitative researchers of a special kind, our situation in the life-story interview is analogous to that of the analyst in some important respects. Firstly, our approach involves encouraging the informant, through attentive listening, to develop their account in the way they wish. The result of this is, as Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson observe, that the informant may reveal more about themselves than they are consciously aware of. In the sense that life-story narratives 'contain significances beyond the teller's intentions', they share something with free association.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, upon reviewing her transcript, one of my interviewees spontaneously described as 'free association' the account that she had given me. Secondly, this kind of interview usually involves the recollection of early experiences with primary figures such as parents and siblings, about whom there are often deep and unresolved feelings. When interviewing we actively encourage our informants to allow us to feel, with them, something of what they have been through. Aspects of the emotional content of such relationships will be, inevitably, evoked in this process of recollection. Our informants will tend to respond to us in ways that, if they do not repeat, then approximate their relationships with significant figures from their pasts. This is what is meant by transference. In listening to these accounts, and experienc-

ing something of what our interviewees experienced then, we may in turn have to deal with counter-transference, a triggering of anxieties and conflicts from our own pasts, brought alive by the material in the interview. Moreover, whilst the point of the life-story interview is not therapeutic – we do not seek to convert transference into interpretation for the benefit of our interviewees – there are nevertheless some affinities between the roles of analyst and interviewer. Penny Summerfield has observed that the interview process may just as often result in a sensation of 'discomposure' as it does a fluent and emotionally contained narrative.<sup>8</sup> In requiring our subjects to dredge up the past and render it in words, we must be able to tolerate the pain and anxiety that recollection brings. We, like the psychoanalyst, are thus sometimes in a position of having to contain or hold difficult feelings.<sup>9</sup>

### Transference and interpretation

My questions are these: given that transference is going on, how can we capture it, and how might the knowledge of transference affect our interpretations? First, how we capture it. In their *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods*, Taylor and Bogdan remark that in tape-recorded interviews 'the interviewer's data consists almost entirely of words'.<sup>10</sup> An interview does of course consist of words, but when we say it is a relationship, we include aspects such as body posture and movements, facial expressions, and gestures, which, together with words, convey emotional states. The clues as to these states may not lie in the words heard, even less in the recording of words, and even less in a transcript. In the interview encounter, as in the analytic one described by Betty Joseph, our informants will convey 'experiences often beyond the use of words, which we can often only capture through the feelings aroused in us'. Our sense of the *mood* of the interview sometimes gives a better indication of what is going on in it than words.<sup>12</sup>

Barry Godfrey, in a recent article for *Oral History*, asks how far the emotions conveyed in an interview are captured in the recording or transcript, and how this emotional content might affect the later interpretation of such material by researchers, even those who were not present at the original interview.<sup>13</sup> He shows how the transference finds its way onto the record, even affecting third parties. However, Godfrey maintains a traditional notion of the relationship between the emotional processes in the interview, and subsequent analysis. He views the interview relationship as ontologically distinct from the narrative given, and presumes that the interviewer/reader's emotional reactions to the transcript will be set aside during the process of interpretation.<sup>14</sup> Regarded from an *experiential* viewpoint, such a position seems odd. From the point of view of analysis, it is problematic as it ignores the value of the transference as an interpretative resource. The question for me is not how far the evidence of emotion creeps into a transcript, or might affect the researcher's capacity for 'dispassionate analysis', but how, for the purposes of interpretation, we can preserve the most complete evidence of emotional relationships.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most powerful experience I have had whilst

Freud and his couch, 1930.  
Picture: Freud Museum, London.



interviewing for this project, amounts to a transcript of just 8,000 words. My interviewee was someone who, as I shall explain later, was deeply sceptical of the value of words. Interviewing him was an almost painful experience, as I felt pushed right up against his internal world, as if he and I had no skin. I was forced to feel with him, the allure of an analysis in which negative feelings of envy, aggression and competition were stirred; his perceived failure to write in a manner that captured clinical material; the loss of an infant son and present illness of another; and remorse at having been a 'stupid father'. I find myself re-reading my field notes, and listening over and over again to the tape of my interview with B., puzzling over what was going on between us, nurturing the memory of what I felt at the time.<sup>16</sup> Too much significance can be given to methods that organise and categorise the words in an interview.

The effect of theoretical trends within life-story work over the past decade – specifically, the linguistic turn – has

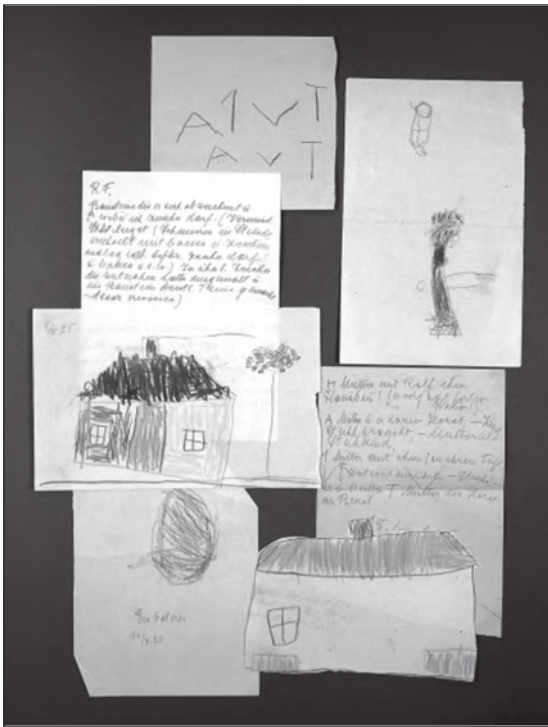




been to encourage a rather blinkered perception that the interview consists merely of words. Narrative approaches might critique the status of oral accounts as transparent 'fact', but in so far as they fail to recognise the interview as an experience in which transference takes place, they fall back upon traditional social science understandings of qualitative research. The emotional states of interviewer and interviewee alike, and their effects upon the resulting testimony, are rendered largely invisible in the interview-as-text, which can then be interpreted as if it was purely an instance of genre or form, and not a subjective experience.

It is through attention to how the interviewee makes us feel that we can begin to restore something of these lost dimensions. This entails, as Joseph puts it, 'focusing our attention on what is going on within the relationship, how he [the patient] is using the analyst, alongside and beyond what he is saying'.<sup>17</sup> This is not easy. When students conduct their first interview, perhaps their most common

response is that they find it difficult to both guide the informant, and listen to what they are saying. I think that this difficulty arises in part because of the intimacy it requires in order to generate a testimony. Empathy in a life-story interview involves being receptive to how the interviewee felt then and makes us feel now. The emotional energy required by such attentiveness makes it particularly hard to keep hold of our own questions and research agendas. Moreover, because pain, loss and disappointment are to some extent universal human states, at some point in an interview we may well be confronted by reactions or memories which feel difficult, and which may threaten our capacity to empathise. I have sometimes found myself repeating in my head, when confronted by anxieties such as these, 'just stick with it, stay with what they are feeling'. Of course one's instinctive tendency is to want to put these awkward or uncomfortable moments behind as soon as possible. During the interview itself it may indeed be neces-



Drawings used by Melanie Klein in her therapeutic work. Picture: The Wellcome Library, London.

sary to suspend reflection about the sources of our own anxiety. The necessity to do this in the here-and-now of the encounter, however, should not discourage retrospective insight into what was going on. Jones observes that 'It may be that the upset experienced by the interviewer is a terribly important part of the communication.'<sup>18</sup> A more comprehensive understanding of the encounter – and thus of the words spoken in an interview – is achieved by examining moments of difficulty, when the counter-transference makes itself felt.

### Interview with N

My negotiations with N prior to our interview were prolonged. She was exceedingly busy and difficult to catch on the phone. Our interview had to be booked up quite a way in advance. I was seven minutes late, having miscalculated the time of the train's arrival, and taken a cab to make up time, which had then become caught in traffic. I arrived flustered and apologised for being late. N responded by telling me that in any case we did not have much time – just an hour and a quarter – since she needed to have her lunch before the next appointment. We went straight from the hall to her consulting room downstairs. I refused coffee, not wanting to waste further time, and set about getting the equipment ready. On unpacking the recording equipment she observed that I was using a lapel microphone, and commented that she did not like them, the wire connection was a bother. I got her to affix it, but (as I discovered to my horror at the end of the first session)

neglected to turn it on. I then commented that I had better tell her something about the project. She laughed and said in a mildly sceptical tone, 'yes, it seems, slightly.... curious'.<sup>19</sup> Having explained our broad aim, to research the relationship between the life experiences and professional careers of psychoanalytically-trained psychotherapists after the Second World War, I then had to correct her impression that I was unaware of earlier developments in her particular specialism. I was mindful of the fact that she had herself written an account of the history of one of the psychoanalytic institutions we were researching, and one which made interesting use of sociological materials. I felt the need to show that I was knowledgeable, and I wondered if she might feel ours was a rival project. This process of mutual 'sounding out' in relation to knowledge characterised our initial exchanges. She went on to talk about her interest in social history, and mentioned an oral historian whose work she admired. Remembering that she was talking to another oral historian, she then seemed a little taken aback.

During the rest of the first session she focused on her childhood, relationships with parents and her aunts, and early career. She described herself on a number of occasions as having been 'disturbed'. As a teenager she had experienced disruption and separation from her parents because of the war. Like many psychotherapists, she described a 'difficult' relationship with her mother in particular: 'I do think I was the sort of child who was projected in to a great deal, by my mother'.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, her aunts were a largely positive presence, especially during the war. She went on to give a detailed description of false starts in her career, and of influential figures, who, for some reason or another, had seemed to over-shadow her. These descriptions centred on the academic career she had not pursued. She told of an epiphany about a lecturing post which she was invited to interview for. In the interim she had accepted a temporary lectureship vacated by a friend. She had found the job 'pretty traumatic really', especially lecturing to large groups.<sup>21</sup> Her sense of the difficulty in making the job her own, of it still really being 'Jane's job', was compounded by the fact that she had taken up Jane's lodgings, and her car. The car symbolised her experience of stepping into someone else's shoes: it was 'an enormous thing, which I couldn't drive easily'.<sup>22</sup> Her analyst, she later learned, was also close to her in background. They had graduated from the same university in the same subject, gone on to the same occupations, and shared the same sports. Her narrative of early adulthood dwelt upon experiences in which, consciously or not, it had been difficult to distinguish her 'I' from others. Despite our halting beginning, in these descriptions she was actively working with the interview, and I began to relax.

The mood at the beginning of our second exchange was rather different. The tape records us exchanging Christmas greetings as a means of testing the recording levels, provoking spontaneous laughter on both sides. She gave a vivid and extremely moving account of her long-term work with a particular client, which conveyed a closer sense of clinical setting and methods than I had experienced hitherto. Her desire to support others through 'rough patches'



was a strong theme throughout the second interview, as she told me about her work with supervisees, clients, and others. Having been projected into as a child, she seemed to have developed a particular sensitivity to the problems this caused others. She was currently working with someone from a non-analytic profession: 'bit by bit I feel I'm pulling her into a situation where she can actually observe something and doesn't put too much of herself in it'.<sup>23</sup> As we drew towards the end of the time we had scheduled, she extended the limit. I then asked her about what qualities she felt she had contributed to her work. One of the factors she mentioned was being 'good at interviewing. I'm good at going with the flow', then added, You know, I had an aunt called Flo'.<sup>24</sup>

Joseph comments that 'movement and change is an essential aspect of transference' in the analytic situation.<sup>25</sup> The same could be said of the interview. At the beginning of the initial encounter with N there was – as there usually is – some anxiety on both sides. I was somewhat rattled at being late, a feeling which in fact hampered my attempts to set the equipment up properly and start the interview. I had to stave off thoughts of impending disaster, a sense that the interview might be ruined because N would be irritated at my lateness, and because time was short. This had undoubtedly contributed to my failure to turn N's microphone on. In contrast to the analyst, whose training and supervision helps to guard against acting out, such a failure might be seen as an enactment of my counter-transference; that is, of my fear of having offended N, and anticipation of her possible anger towards me.

At the same time, however, I think my failure may also have been prompted by N's transference to me. Amidst my own confusion at the time of unpacking the recording equipment I had an acute sense of the intrusiveness of my endeavour. I found myself wondering what earthly right I had to delve into this woman's personal past. This sense was prompted I think by N's reactions to the microphone cord, and then by her seemingly sceptical response to my offer to tell her more about the project. With ethical doubts so much in mind, I struggled to summon an adequate intellectual rationale for our project. N's sense of uncertainty about what the interview would entail emerged further in her response to my description of the project, as she sought to put me right about the history of her occupation. Her initial wariness – experienced by me as a sense of slight prickliness – might perhaps be explained in terms of the account she subsequently gave of her childhood and career prior to becoming a psychotherapist. Even with the benefit of analysis, it would be difficult for her to traverse this past without to some extent *re-encountering* the confusion of boundaries. I often had a sensation during the interview of uncanny parallels between her experiences and my own, a sense that her comments may just as well have been my own, as if she was speaking my mind. This was not only in relation to our shared intellectual concerns. Listening to her accounts of her lecturing experiences had prompted some extremely painful memories for me of 'stepping into the shoes' of my predecessors. Above all, her comment about being projected into struck an immediate chord with me, making me feel that this really must be my mother she

was talking about. This sensation of close associations recapitulated something of the feelings that I suspect N had experienced with Jane, her analyst, and others. Without conscious prompting, and in response to transference on each side, issues about the struggle to achieve familial and professional autonomy were present throughout the session.

In the second interview I felt that we had moved on somewhat from these concerns. I had a sensation of time telescoping, as did she. She communicated great enthusiasm for her work. Whereas the first interview had rekindled my long-standing ambivalence towards lecturing, I now found myself wondering about what kind of a psychotherapist I might make. Her capacity to, as she put it, 'foster... people's development' was something which I experienced directly, when N observed that she thought I was a good interviewer. This followed immediately on from a comment about her aunt 'Flo'. She concluded by describing our interview as a 'not untherapeutic' experience, because, in contrast to an analysis which is ongoing, it had enabled her to draw various parts of her life together and see them at once.<sup>26</sup>

What was the 'pathway of associations' in these interviews?<sup>27</sup> My reactions to N in the early minutes of the interview put me in mind of my mother, who was often late for social occasions, and for whom lateness was experienced with a sense of panic that never seemed quite commensurate with the occasion, and which could sometimes temporarily deprive her of the capacity to think. In the interview with N I had reacted precisely like my mother, a case of enacting in the present, a state of mind once transferred onto me. Eased out of this state by the developing conversation with N, it was not long before I was able to recover a sense of professional competence. On N's part, the interview moved from an initial focus on situations in which it had been difficult to establish boundaries between herself and others that felt appropriate, towards accounts which communicated a sense of her competence, and in which the desire to give back to her profession was prominent.<sup>28</sup> Her references to the mother who projected into her, and to her aunt 'Flo', indicate aspects of the emotional contents of significant relationships from her past which were present in our two interviews.

Movements such as these in the character of the empathy between interviewer and interviewee are far from unusual. Qualitative research textbooks might attribute such shifts to the establishment of 'trust', or 'rapport'. What such terms miss is the capacity of the interview, through the uncertainty that it generates, and its focus on childhood and family background, to re-capitulate particular aspects of earlier emotional conflicts on both sides. In the case of my interview with N, the encounter changed as I moved beyond the family script of immobilising panic, and as N moved from *her* early experiences of being projected into, to her post-analysis, adult life and career.

In trying to assess how and where unconscious material might be being brought into the interview, the interviewer faces many difficulties. Whereas analysis will unfold over many sessions, taking months or years, our data rests on a limited number of encounters, usually held over a rela-



Portrait of Melanie Klein, circa 1950. Picture: The Wellcome Library, London.

tively short time-span.<sup>29</sup> Freud once remarked that a full interpretation of associations given early in analysis, may sometimes only be possible at the very end of treatment.<sup>30</sup> We are not in a position of being able to reassess initial interpretations in the light of new material given by our interviewees. Furthermore, whilst the analyst might assess the accuracy of an interpretation through a change in the patient's emotional state, we lack such measures. Yet, if our aim is not to psychoanalyse our informants, we nevertheless need to account for movements within the interview in mood and content, and this may require some interpretation to be made of how the lived life, through the story told, is being brought into the interview. In the case of analytically trained practitioners, such assessments are made both easier and more difficult. N's analysis, and her professional facility with analytic concepts, enabled her to give me an already formulated description of psychic states and processes which she had experienced (for example being projected into). She provided me with a kind of diagnostic short-hand. This gave me a closer indication of what the significance of material presented by her in the interview might be, than would normally be possible. In other kinds of interviewing, with those who have not been in analysis, such knowledge would be harder to come by, and we would be even less certain of our interpretations. At the same time, paradoxically, an analytic training can also mean that the unconscious dimensions are harder for the interviewer to reach. Analysis gives psychotherapists a powerful means of consciously monitoring their transfer-

ence, of not giving too much away. It gives them a language and an understanding of psychic states which encourages description rather than repetition.<sup>31</sup>

Thus even if we accept Figlio's observation that we are in a transference situation, the question of how much we can know about *what* is being transferred, and whether our interpretations will amount to more than 'wild analysis' is a pressing one. For these reasons, attention to the counter-transference is particularly important. Perhaps the most useful clues to understanding the content and movements in N's narrative lies in my register of how I felt during the two interviews. This meant not only heaving a sigh of relief that I had at least turned my own microphone on, and putting this lapse of professional expertise behind me, but reflecting on what was going on such that I should have arrived late in the first place, and then failed to turn on N's microphone. It involved sitting with a series of accounts of failed starts, in which I had to re-encounter the discomfort of my own memories of struggling to find my feet. That struggle was not only located in the past, but formed part of the empathy of our first interview. N's story was produced in a context of unconscious associations, and shaped not only by the genres and forms of psychoanalytic talk, or by our respective social situations. The areas of similarity in our backgrounds – for example, our early lecturing experiences – were clearly important influences: my age and occupation probably reminded N of the career she might have had. However, a full understanding both of how N had *felt* during this time, and of the later subjective significance of her experiences, requires that we move beyond the workings of social structures within the interview, to consider the unconscious elements being transferred into the interview setting. In the end, it was my sense of uncanny parallels and uncertain boundaries that communicated most acutely the nature of N's experiences, rather than the words in her narrative. Moreover, whereas reflexivity supposes a rather direct and limited range of associations between interviewer and interviewee according to social status, I would argue that *all* aspects of communication in an interview might be considered as furnishing evidence of unconscious processes. Transference in oral history can be seen to operate, not just in direct associations to us (as in 'when I was your age....'), but in *all the material* brought in to the interview by the respondent.<sup>32</sup> Thus, I was constantly having to reflect on why N had chosen to tell *me* this, at this particular moment in our encounter, and for what ends, and on why I had responded in the ways I did, and with what effect on the interview.

Attention to what we feel, moves us from a position of simply eliciting a narrative *about* our interviewees, to understanding the ways in which their subjectivities are enacted within the interview. This requires a different way of understanding to that which the researcher normally adopts. The overall aim might still be to generate narratives or information about the past. Considering the interview as a 'total situation', however, involves not only working with the conscious and rational aspects of the encounter, but with the empathetic and unconscious as well, since all these elements structure our knowledge and understanding.

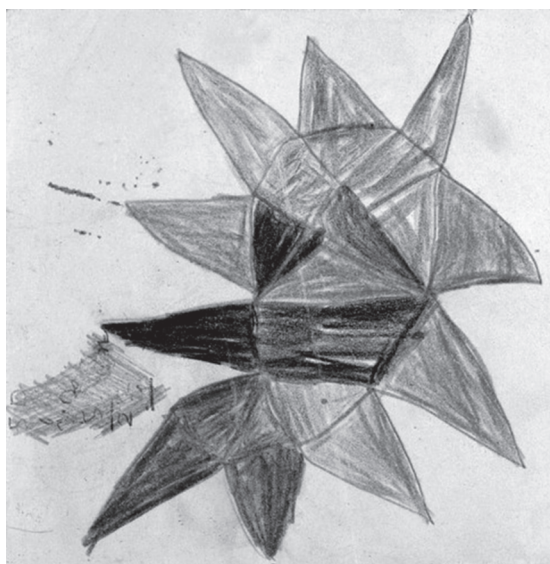
## The 'big black, Melanie horse'

If on the one hand I am recommending that oral historians operate in a way that is more attuned to unconscious processes and thus *closer* to the analytic setting, on the other, the project has sharpened my perception of what makes the oral history encounter distinct from the analytic one in terms of the kinds of transference relationships it tends to encourage. Such reflection was prompted particularly by the interview with B. In contrast to some of my interviewees, who gave basic information about their private lives, but were not prepared to be drawn into elaborate accounts, or were careful not to express much affect, the interview with B felt raw from the first moments. He began by offering coffee, but told me that his friends said his coffee was never much good. We started the interview, sitting at right angles. He did not look at me but sat facing forward with his head bowed and eyes half-closed, smoking cigars throughout. Lacking eye contact, I found myself struggling in the early stages, thrown back into the position of the novice. He spoke extremely slowly, with silences of up to 45 seconds. I initially interpreted these silences as a sign that he had concluded his answer and felt myself rushing in to the next question, which soon initiated a pattern of short answers. In other ways too, I found myself lapsing into habits that over the past twenty years of interviewing, I've worked hard to subdue. My questions often ended mid-sentence. They sometimes avoided probing and drew him back towards chronology – the dates of his psychiatric training, war service, the move to the UK and births of his children – a tendency which I tend to adopt when anxious about the material being thrown up in the interview. He commented that he was useless with dates, and in fact, the dates he gave me did not tally up.

Early on he explained that he had had two analyses, the first with a Freudian, the second with Melanie Klein.<sup>33</sup> The difference between these I think formed the lynch-pin of the interview. That with the Freudian, he described as 'done in a kindly way, and benevolent and so on', but as 'really very superficial and descriptive'.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, the analysis with Melanie Klein was 'thrilling'. He had been 'plunged into the revelation of enviousness and ambition and ruthlessness and things of that sort', impulses which had not appeared in the earlier analysis.<sup>35</sup> It was Klein's emphasis on the negative transference that had allowed this to surface. He then narrated a dream he had had during the analysis:

The first night after my first session, I dreamed that I was riding a horse, whose picture was at the foot of her couch, and I was riding this big horse, without a saddle and without a bridle, and really scared! But I was quite a good horseman then, but this was a big black, Melanie horse! And [...] analysis with her was, was quite frightening really, because of her penetration, you know, she ... she didn't mess about with defences and so on and ... she went for the emotions and the conflicts.<sup>36</sup>

B mentioned Klein's analysis of Richard as the best account of how she worked.<sup>37</sup> I had read this, and



Drawing by 'Richard', June 1944, used by Melanie Klein (see note 37). Picture: The Wellcome Library, London.

commented upon how quickly she dispensed with Richard's external environment in the analysis, interpreting in sexual terms the material he presented almost from the first moments. Later, B spoke of how he had given up writing about clinical material, because he felt that papers so signally failed to capture 'what actually happens in the transference/counter-transference encounter'.<sup>38</sup> At the end of the interview he commented that the account he had given me was 'all egocentricity' and 'not valid historically'.<sup>39</sup>

B's interview has proven extremely fruitful for my thinking both about how a Kleinian analysis works, and about how we work as oral historians. It was a difficult interview for me because B refused the positive empathy which one normally expects, and seeks to foster in interviewing. Although he offered coffee, it was with a disclaimer: this was not meant as a ritual which would help break the ice. He did not make eye contact; in short, he did nothing to put me at my ease, and nor did he seek any reassurance from me about the material he was giving, as most others have. Denied of such niceties, I was forced back into a position of encountering quite primitive emotions. It was the feeling of losing my social and professional skills as an *interviewer*, which alerted me to this. Underlying this professional stripping away was however a deeper feeling. The tendency to leave sentences unfinished is something which developed when I was a teenager, and which I think functions as a means of encouraging positive empathy in other people, who signal their understanding of my internal world by finishing off my sentences for me. Through his rejection of positive transference in the interview, I realised how much I relied upon it when interviewing. This sparked uncomfortable questions about what my own motives might be in seeking to use interviewing in such a way.

B's account of his dream and the Melanie horse enacted precisely what I was feeling at the time; a sense that we

were in the midst of profound and dangerous emotions which must be allowed to run loose. Just as he considered himself a good horseman, I considered myself a pretty good interviewer, but we both felt we were just hanging on. There were indeed times in the interview where I had felt in danger of 'losing it', of being overwhelmed by the rawness of his associations. What he admired in Klein was her capacity to 'stand a lot of... bouts of negative transference': it was precisely this which he now encouraged me to tolerate.

I had in fact offered myself up as in the Freudian position, through my comment about Klein's by-passing of Richard's external environment (the war) and emphasis on interpretation (some Freudian and Middle Group psychotherapists call this 'going for the jugular'). Responding to this, he demonstrated the power of a Kleinian approach to touch primitive conflicts. My sense of timidity faced with the rawness of the material he presented, allowed me to understand his disdain towards his Freudian analyst who had 'never hurt me, never frightened me'.<sup>40</sup> Other aspects of my reactions in the interview confirm the way in which he had come to associate me with a non or pre-Kleinian position. In responding to my comment about the Richard case, he said 'She was absolutely down on the transference and the counter-transference. Everything was studying what was going on right there and then in the consulting room. No nonsense about history and sociology and politics and things like that, but absolutely minutely studying the transference and counter-transference'.<sup>41</sup> In my letter to him I had described myself as a social historian working in a sociology department. His reference to these fields as 'nonsense', and his view that, as history, his account was 'baloney', indicated the extent to which the interview relationship had come to enact this tension between internal and external understandings.

When towards the end of our session I asked B if he felt there were any parallels between the oral history interview and the analytic session, he replied that there were not. In the analytic situation, he explained, 'the focus is absolutely on the moment-to-moment encounter, the transference and counter-transference'.<sup>42</sup> And yet, what B demonstrated in his interview was precisely the importance of such a focus, and as a result I learned more from it about the differences between Kleinian and Freudian positions on the transference than I had done in years of reading. What B did was to represent the differences by evoking them with me, making *me* feel what Klein had made *him* feel. It gave a meaning to differences which had until then seemed abstract and purely theoretical. Much as I wished to avoid the anxiety of riding bare-back through the interview, being forced to do so brought understanding which had hitherto eluded me.

### Emotion conventions and the interview

This experience has also encouraged me to reflect on the emotional conventions of the life story interview. In the interview with N we seemed to move from a situation of mild mutual suspicion and anxiety on beginning, towards some kind of resolution in which it became possible for

both of us to flow. I suspect that this kind of shift is commonly experienced among oral historians, and indeed, is more typical. In my interview with B however, my desire to achieve such a shift was frustrated: my experience of that interview was of emotional impulses which were and remained barely tolerable. B flouted the conventions of the oral history interview, by refusing to allow me to foster a positive empathy towards him.

The interview with B makes me wonder about how far the life-story interview as a genre, operates through generating what he, describing his Freudian analysis, termed an 'atmosphere of colleagues and friendship'.<sup>43</sup> Anxieties are inevitably raised, but the general direction of interviewing often works towards the fostering of coherence and against domination by feelings of disappointment, frustration, failure or despair. This is because firstly, we feel greatly indebted to our interviewees – usually relative strangers – for giving us their time, and for sharing confidences about their lives which make them vulnerable. This may make us timid about pursuing more negative aspects of the transference. Secondly, the use of linear questions, which begin with more primitive childhood experiences and move forwards to adulthood, may tend to encourage an emotional mood in the interviewee of 'moving on', rather than of sitting with difficult feelings.

Such a structure may also seem to the interviewee to require that they produce as 'composed' a narrative as they can. In so doing it might encourage the repetition of what Ian Craib has called 'bad faith narratives'. These are stories which paper over the psychic reality. The individual mobilises them as a defence mechanism, to avoid emotional impulses that feel too painful or dangerous to contain.<sup>44</sup> Thirdly, the political traditions of oral history itself may encourage an emotional atmosphere in which feelings of antagonism or aggression, when directed towards the interviewer rather than an 'external' figure or force, are not easily accommodated. The motivation to want to give back something to people who have in some way experienced oppression or been silenced – the recuperative urge – was and remains a keystone of oral history. In the oral history interview itself, such motivations may take unconscious forms, for example as manic reparation, the omnipotent desire to want to make good another's past, as if we were capable of effacing the private pain caused by social oppression and exclusion.<sup>45</sup> We might enact the recuperative urge through a highly-developed facility with sympathy, or a tendency to take the informant off difficult subjects to the memory of experiences that reveal their capacity to cope and change, the effects of which may be to curtail rather than allow and contain negative transference. The very injunction of the interview, to construct a coherent account, and, our bias towards relationships in history and the external world, may, if we are not careful, result in failure to properly assimilate feelings of being 'in pieces', or of being dominated by internal objects.<sup>46</sup> The problem with not working through the transference is that we will foster a rather lop-sided empathy. Aggressive and destructive urges – which are always present – may not be given expression, but squirreled away in a desire to encourage what is felt to be a more positive situation, of narrative



fluency, warmth and a measure of 'oneness' between interviewer and interviewee.<sup>47</sup>

For reasons such as this, oral historians have much to gain from thinking, over and above the specific intellectual needs of their research, about what attracts them to this form of encounter, and about the connection between their earlier experiences and their capacities as interviewers. I wonder how often it is the case – as it is for me – that interviewers are people used to being projected into, and required to contain others' projections. If it is this which gives me a particular facility in interviewing, nevertheless such situations always threaten to thrust me back into the realms of primitive projective identifications, where boundaries are not clear. I am drawn to interviewing partly because of the manner in which it puts me close up against this earlier sensation, whilst, usually and ultimately, confirming how different other people really are, and my capacity to deal with them as they are.

Even setting aside the complex histories which bring us to interviewing, it is never easy to remain open to the full range of feelings that an interview will arouse in our interviewees and hence us. By its very nature, the recollection of intimate experience will often feel difficult to endure. At such times, as Irma Brenman-Pick has observed in the analyst's case, we have a double task of not only containing the situation for our informants, but of managing our own feelings. Of course, our interviewees do not present themselves to us in the first place because they are experiencing distress, and the bringing in of this distress does not *define* our encounters, as it does analysis. Yet, if in the one-off situation of the interview, it is less likely that primitive material will emerge, nevertheless, we and our informants can never be quite sure about what emotional issues the interview will throw up. This uncertainty, brought about by the capacity of unconscious material to emerge on *both* sides, makes the life-story interview powerful and compelling, but it also generates anxiety. For this reason, Brenman-Pick's observation of the necessity for the analyst to reflect on anxiety has I think some value for us too. The oral historian, like the analyst, is sometimes in a position of having to 'work through the experience of feeling like an overwhelmed mother threatened with disintegration by an interaction with the overwhelmed baby'.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

The ideas I have been exploring here have an immediate resonance with oral history, because it is a personal

encounter, but to an extent the basic principles of analysis hold good for any form of life history, whether based on oral or written sources. Histories of subjectivity by necessity operate with the stuff of transference and counter-transference, whether or not this is explicitly understood by the historian. In any form of biographical research, as Freud noted, there is an emotional investment in the person being studied. Our choice of subject, and the significance given to particular evidence and aspects of experience (what we deem to be worthy of interpretation), will depend partly on our counter-transference, no matter how indisputable the historical significance of the individual or the intellectual relevance of the questions being asked. In the biographical enterprise there is no alternative but that we cultivate sensitivity to how our subjects felt then, according to how the evidence of their lives makes us feel now. It is a case of allowing ourselves, through a process of empathetic imagination, to be projected into and to hold and process the emotional impulses conveyed through the evidence of past texts. Reflection about what unconscious material belongs to us and what does not – as I was prompted to undertake after the interview with N – is part of this process.

If I seek to do more than explain our subjects' behaviour in terms of economics, social forces, or conscious intent – if, that is, we seek a serious engagement with subjectivity – we have to consider the subject's relationships. This entails paying attention to both the conscious and unconscious elements of relationships. In most historical research this task is complicated by the fact that we must analyse transference relationships indirectly: oral history apart, in most cases the evidence of a life is not given as a response to us in person, shaped by direct human contact. Nevertheless, we may still seek to reconstruct and to understand something of the nature of the transference operating between historical actors, and puzzle over the unconscious material which our subjects bring to, and enact within, social situations. We can even ask about how the process of narration itself is being used to contain and process emotional impulses, seeing the transference, as it were, operating within the act of constructing a life-story. Interpretation proceeds through attention to the counter-transference in all such cases. In this respect the difference between an oral testimony and other autobiographical sources is ultimately a matter of degree rather than of kind: oral history is distinctive only in that the transference is in the room, directed in the here-and-now to the figure of the interviewer.

I would like to thank my two interviewees, N and B, who gave their time to the project and whose reflections on an early draft of this paper, and their experience of the interview, have greatly helped my thinking. I would also like to thank the audience at the European Social Science History Conference at The Hague; Lyndal Roper and Paul Thompson for their insightful comments; and the reviewers at *Oral History* for their suggestions.

## NOTES

1. On the interview as a social relation see especially P Bourdieu, 'Understanding', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol 13, no 2, pp 17–37. On reflexive interviewing see A. Coffey, *The Ethnographic Self. Fieldwork and the representation of identity*, London: Sage, 1999; R Hertz, 'Introduction: Reflexivity and Voice', in R Hertz (ed.), *Reflexivity and Voice*, London: Sage, 1997; and JF Gubrium and JA Holstein, *The New*

*Language of Qualitative Method*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

2. Karl Figlio, 'Oral history and the unconscious', *History Workshop Journal*, vol 26, Autumn 1988, pp 120–133.
3. See for example Nigel Hunt and Ian Robbins, 'Telling Stories of the War: ageing veterans coping with their memories through narrative', *Oral History*, vol 26, no 2, Autumn 1998, pp 57–65.
4. David W Jones, 'Distressing histories and

unhappy interviewing', *Oral History*, vol 26, no 2, Autumn 1998, p 49. See also the discussion of the 'hidden' aspects of remembering in A. Thomson, *Anzac Memories. Living with the Legend*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp 10-11.

5. See Kathleen Blee, 'Evidence, empathy and ethics: lessons from oral histories of the Klan', in R Perks and A Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp 333-343; Barry Godfrey, "'Dear Reader I killed him": ethical and emotional issues in researching convicted murderers through the analysis of interview transcripts', *Oral History*, vol 31, no 1, Spring 2003.

6. Godfrey, 'Dear Reader I killed him', p 55.

7. W Hollway and T Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently. Free association, narrative and the interview method*, London: Sage, 2001, p 35. See however, Jones, and Steinar Kvale for a useful discussion of the problems entailed in interpretations which go beyond the self-understanding of informants. Jones, 'Distressing histories', p 49, and S Kvale, 'The psychoanalytic interview as qualitative research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, March 1999, pp105-7.

8. P Summerfield, 'Dis/composing the subject. Intersubjectivities in oral history', in T Cosslett, C Lury and P Summerfield, *Feminism and autobiography. Texts, theories, methods*, London: Routledge, 2000, p 91-3. For further comments on the limits of narrative in achieving psychological 'composure', see M Roper, 'Re-remembering the Soldier Hero: the composure and re-composure of masculinity in memories of the Great War', *History Workshop Journal*, vol 50, Spring 2000, pp 181-205; and 'Splitting in unsent letters: writing as a social practice and a psychological activity', *Social History*, vol 26, no 3, 2001, pp 318-340.

9. This opens the whole question of whether interviewing does or should fulfil a therapeutic purpose. Hollway and Jefferson point out that the interviewer is often in the position of experiencing painful emotions with the interviewee, but go on to remark that 'it can be reassuring and therapeutic to talk about an upsetting event in a safe context' (*Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, p 87). Whilst I accept this, I think it is important to remember that oral historians are not trained in therapeutic methods, and that for our subjects, the interview will not necessarily be psychologically beneficial. Kvale's comments are relevant here: 'Not having therapeutic training in handling the

emotional personal nature of therapeutic relations, interview researchers in the social sciences should be careful not to promote some kind of therapeutic experiences from their subjects' ('The psychoanalytic interview', p 105-6).

10. S Taylor and R Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods. A guidebook and resource*, New York: John Wiley, 1998, p 112.

11. B Joseph, 'Transference: the total situation', in M Feldman and EB Spilius (eds), *Psychic Equilibrium and Psychic change: Selected papers of Betty Joseph*, London: Routledge, 1989, p 157. Kvale points out the importance of material beyond the 'explicitly formulated verbal dimension' - such as bodily posture and gesture. 'The psychoanalytic interview', pp 104-5.

12. Irma Brenman-Pick observes that patients often do not 'hear' the words on receiving an interpretation, and that the analyst must therefore seek an understanding of the 'mood and atmosphere of communication' ('Working through in the transference', in EB Spilius (ed), *Melanie Klein Today. Developments in theory and practice*, vol 2, London: Routledge, 1988, p 36).

13. Godfrey, 'Dear Reader I killed him'.

14. Godfrey, 'Dear Reader I killed him', p 55; p 63.

15. Godfrey, 'Dear Reader I killed him', p 63.

16. See Hollway and Jefferson for accounts of how they kept a record of the transference. They remark on the importance of keeping fieldnotes and re-listening to the interview (*Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, p 46).

17. Joseph, 'Transference: the total situation', p 157.

18. Jones, 'Distressing histories', p 56.

19. Interview with N, p 1.

20. Interview with N, pp 3-7.

21. Interview with N, p 9.

22. Interview with N, p 10.

23. Interview with N, p 40.

24. Interview with N, p 44.

25. Joseph, 'Transference: the total situation', p 157; p 160.

26. Interview with N, p 45.

27. Hollway and Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, p 41.

28. In Kleinian terms, such a movement might be seen in terms of a shift from the paranoid-schizoid position, in which the infant has an uncertain sense of distinctions between itself and others, and in which difficult feelings are projected outwards, towards the depressive position, in which one feels a desire for reparation, and is

capable of accommodating ambivalent feelings.

29. This issue is discussed well by Kvale.

According to him, analysis will reveal 'deeper levels of personality, which may be inaccessible through a brief research interview'. He also points out that, far from the informant seeking us out, we seek them out, raising ethical issues about interpretations that might challenge how people understand themselves ('The psychoanalytic interview', p 103; p 106).

30. Cited in Kvale, 'The psychoanalytic interview', p 94. Kleinians however - see below - are more likely to make immediate interpretations of material given by the patient.

31. Freud comments that analysis allows the patient, by transferring onto the analyst something that happened to them in earlier life, to 'transform his repetition into a memory' (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis Volume I*, London: Penguin, 1973, p 496).

32. The phantasies present in the transference are as Paula Heimann comments 'not something that occasionally irrupts into the patient's relation with the analyst', but ubiquitous. Heimann, 'Dynamics of transference interpretation', in M Tonnesmann (ed), *About Children and Children no Longer. Collected Papers 1942-80*. Paula Heimann, London: Routledge, 1989, p 113. Heimann argues for example that patients' accounts of their dreams can be interpreted as a means of expressing impulses towards the analyst. See also Joseph, 'Transference: the total situation', pp 156-7.

33. Born in 1882, Klein, with Anna Freud, is considered as a founding figure in child analysis. Klein became involved in psychoanalysis in the 1910s, partially through the experience of rearing her own children. Her ideas focused more closely than Freud's on the maternal relationship. The question of how far her ideas could be considered as building upon or deviating from Freud's theories has pre-occupied psychoanalytic movements since the 1920s. The sometimes heated debates of the inter-war period culminated in the 'controversial discussions' of 1942-5, the outcome of which was the setting up of separate courses for Freudian and other (Kleinian and 'Middle Group') trainee analysts under a single training committee. See P King and R Steiner (ed), *The Freud-Klein Controversies 1941-45*, London: Routledge, 1991.

34. Interview with B, pp 6-7.

35. Interview with B, p 4.

36. Interview with B, pp 5-6.

**37.** Klein's *Narrative of a Child Analysis* was first published in 1961, shortly after her death. It is a detailed, session-by-session account of a four month long analysis of the 10 year old Richard, compiled from her case-notes, and constitutes the fullest account Klein gave of her clinical techniques and interpretations. The analysis was conducted in Wales during the Second World War, where Klein and Richard (whose parents had moved to the country for the duration of the war) were living. In the sessions Richard shows great interest in and concern about the events of the war. He followed the war news closely. Many of his drawings depict aeroplanes and warships engaged in battles, and he often expressed his fears about bombing. In the analysis, these fears are interpreted by Klein as deriving from primitive *internal* conflicts. See M Klein, *Narrative of a Child Analysis*.

*The conduct of the psychoanalysis of children as seen in the treatment of a ten-year old boy*, New York: The Free Press, 1961.

**38.** Interview with B, p 16.

**39.** Interview with B, p 31.

**40.** Interview with B, p 6.

**41.** Interview with B, p 5.

**42.** Interview with B, p 30

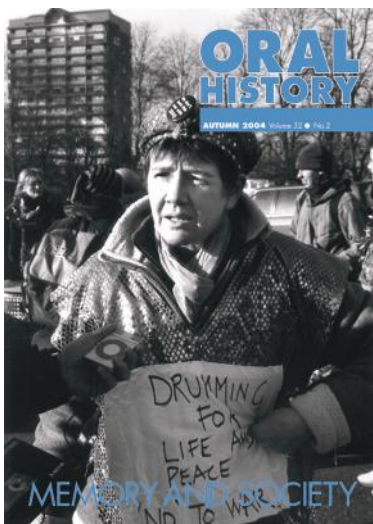
**43.** Interview with B, p 6.

**44.** See I Craib, 'Narratives as bad faith', in M Andrews, SD Sclater, C Squire and A Treacher, *Lines of Narrative. Psychosocial Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp 64-75.

**45.** See M Klein, 'Mourning and its relation to manic depressive states', in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921-1945*, London: Vintage, 1988.

**46.** Gabriele Rosenthal remarks on the difficulties which oral historians experience

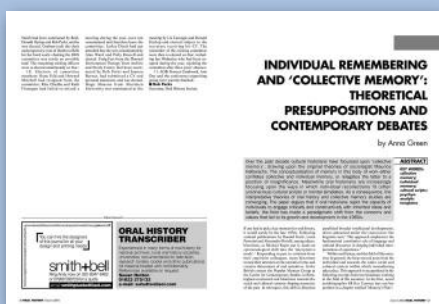
in interviewing traumatised informants, and how we often tend to adopt a 'well meant attempt to shut the door'. 'German war memories and narratability', *Oral History*, vol 19, no 2, 1991. Hollway and Jefferson comment too on the danger that, if experiences are too painful for the interviewer, they might feel unable to contain them and instead, 'throw them out', for example by offering reassurance (*Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, p 49-50). **47.** See Figlio's account of research on the subjective experience of wage labour in Germany, in which the interviewer's attention to a counter-transference of exhilaration led her to an understanding of undercurrents of aggression in the interviewee. 'Oral history and the unconscious', p 124. **48.** Brenman-Pick, 'Working through in the transference', p 46.



# Individual remembering and 'collective memory': theoretical presuppositions and contemporary debates

by Anna Green

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I was deeply concerned at the time about what I perceived to be the overdetermining influence of collective memory theory on oral history analysis and interpretation, and on the spur of the moment decided I had to write something. I felt very much out on a limb and remember encountering a

particularly aggressive negative response, for example, at the inaugural 2008 ISCH conference in Ghent. It was only much later that I came across the following observations written sixty years apart by the Annales historian Marc Bloch and the American historian David Thelen. Bloch ascribed the fall of France in 1940

(*L'étrange défaite*) to a collective scholarly fatalism in the face of 'the great impersonal forces at work in society....'; and David Thelen built on Bloch's critique ('But is it history?') to remind us that it is 'individuals [who] remember and forget, dream and criticise, decide whether to take

responsibility. Institutions and cultures and circumstances don't do these things'. I wished I had read them both earlier.

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**Abstract:** Over the past decade cultural historians have focussed upon 'collective memory', drawing upon the original theories of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. The conceptualisation of memory in this body of work either conflates collective and individual memory, or relegates the latter to a position of insignificance. Meanwhile oral historians are increasingly focusing upon the ways in which individual recollections fit (often unconscious) cultural scripts or mental templates. As a consequence, the interpretative theories of oral history and collective memory studies are converging. The paper argues that if oral historians reject the capacity of individuals to engage critically and constructively with inherited ideas and beliefs, the field has made a paradigmatic shift from the concerns and values that led to its growth and development in the 1960s.

**Key words:** collective, memory, individual, memory, cultural scripts, psycho-analytic, templates

If one had to pick a key moment for oral history, it would surely be the late 1970s. Following seminal publications by Ronald Grele, Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli, among others, historians, as Michael Roper put it, made an epistemological shift into the 'interpretive mode'.<sup>1</sup> Responding in part to criticism from their empiricist colleagues, many historians turned their attention to the narrative forms and creative dimensions of oral narratives. In the British context the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Studies in Birmingham reoriented oral historians towards the social and cultural contexts shaping memories of the past. In retrospect, this shift in direction paralleled broader intellectual developments, often subsumed under the expression 'the linguistic turn'. This approach emphasizes the fundamental constitutive role of language and cultural discourses in shaping individual interpretations of experience.<sup>2</sup>

Within oral history, and the field of life narratives in general, the focus moved away from the individual and towards the wider social and cultural context within which remembering takes place. This approach is encapsulated in the following excerpts from two historians working in the field of life narrative. In the first, noted autobiographer Jill Ker Conway lays out her position in a chapter entitled 'Memory's Plots':

Whether we are aware of it or not, our culture gives us an inner script by which we live our lives. The main acts for the play come from the way our world understands human development; the scenes and key characters come from our families and socialization, which provide the pattern for investing others with emotional significance; and the dynamics of the script come from what our world defines as success or achievement.<sup>3</sup>

Conway's succinct description of the cultural construction of life narrative (in this case written autobiography) has resonance for contemporary directions in the analysis of oral histories. In Conway's passage, the key word is the use of 'script'. In the second example, taken from a recent study of war memory and commemoration, edited by TG Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper, the key concept is that of 'templates', associated with the psycho-analytic concept of unconscious mental schemas. Memories of war, the authors argue, are shaped by the 'templates of war remembrance... [the] cultural narratives, myths and

tropes.... through which later conflicts are understood'.<sup>4</sup>

Historians are increasingly focussing upon the ways in which individual recollections fit (often unconscious) cultural scripts or templates. There is apparently little space for the consciously reflective individual, or for the role of experience in changing the ways in which individuals view the world. As a consequence, oral history is converging with collective memory studies, within which individual memory is either subsumed under 'collective memory', or assigned to the realm of the passive unconscious.

### Collective memory studies

Cultural historians and cultural theorists largely agree that contemporary society is in the grip of a memory boom, expressed in myriad ways from the building of memorials and expansion of museums, to retro fashions and popular representations of the past in film and television.<sup>5</sup> These multiple 'sites of memory' (the phrase, of course, is taken from French historian Pierre Nora) have led historians to think about whether another 'venue of memory and identity transmission ... operate(s) simultaneously and competitively with history, namely "collective memory"'.<sup>6</sup> While there is no consensus concerning the precise definition of collective memory, in practice collective memory studies appear to fall primarily around two poles.

A large body of cultural history has examined what Paula Hamilton has characterised as a cross-national 'memorial culture... characterised by the dominance of memory and commemoration as the prism through which we negotiate the past'. The focus of these historians is public commemoration and the active participation by large numbers of people 'doing the work of mourning and public remembering themselves...'.<sup>7</sup> The substantial body of work on the memorialisation and remembrance of war comes into this category.

Alternatively, Alon Confino defined collective memory much more broadly, as 'the representation of the past and the making of it into shared cultural knowledge by successive generations in "vehicles of memory", such as books, films, museums, commemorations, and others'.<sup>8</sup> In this definition every representation of the past is potentially a form of collective memory.

Despite widespread use of the term 'collective memory', it is only fair to point out that many historians are very uneasy about the concept. A number explicitly substitute parallel or alternative terms that better reflect their under-

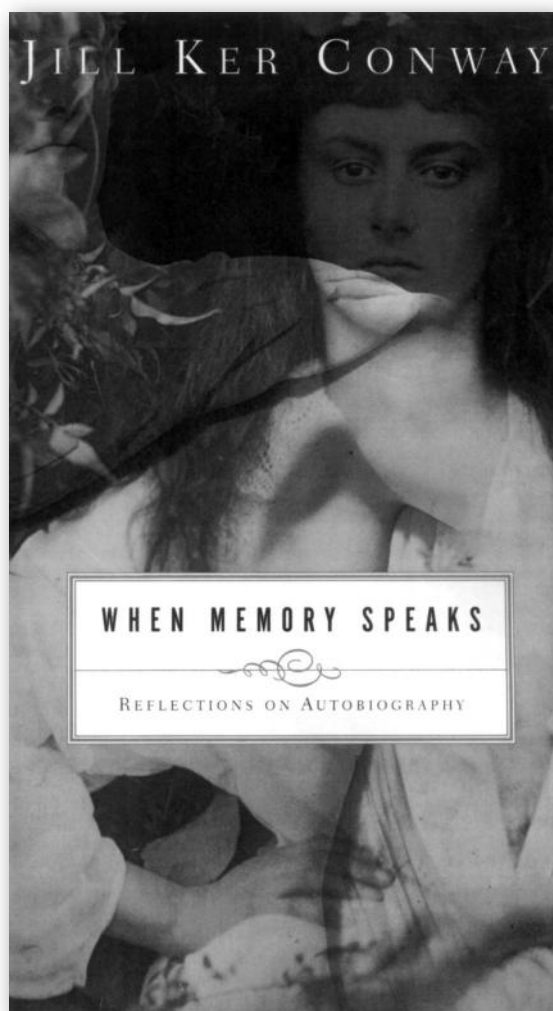
standing of the processes through which particular groups, communities or nations collectively remember their past. These terms include, for example, 'collective remembrance', 'collected memories', 'cultural memory', 'public memory', or 'mnemonic communities'.<sup>9</sup> The philosopher of history, Wulf Kansteiner, has written a broad and useful review of collective memory studies that explores a number of the issues that concern historians and cultural theorists, but here I will focus on the problems of most relevance to oral history.<sup>10</sup>

The two definitions of collective memory outlined above contain implications that should concern oral historians. The first is the use of the word '*memory*' to describe what are really different ways of knowing about the past. As Samuel Hynes pointed out, 'Memory is the mental faculty by which we preserve or recover our pasts, and also the events recovered. Without that link – now reaching back to then – you have an image of the past in your mind, but it isn't memory but something else, a social construction, history'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, all forms of historical understanding – even those that do not engage the faculty of personal memory at all – are increasingly classified as memory. As a consequence, memory has become detached from the individual. This places theorists in a dilemma. Memory is indisputably a faculty of the individual brain, and few would argue that there is any linear or aggregative relationship between individual memory and collective memory.<sup>12</sup> How do cultural theorists resolve this paradox?

A number of cultural theorists subsume individual memory under the rubric of collective memory and reject the significance of individual memory altogether. Sociologist Daniel Schudson argues that since memory can only be expressed through the 'cultural construction of language in socially structured patterns of recall', in the most important sense all memory is collective cultural memory.<sup>13</sup> Wulf Kansteiner makes a similar point more cautiously:

Another unsettled area of collective memory studies is the precise relation of the individual and the collective. ... research has time and again emphasized the social nature of individual remembering and forgetting.... The very language and narrative patterns that we use to express memories, even auto-biographical memories, are inseparable from the social standards of plausibility and authenticity they embody. In this sense, 'there is no such thing as individual memory'.<sup>14</sup>

Other historians argue that individual memory is unimportant because it lacks active agency. In Nancy Wood's study of memory in postwar Europe, individual and collective memories both avail themselves of 'mechanisms like selection, narrativization, repression, displacement or denial'. However, the 'emanation of individual memory is primarily subject to the laws of the unconscious....', whereas collective representations of the past represent the conscious purpose of social groups.<sup>15</sup> In this argument, collective memory is permitted a high degree of intentionality, whereas individual memory (despite drawing upon the same cultural mechanisms) lacks a similar sense of purpose, Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan also differentiate between



the active agency of collective remembrance, and 'passive memory – understood as the personal recollections of a silent individual', or 'homo psychologicus – the man of private memory'.<sup>16</sup> In these definitions, individual memories are confined to the realm of psychology, presumed to lack conscious purpose, and are therefore largely irrelevant for the work of historians.

To sum up, the cultural theorisation of memory/remembling increasingly rejects the value of individual recollection. The first approach declares that the social and cultural context within which remembering takes place determines personal recall to the extent that the individual dimension of memory is deemed insignificant. The second places individual memory within the realm of the unarticulated, or unconscious, psyche. Where do these ideas originate?

### **Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945)**

The concept of collective memory originated with the work of the sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs.<sup>17</sup> Influenced by the sociology of Emile Durkheim in the 1920s, Halbwachs

developed a theory of memory that continues to shape contemporary memory studies. As Jan Assman pointed out, Halbwachs' research shifted our understanding of memory from a 'biological framework into a cultural one'.<sup>18</sup> More accurately perhaps, Halbwachs shifted memory into the realm of social relationships, as the following summary of his theory illustrates.

First of all, Halbwachs agreed that memory was a mental faculty that could only exist within the individual. In accord with the point made by Samuel Hynes earlier, Halbwachs did not regard knowledge of events outside direct experience as memory:

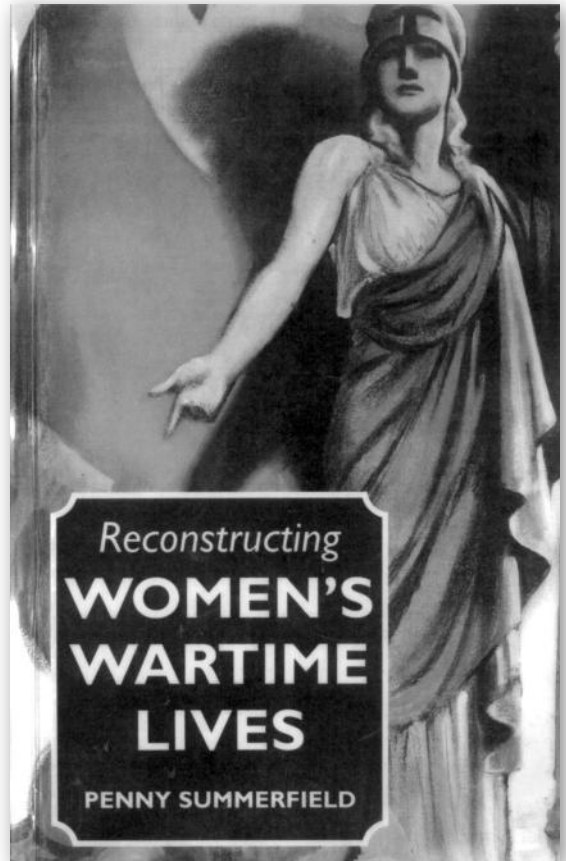
I carry a baggage load of historical remembrances that I can increase through conversation and reading. But it remains a borrowed memory, not my own.... For me they are conceptions, symbols. I picture them pretty much as others do. I can imagine them, but I cannot remember them.<sup>19</sup>

Individuals remember, Halbwachs argued, through dialogue with others within social groups. For example, we remember as children within families, or as adults within religious or occupational groups. Within these groups, Halbwachs suggested, the most durable memories tended to be those held by the greatest number. Finally, while he accepted that not all individuals within a group would remember the same events or with the same intensity, he suggested that the need for an 'affective community' ensured that individuals remembered primarily those memories which were 'in harmony' with those of others.<sup>20</sup> Therefore the memories of the individual became merged, and submerged, within group, or collective, memory.

Halbwachs' theory of collective memory is functionalist. Memory functions as a mechanism that unites groups and cements identity. His theory therefore ignores conflicting memories, and tends to suggest that those memories that do not accord with the group gradually fade from memory. Peter Burke made an interesting point in this context, reminding us that the sociology of Emile Durkheim 'with its emphasis upon community, consensus and cohesion' developed in the context of European nation-building, and the search for traditions and rituals that could legitimise nation-states. Burke argues that it 'would be unwise to follow Durkheim and his pupil Halbwachs too closely in this respect, and to discuss the social function of memory as if conflict and dissent did not exist'.<sup>21</sup>

### Life narrative interpretive theories

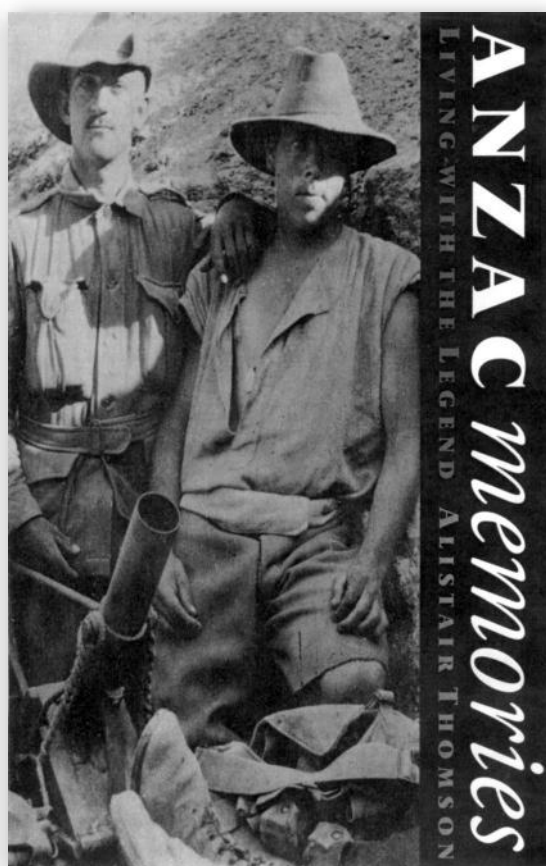
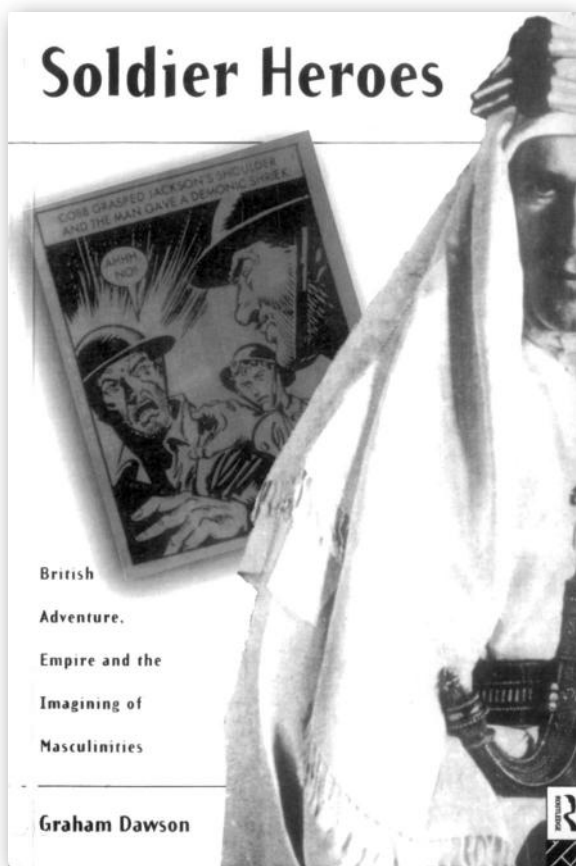
However, contemporary cultural theorists in collective memory have not heeded Burke's advice, and their work – as we have previously shown – either conflates collective and individual memory or places the latter beyond reach. A little over a decade ago, James Fentress and Chris Wickham pointed out that 'an important problem facing anyone who wants to follow Halbwachs in this field is how to elaborate a conception of memory which, while doing full justice to the collective side of one's conscious life, does not render the individual a sort of automaton, passively



obeying the interiorised collective will'.<sup>22</sup> How have historians approached this problem?

Contemporary life narrative/oral history interpretive theory consists of three interwoven strands: these may be broadly categorised as the cultural, the social and the psychological. Cultural forms of analysis examine, for example, how individuals draw upon archetypal myths and follow particular genres of storytelling or narrative forms. The concepts central to this approach are derived primarily from anthropology and literary studies. There is now a rich body of literature convincingly demonstrating the pervasiveness of cultural myths and traditional narrative forms in oral expressions of historical consciousness.<sup>23</sup> But it is one thing to unpack individual narratives using the tools of cultural analysis; it is another to establish public cultural scripts within which individual narratives must fit.

An example of the latter approach may be found in Penny Summerfield's post-structural analysis of women's Second World War oral narratives, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*.<sup>24</sup> In this study, Summerfield explores the way women's oral histories relate to publicly available representations and discourses about women's lives during this period. Each chapter begins with a summary of the relevant public pre-war discourses, such as the daughter/filial relationship. These are gleaned from a variety of sources, for example, official government poli-



cies, girl's magazines, and films. The oral histories recorded with women who lived through the war are then located within the matrix of publicly available discourses. The result is reductionist, and complex answers are forced into the categories, for example, of 'stoic' or 'heroic' narratives. Nor is there much room in Summerfield's analysis for the self-reflective individual, rejecting as she does the 'capacity of interviewees to see into the inner processes of [the] self, specifically to perceive internal changes across time and attribute them to identifiable causes'.<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to understand, in the model adopted by Summerfield, why individuals adopt a specific perspective, or how changes in individual perception and understanding could occur. Rather than exploring how and why ideas, values and beliefs are critiqued, reassembled, juxtaposed or rejected, her focus appears to be how far the oral narratives fit pre-existing cultural frameworks.

The social and psychological dimensions of oral history interpretive theory focus upon the context within which remembering takes place, and upon shared psychological imperatives underlying the construction of stories about the past. The theory of 'composure', employed in two key oral history texts published in 1994, Graham Dawson's *Soldier Heroes*, and Alistair Thomson's *Anzac Memories*, incorporates these elements alongside a cultural analysis. Dawson was a member of the Popular Memory Group in

Birmingham and Thomson was influenced by the Group's approach, which explored the interaction between public and private memory. The critical insight developed by this Group, according to Michael Roper, is that remembering always invokes broader public discourses, particularly those of the popular media:

Central to the popular-memory approach is the notion that personal accounts of the past are never produced in isolation from these public narratives, but must operate within their terms. Remembering always entails the working of past experience into available cultural scripts.<sup>26</sup>

The two cultural scripts under investigation in Dawson and Thomson's work are those of the 'soldier hero' of British adventure stories, and the Anzac legend in Australian memory.<sup>27</sup>

As Roper pointed out, the main emphasis of both books is upon the link between private and public remembering, and the individual's need to compose a past that is publicly acceptable. Dawson argues that, 'subjective composure fundamentally depends upon social recognition, with its power to confirm that the versions of self and world figured in a narrative correspond to those of other people....'<sup>28</sup> Thomson and Dawson also place considerable



emphasis upon the social context, the 'particular publics' such as a wartime platoon, within which memories are recounted and shared. Thomson draws our attention to 'the importance of social acceptance and affirmation' within these groups, which may be potentially repressive of individual memories or perspectives that do not correspond with those of others.<sup>29</sup> Dawson describes the 'determining influence' of such groups.<sup>30</sup> These arguments are consistent with those of Halbwachs, emphasising the controlling role of collectivities sharing a remembered past.

Another dimension of composure is psychological: the need to construct in Thomson's words 'a safe and necessary personal coherence out of the unresolved, risky and painful pieces of past and present lives.' Composing a past we can live with, and that gives us a sense of coherent identity, involves actively managing the memories of traumatic or painful experiences. As Thomson acknowledges, this is not always successful, and 'we are left with unresolved tension and fragmented, contradictory identities'.<sup>31</sup> These tensions cause psychic anxieties, and Dawson draws upon Kleinian psychoanalytic theory, and the concept of 'phantasy', to explain the purchase of the myth of the soldier hero upon masculine consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

The theory of composure has had considerable influence among oral historians. It provides a valuable way of understanding the underlying dynamics of life narratives, and provides considerable insights into the cultural, social and psychological dimensions of remembering.

One strength of composure as an interpretive device is that it 'introduces one possible motivation for story-telling: as a means of actively managing painful experiences from the past'. But, as Roper continues, 'it has little to say about personal motivations for remembering'. He seeks to address this lacuna in a study of two autobiographical accounts of a specific wartime incident, written by the same author sixty years apart. Roper argues that the author was 'motivated as much by the need to address feelings which date from the event itself as from the imagined expectations of his audience at the moment of telling'. Roper concludes that unconscious emotions generated in the past coalesce with contemporary 'life-dilemmas', triggering the processes of memory. In this analysis individual memories are structured by the unconscious.<sup>33</sup>

In conclusion, the three strands of contemporary life narrative and oral history interpretive theory – the cultural, social, and psychoanalytic – all lean towards a culturally determinist and functionalist perspective concerning individual memory. Each reinforces the notion that individuals' memories conform to dominant cultural scripts or unconscious psychic templates, and are recalled within the constraints of 'particular publics'. It is easy, therefore, for collective memory theorists to reject the significance of individual remembering, and subsume it within the concept of collective memory.

In defending the significance of individual memory and remembering for historians, I would like to raise two questions about the analytical perspectives outlined above. The first relates to the tendency among memory theorists to

utilise the same interpretative approaches for both autobiography and oral history; should not the differences between written and oral forms of life narrative be given greater weight? The second asks whether oral historians are prepared to abandon the idea that there is a conscious 'self' capable of reflecting upon experience and critiquing public and private discourses or (to use Dawson's term) 'cultural imaginaries'.

Roper's conclusions regarding the processes of memory are based upon two written documents, not oral histories. However, there are differences between the fixed, literary written form of life narrative, and the fluid, interactive and often more ambivalent dialogue that is generated in the oral history interview. All oral narratives are spoken with an audience in mind, but reminiscing with one's contemporaries (the 'particular publics' of Dawson and Thomson), writing an autobiography, and responding to an oral historian are all very different mnemonic contexts.<sup>34</sup> While the oral history interviewer undoubtedly influences the narrative outcome through engagement with the interviewee, the nature of the dialogue between an interviewer and interviewee is not the same as that within a cohesive social group such as a family, where competing memories jostle for dominance. The interviewer usually does not share the same past, and in many contexts there may be less personal constraint on what may, or may not, be said.

An example of the relative candour within an oral history interview was noted by Alistair Thomson in *Anzac Memories*, when he wrote of one of his interviewees: '...his remembering was reflective and discursive, and sometimes self-questioning. He decided that he should tell me stories that he preferred not to relate to other audiences or to dwell upon when he was alone....'<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, a narration that seemingly draws upon a conventional 'cultural script' may be more subversive than is at first apparent. For example, following an oral history interview with an 'ordinary' Italian American 'housewife', Susan Ostrov Weisser concluded that the interviewee almost 'effaced' herself in the initial spontaneous narrative, submerging herself within a conventional family story.<sup>36</sup> But through an insightful analysis of the ways in which the words 'but', and 'just' were used within the narrative, Weisser came to see how her interviewee mediated the gender constraints and expectations of her life:

As the first audience for Mrs F's text, and later one of her reader interpreters, I came to stand before it not with an authority over its interpretation that would foreclose or exhaust its multiple meanings, but with a certain humility, admiration, and, eventually, sympathy. For me the ingenuity (*not* ingenuousness or disingenuousness) of Mrs F's narrative is the way in which it allows for, but also contains, a multiplicity of positions that are contradictory, yet also permits a certain fluidity of identity within the constraints of her gender, ethnicity, and class.<sup>37</sup>

Oral histories are works in progress, as individuals cognitively and emotionally grapple with the contradic-

tions and complexities of their lives. Raymond Williams, whose writings laid the foundations of modern cultural history, placed great emphasis upon the active nature of consciousness and the dynamic relationship between inherited culture and the individual mind:

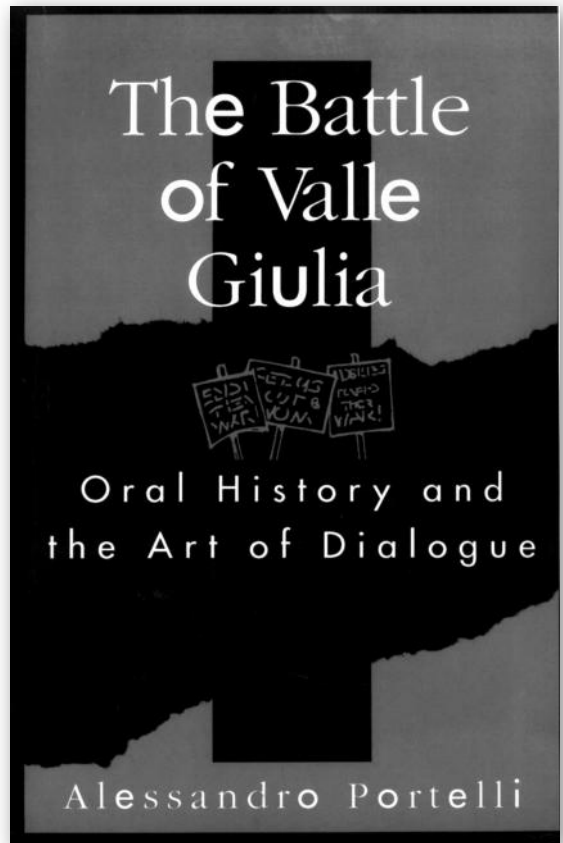
The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. The making of a mind is, first, the slow learning of shapes, purposes, and meanings, so that work, observation and communication are possible. Then, second, but equal in importance, is the testing of these in experience, the making of new observations, comparisons, and meanings.... These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative....<sup>38</sup>

Williams describes the making of human consciousness as a creative, active and reflexive process. Thirty years later Luisa Passerini made similar points in her path-breaking article on working-class memories of Fascism. Individual subjectivity, Passerini argued, derived from the interaction between inherited socialisation and the 'capacity for self-reflection' and critique.<sup>39</sup> In his review of collective memory studies, Kansteiner concedes that 'more conventional analyses of the lives and deeds of politicians, artists and intellectuals reveal how individuals have negotiated and tested the limits of ... inherited perceptions of the past. Almost by definition these approaches pay tribute to and respect the creative energy of individuals.'<sup>40</sup> Do oral historians now believe that the capacity to engage critically and constructively with inherited ideas and values is confined to these elites? If so, the field has indeed made a paradigmatic shift from the concerns and values that led to its growth and development in the 1960s.

### Individual remembering

Are individual memories insignificant, as cultural theorists often suggest, interested as they are in the dominant, public affirmations of memory? Can individual memories challenge dominant narratives, such as those of the nation state for example? In practice, individual and collective memories are often in tension, and the recollections of individuals frequently challenge the construction of partial accounts designed primarily to achieve collective unity. Let us take just one example from oral history to address these issues. In *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, Alessandro Portelli explored a particularly violent incident during the Second World War, and he compared the memories of Italian anti-Fascist partisans to the dominant public interpretations of these events that emerged in the postwar years.<sup>41</sup> The incident took place as follows. On 10 March 1944 Fascists from Rieti were sent to the small town of Poggio Bustone to find draft resisters for the army, and to arrest political dissenters; a partisan group returned to the town and in the ensuing battle the Fascists were killed.

Portelli's account of the Battle of Poggio Bustone illustrates a number of issues we have been discussing. The group of partisans fit Halbwachs' definition of the



memory of a social group in continuing contact. Here both individual and collective remembering reveals memory as a site of cultural conflict. First of all, accounts of the event are fragmented and contradictory, particularly on the key issue of where the Fascists were killed. Were they killed by partisans inside the house in which they were barricaded, or as they surrendered outside?<sup>42</sup> The narratives are also shaped by imaginative dimensions of epic and myth, which Portelli argues provides insights into the real meaning of these stories. 'What these contradictory and symbolic narratives may be covering up', he suggests 'is less what the partisans did than what they felt: they need to justify not the killing of the Fascists in battle, but the rage, the hatred, the desire to kill them that they carried inside them....'<sup>43</sup> These stories reflect the personal struggle to reconcile conflicting values in war and peace.

The partisan accounts of the battle of Poggio Bustone also have profound implications for national narratives of the past. In post-war Italy, Portelli reminds us, the Resistance was perceived as the 'foundation of the Italian republican democracy', and patriotic and heroic narratives were 'cleansed' of violence in the partisan struggle. Those who had taken part, however, rejected the official discourse, and:

...tried to make space for violence in their narratives – to justify it as a necessity of the times, sometimes to redeem

it as revolutionary value.... they also tried to rescue the memory of the Resistance as class war and civil war from under the suffocating white-wash of the exclusively patriotic war.

Alessandro Portelli concludes that the participants are, 'if we listen and try to understand, more articulate and credible historians than those professional writers and administrators of history who constructed the myth of a domesticated, pacified, almost nonviolent Resistance....'<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Contemporary oral history interpretive approaches are converging with the theoretical direction of cultural theorists writing on collective memory. That is, the social, discursive and psychological structures of remembering have led both groups of historians to minimise (or even discard) the value of individual memory. I would not wish to deny the valuable insights into the cultural construction of memory and the social context of remembering developed over the past twenty years or more. But surely the interesting issue is not that individuals draw upon contemporary cultural discourses to make sense of their lives, but *which* ones, and *why*. Psychoanalytic theories are one way

some oral historians have chosen to answer these questions, but as Joanna Bourke points out, 'too often, psychoanalytical explanations for emotional responses emerge out of the model itself.'<sup>45</sup>

Oral historians need to re-assert the value of individual remembering, and the capacity of the conscious self to contest and critique cultural scripts or discourses. Rather than seeking to fit oral narratives to pre-existing cultural representations or psychoanalytic templates, would it not be more fruitful for oral historians to explore those points of conflict and rupture in people's lives that create confrontations with discourses of power? As Alessandro Portelli pointed out some time ago, oral history allows us access to the range of 'expressive possibilities' within a given society or time.<sup>46</sup> This requires that we remain open to the richness and variety of individual consciousness. We are uniquely placed to investigate ways in which individuals negotiate competing ideas or beliefs, or find spaces within or between dominant discourses. In *The Cheese and the Worms*, Carlo Ginzberg revealed the imaginative and eccentric world-view of Menocchio, a sixteenth-century Italian miller. The miller of Friuli transformed historians' understanding of the expressive possibilities within sixteenth-century peasant culture.<sup>47</sup> What would oral historians make of a contemporary Menocchio?

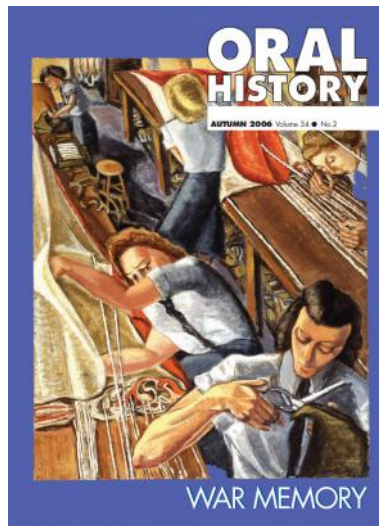
## NOTES

I would like to thank Alistair Thomson for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

1. Michael Roper, 'Oral History', in Brian Brivati, Julia Buxton and Anthony Seldon (eds), *The Contemporary History Handbook*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996, p347.
2. A discourse is 'a more or less coherent body of statements that can be analysed using approaches deriving from linguistics, and underlying which is a particular view of the world'. See Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, London: Arnold, 2000, p 212.
3. Jill Kerr Conway, *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography*, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1998, p 6.
4. TG Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper (eds), *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, London: Routledge, 2000, p34.
5. See, for example, David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol 1: *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, London: Verso, 1994; Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, 3 vols, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-98; Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, New York: Routledge, 1995; Tony Barta (ed), *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*, Westport: Praeger, 1998.
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11. Samuel Hynes, 'Personal Narratives and Commemoration', in Winter and Sivan, 1999, p 206.
12. Jay Winter, 'Film and the Matrix of Memory', *The American Historical Review*, vol 106, no 3, 2001, p 860.
13. Michael Schudson, 'Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory', in Daniel Schacter (ed), *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp 346-47.
14. Kansteiner, 2002, p 185. It should be noted that Kansteiner's references, while reflecting an otherwise admirable breadth of research, contain not one significant contemporary text by an oral historian.
15. Nancy Wood, *Vectors of memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe*, Oxford: Berg, 1999, p 2.
16. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, 'Setting the framework', in Winter and Sivan, 1999, pp 6, 10.
17. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, translated by Francis J Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter, New York: Harper and Row, 1980. Halbwachs' major work, *La Memoire collective*, originally published in 1950 (after his death in Buchenwald), was translated into English in 1980.
18. Assman, 1995, p 125.
19. Halbwachs, 1980, p 51.
20. Halbwachs, 1980, pp 25, 48, 43, 31.
21. Peter Burke, 'History as Social Memory', in Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997, p 55.
22. James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p ix.

23. For examples, see the following: Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths We Live By*, London: Routledge, 1990; Marie-Francoise Chanfrault-Duchet, 'Narrative Structures, Social Models, and Symbolic Representation in the Life Story', in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, New York: Routledge, 1991; Alistair Thomson, 'Anzac memories: putting popular memory theory into practice in Australia', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998.
24. Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.
25. Summerfield, 1998, p 252.
26. Michael Roper, 'Re-remembering the Soldier Hero: the Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War', *History Workshop Journal*, no 50, 2000, p 183.
27. Anzac is the acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps.
28. Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*, London: Routledge, 1994, p 23.
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31. Thomson, 1994, p 10.
32. Dawson, 1994, chapter 2.
33. Roper, 2000, pp 183-4, 200-1.
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35. Thomson, 1994, p 17.
36. See Susan Ostrov Weisser, "'What Kind of Life Have I Got?'" Gender in the Life Story of an "Ordinary" Woman', in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds), *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp 249-270.
37. Weisser, 1996, p 267.
38. Raymond Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary', reprinted in A Gray and J McGuigan (eds), *Studying Culture: an introductory reader*, London: Edward Arnold, 1993, pp 5-6. See Martin Hewitt, 'Raymond Williams (1921-1988)', in Kelly Boyd (ed), *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, 2 vols, London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999, p 1304.
39. Luisa Passerini, 'Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism: work in progress', *History Workshop Journal*, no 8, 1979, p 104.
40. Kansteiner, 2002, p 196.
41. Alessandro Portelli, 'The Battle of Poggio Bustone', in *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
42. Portelli, 1997, p 132.
43. Portelli, 1997, p 135.
44. Portelli, 1997, p 139.
45. See Joanna Bourke, 'Fear and Anxiety: Writing about Emotion in Modern History', *History Workshop Journal*, no 55, 2003, pp 111-133, for further discussion about history and psychoanalytic interpretations of emotion.
46. Alessandro Portelli, 'Narrative Form in Autobiography and Oral History', in *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, p 86.
47. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, London: Penguin, [1976] 1992. 'In the late sixteenth century, a self-taught but intellectually voracious Italian miller called Menocchio drew on books, a sense of social injustice and a rich imagination to produce his own startlingly eccentric cosmology.'





# So much depends on a red bus, or, innocent victims of the liberating gun

by Alessandro Portelli

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Like much of my work, the making of this paper has been a long work in progress, developed through a number of versions and revisions, in Italian, Spanish, and English, and reflecting in almost real time my relationship to dramatic current events. However, the original occasion was a

conference at Ohio State University on "Going Native". Thus, while the emotions that generated it had to do with the ongoing wars and the memory and the memory of memory of past ones (and how a mutilated memory of past wars legitimated new ones), the methodological

question had to do with positioning: we can take the "native" point of view but do not understand its meaning view unless we are also able to look at it from a distance. In a way, it was also a reply to the anti-oral history mantra – "you can't do history only with oral sources" – which of course no one

really does; indeed, much of the power and meaning of oral sources does not come from taking them at face values but from the dialogue and confrontation with other narratives. Thus, we recognise the importance and meaning of the "wrong" narratives in which

survivors blame the destruction of their homes and neighbourhoods not on the Allies but on the Germans, precisely because we know that

they are "wrong". The task of "oral historians" ultimately lies in being in two places at once, connecting and interrogating different levels and forms of

narrative (including Karl Vonnegut, William Carlos Williams, even *The Merchant of Venice* – at the time I was still a professor of literature), and navigating, as it

were, the middle ground between history and memory, documents and imagination, writing and orality, and the airplane and the red bus.

**Alessandro Portelli**

**Abstract:** The essay looks at contemporary descriptions of aerial warfare as a metaphor for the 'top-down' and 'from-the-bottom-up' perceptions and representations of history and argues that the task of oral history is to reconnect the two views and explore the ground in between. It exemplifies this approach by an exploration of the memory of bombardments in Italy (mainly Rome and Terni) and of its ambiguities: for instance, many narrators have a hard time recognising that their homes and neighbourhoods were destroyed by those who they have learned to designate as 'liberators', rather than by their Nazi and Fascist oppressors. The article also compares this memory with journalistic, historical and literary discussions of aerial warfare, including the wars in Kosovo and Iraq as well as the bombing of Dresden.

**Keywords:** aerial bombardment, World War Two, Italy, memory

So much depends  
Upon

A red wheel  
Barrow

Glazed with rain  
Water

Beside the white  
Chickens  
(William Carlos Williams)

Innocent victims  
Of the liberating gun  
June 6, 1944  
Proietti Cleofe  
Proietti Maddalena  
(plaque in via San Vittorino, Rome)<sup>1</sup>

### Air-to-earth

I was reminded of William Carlos Williams's somewhat cryptic poem by a news item in *la Repubblica* on 1 May, 1999: 'The Djakovica – Pec – Podgorica express [was] an old red bus'. As it travelled between Kosovo and Montenegro on 1 May, 1999, it was hit by a Nato missile and about forty passengers were burned alive inside. 'Its bright colour did not suffice to make the bus visible to Nato pilots. As a spokesperson said about the Lyzane accident, from the altitude the pilots are at, if they concentrated on a bus they would lose sight of their targets'.<sup>2</sup>

This is not a paper about the war, but rather about historical methodology, the fieldwork experience, and the grammar of memory. Aerial warfare is both a tragic fact of life and history, and is the materialisation of some of the metaphors so commonly used in literature, anthropology and history that we hardly recognise them as metaphors:

discourse 'from above' and 'from below', history 'from the top down' and 'from the bottom up', internal and external 'point of view', the 'etic' and the 'emic, and so forth. It all becomes terribly literal when world history is dropped on a local bus in the shape of a missile.

The top down, outside, emic view from above possesses a *superior* (literally, higher) *power* to perceive the global context, the general picture. The bird's eye or bomber's radar view of the world sees farther, and retains the whole-some detachment, the capacity for abstraction, the rational ability to concentrate on the *objective* and the relevant (the target) and dismiss the irrelevant (the bus) that is so necessary to science. Thus, air photographs of the air raids on Rome, 19 July, 1943 (which I will use here as my main reference) show the city as an agglomerate of buildings, but with no discernible human presence: which makes sense, since the buildings, not the humans, are the stated object of the discourse of the raid. 'I didn't see much of the city at all as I recall', says a British airman who participated in the raids over Dresden: 'I'm sorry I can't tell you more, but when you're in that kind of a situation you're not observing a lot of things'.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the lower (literally, *inferior*) point of view is narrowly focused, irretrievably bound to the detail, to the concrete – shall we say, down-to-earth, grassroots – immediacy of material experience, and is inevitably twisted into and limited by the personal, emotional identification and involvement. The Argentinean writer Rodolfo Walsh, later murdered by the military regime, put it perhaps a bit too categorically in his *Operación Masacre*: 'the ideas of the common people [are] generally accurate in what concerns concrete and tangible things, vague or arbitrary in other respects'. We shall see that it isn't always this way. Yet, he has a point. The other point, of course, is that our culture tends to prize the general and the abstract over the concrete and the tangible.<sup>4</sup>

Neither, however, is more authentic than the other, and neither functions correctly without the other. Indeed, global history from above ignores local history and native point of view from below to its own risk – as well as to the risk of those below. Today's smart weapons are infallibly directed towards their surgical targets – provided, however, that their way between the sky and the earth be absolutely clear of interfering detail. As another Nato spokesman explained, if they run into clouds – or even into the dust close to the ground raised by earlier smart bombs – their laser beam gets thrown off course and they may wind up in another country altogether – like the smart bomb that destroyed an apartment house in the outskirts of Sofia, Bulgaria, a hundred miles away.<sup>5</sup> Or, as in Luzane and earlier in Grdelica Klisura, you may actually hit the target – a bridge – and write off as non-pertinent, 'collateral' damage the bus or the train that may just then find itself between the bridge and the bomb.<sup>6</sup> When an intelligent bomb fell on a bus at the Kandahar city gate, on 25 October, 2001, ten to twenty passengers died.<sup>7</sup> A number of us historians, critics, cultural analysts must have had the same experience in our work: we see much and we see far, but the messy matter of everyday life keeps getting in the way of our concepts and we miss the red bus. Fortunately, with no immediate casualties other than the value of what we do.

On the other hand, we may become so enamoured of the actual and the concrete that our perception becomes restricted to what is visible and recognisable from the ground level. We see the immediate experience, the personal stories, and lose sight of the global processes that impact on them. We see the bomb fall on the bus, and fail to recognise, or even to question, who dropped it and why.

Oral history, in essence, is an attempt to re-connect the local, native point of view from below and the global, scientific point of view from above: to contextualise the local, and to enable the global to recognise it. Oral history, then, brings history from above and history from below into the same text – as it were, to the negotiating table – creating an equal dialogue between the historians' awareness of broad spatial and temporal patterns, and the local narrator's closely focused personal narrative.

### Understandable emotions

In his excellent book on the bombing of Dresden, Frederick Taylor describes how after the firestorm created in the city centre by the first raid, successive raids hit wider and wider areas, extending to the outskirts where the inhabitants of the centre had sought refuge. A local witness observed that, as the bombs seemed to follow their route of escape, they 'really felt as if they were coming in for special persecution'. 'Of course they were not', Taylor comments: 'But when an area is subjected to intense attack, terrified individuals understandably take it personally'.<sup>8</sup>

Bombardments are impersonal; bombarded people, however, die *personally*. If a missile falls on a red bus, the damage to the passengers may be collateral to the strategist, but is as central as it comes to them. Both points of view are correct in their way, and the space between them – the impersonal view from above, the personal anger and

pain from below – is the space of the ultimate contradiction of war.

The key word in Taylor's passage, however, is 'understandably'. Top-down discourse can envelop the experience of those below in an irritating paternalistic comprehension: 'The sense that the enemy aircraft are "following" you, or have "picked you out" is a strong human instinct'. As a US aircraft carrier officer explained, 'a 2000 lb [fragmentation] bomb, no matter where you drop it, is a significant emotional event for anyone within a square mile'.<sup>9</sup> This statement is revealing not only because of its deadpan understatement, but also because of the way it reduces the massacre down to an exclusively local perspective: the event is not even emotionally, let alone historically, relevant outside the square mile immediately concerned. We understand their emotions, precisely because we are above them (they are *terrified*; we, of course, are not), because we possess broader horizons, and retain the monopoly of rationality whereas they are ruled by instinct.

Perhaps the best metaphoric treatment of this relationship is to be found in a passage from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*. Billy Pilgrim, the narrator, witnessed the fire bombing of Dresden from below, as an American prisoner of war. Later in life he suffers from brain concussion in an air crash, and is taken to a hospital, in a near-vegetable state. He shares a room with Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, a Harvard professor of history and the author of a twenty-seven volume history of the United States Air Corps in World War Two. Graphically, Billy is lying on a low cot next to Rumfoord's taller bed. 'There was almost nothing in the twenty-seven volumes about the Dresden raid, even though it had been such a howling success', writes Vonnegut.<sup>10</sup> At this point, however, as he prepares to condense his work in a one-volume edition, he thinks of making some changes: 'Americans have finally heard about Dresden', he says; 'So I've got to put something about it in my book'.

'It was now that Billy Pilgrim spoke up intelligently. "I was there", he said'.

The work of oral history is to connect the twenty-seven volume official history and the immediacy of the 'I was there' experience. An oral historian needs to be able to see both, and to chart the space between. We must make those above aware of the meaning of their actions below; and we must strive to make those below aware of the global causes and contexts of what is happening to them. This is not impossible: after all, though we tend to credit those below only with emotions, yet the Billy Pilgrims of this world speak also 'intelligently'.

Yet, it is no easy task. In the first place, history from above will just not listen: 'Now, with Billy Pilgrim speaking clearly and to the point, Rumfoord's ears wanted to treat the words as a foreign language that was not worth learning: "He's simply echoing things we say... He's got echolalia now..."' Rumfoord's attitude is reminiscent of the approach to cultures that sees subaltern cultures as nothing but ill-understood attempts to imitate cultural traits 'descended' from higher cultures.<sup>11</sup> Thus, they are not worth listening to in any case: as Billy insists, 'Rumfoord sighed impatiently... "Must we talk about it now?"...'

He had heard. He didn't believe'.

In the second place, the narrative from below easily submits to the higher reasons of the story from above: 'It *had* to be done... that's war', explains Rumfoord; and Billy Pilgrim responds, 'I know... I'm not complaining... It was all right'. Hegemony has done its office.

Once the hierarchies of meaning have been re-established, Professor Rumfoord can afford, like Taylor and the US aircraft carrier officer, his own paternalistic moment. While he could not hear when the voice from below spoke *intelligently, clearly and to the point*, he is ready to grant its human emotions:

'It must have been hell on the ground'.

'It was', said Billy Pilgrim.

It is a fleeting moment: in the end, the emotions that really count are not those of the bombarded, but those of the bombardiers: 'Pity the men who had to *do* it'.

Professor Rumfoord's conclusion once again condescends to the feelings below; it possesses, however, an uncanny precision, that will be our guide for the rest of this paper: 'You must have had mixed feelings, there on the ground'.<sup>12</sup>

### Mixed feelings

Mixed feelings is a very good term for the divisions and ambivalence in the perception and memory of the bombardments in Italy. In a recent article, the writer Alberto Arbasino recollects:

We would gaze down from the hills to the fires of the British bombardments that exterminated our civilians in Milan and Genoa – poor people who couldn't afford to leave town to seek refuge in the countryside.

Among our most authoritative neighbours, some claimed that more and more victims were needed in order to finally defeat the Duce.

Others kept telling us that for the little old women who were dying it was an heroic honour to die on the front line for the homeland.<sup>13</sup>

What Arbasino describes is still a view from above, from the hills toward the bombed plain, couched in a variety of political discourse (ironically endowed with authority and/or heroics), for which, however, bombardments remain a political good – a help to the anti-Fascist struggle for some, a patriotic sacrifice for others. Only another view 'from below' – the remembered perception of the child narrator – includes the concrete, tangible experience of 'little old ladies' below.

Yet, he describes accurately the political ambivalence with which Italy perceived the allied bombings. This ambivalence is rooted both in the conflict between Fascists and the Resistance in 1943-45, and, most importantly, in the ambivalence of Italy's historical role as both a perpetrator and a victim of bombardments. In World War Two, Italy had been among the aggressors. Mussolini had publicly exulted about the carpet bombing of Coventry, creating that horrible Fascist addition to the dictionary, the verb 'conventrize'. Earlier, Italian troops had participated in the Spanish civil war and assisted in the destruction of

Guernica; the Italian colonial invasion had used gas and fragmentation bombs on Ethiopia. Indeed, the first bombs ever dropped from an airplane were those dropped by the Italian lieutenant Giulio Cavotti on the oases of Tagiuyra and Ain Zara, during the Italian invasion of Lybia.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the perfect expression for this ambivalence is the oxymoronic plaque cited in the epigraph to this essay: 'innocent victims of the liberating gun'. I will return later to the oxymoron of the liberating gun<sup>15</sup>; for a moment, here, let us consider the concept of 'innocent victims'. Victims are intrinsically innocent and feminized, like Arbasino's 'little old women'; in what sense, however, were Cleofe and Maddalena Proietti 'innocent'? Of course, they were civilians, not military personnel; the war was probably not their idea in the first place; on the other hand, the Allied bombardments are the response to an Italian aggression. Cleofe and Maddalena Proietti, then, are *personally* innocent (though, who knows, they may have lent consent or indifference to the Fascist regime and to the war); yet, they are 'guilty' as Italians, and suffer a death sentence without benefit of trial, for the crimes of the regime and the state.

On the ancient walls that encircle San Lorenzo, the Roman neighbourhood hit by the disastrous raid of 19 July, 1943, that killed almost 2,000 people, a huge plaque commemorates the victims of World War One. Next to it, more recent ones commemorate the dead of 1943. One, placed by Anpi (the association of the veterans of the Resistance), reads: 'In memory of the dead from the bombardment of July 1943, victims of the Fascist war'. Underneath, smaller plaques, placed mainly by families and neighbours, in remembrance of individual victims of the war and of the bombardments. One, very similar to the *ex voto* hung by the faithful at Catholic shrines, is to the memory of 'Paolo Morganti / who died on 19 July, 1943./ Also for your sake / no to Nato'. Both stones express the tension of memory: for the partisans, the dead are victims of Fascism; the stone for Paolo Morganti, instead, voices the hostility toward the powers that materially carried out the mass killing. Both signs share a rejection of war. The partisan stone, however, is an act of commemoration, and looks to the memory of the past war; Paolo Morganti's *ex voto*, with its reference to Nato, looks ahead, toward possible wars of the future. And of our present.

### On the ground: shambles

*Maria Pia Galloni.* Three hours of bombing and my mother, who when the raids came used to be filled with terror, she'd be ill and lose her mind, yet that day – clearly, the Lord helps you, gives you a higher strength – and my mother [kept her cool]. From the [shelter in the] cellar, she climbed up to the third floor to ring my aunt – 'Jole, don't worry, soon as we can move we're coming to get you'. But who could go out into that shambles? And seeing people carried in all kinds of state into the dooryard of our building, dumped in the floor, some brought in from outside, you saw the people that were hit by the bombardment out in the street.

Anyway, soon as the raid was over, three hours later, we went upstairs to put on our shoes, because we had





The bombardment of San Lorenzo, Rome, in 1943. See [http://www.vivisanlorenzo.it/bombardamenti\\_del\\_19\\_luglio\\_1943\\_a\\_san\\_lorenzo.htm](http://www.vivisanlorenzo.it/bombardamenti_del_19_luglio_1943_a_san_lorenzo.htm)

run to the shelter without stopping to put them on. And I remember my new shoes. My new shoes, and out we go from this cellar and the people in the dooryard filled with wounded, with dead, it didn't make sense. We start out walking, we go through via dei Reti by the juvenile jail, and there were all these children, these young people, mountains of screams, fallen buildings and I remember, as we trod on all these things, a dead horse, it still makes me ill, the sight of that dead horse.<sup>16</sup>

On the ground, it didn't make sense (*non si capiva*, literally: one couldn't understand). Maria Pia Galloni makes eloquent use of a recurring metaphor of the memory of bombardments: *macello*, an Italian word that stands both literally for a slaughterhouse and metaphorically for a total loss of order and form – a shambles. It is such a common metaphor for confusion, chaos and mass death that is hardly even recognized as such: 'What happened here was a shambles. All dead, my dear child. Via Fanfulla da Lodi was a disaster, everything collapsed, the fear, you couldn't

get through because to get through you'd have to step over the dead'.<sup>17</sup> The partisan Rosario Bentivegna, a medical student at the time, uses the same image to describe the 'heart-rending' scene around the University hospital: 'it was the image, the sequel, of the shambles into which I had immersed my hands a few minutes earlier' trying to treat the wounded.<sup>18</sup>

In Maria Pia Galloni's narrative, however, the shambles is both metaphorical ('who could go out into that shambles?') and literal, materialized in the recurring image of the dead horse. In Terni, another heavily bombed town not far from Rome, Giovanni Nardi, an anarchist tailor, recalled: 'Along the old main street, the day after, as I went outside – how many dead, damn it! Girls, dogs, dead, lying there, killed'.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, the death of animals is the extreme measure of the killing of innocent beings; on the other, the metonymic connection between humans and animals suggests that the massacre erases all distinctions, that human beings under the bombs are no longer entirely human but rather animals or things: 'As I

walked on via Casilina, it was full of dead people like scraps of paper thrown away...'<sup>20</sup>; 'Then during the war they peppered via Casilina, via Prenestina, the old Roman roads, with bombs. I remember that out there, near the San Felice church, a horse was hit. Soon as this horse fell, all the people, with knives, cutting out pieces of meat, because... there was so much hunger...'<sup>21</sup>; '...capsized trams, dead horses, and the mutilated bodies of the victims of the bombardment'.<sup>22</sup> In May, 1999, with no war supposedly going on, a US missile hit a shepherds' village near Mossul, in Iraq, 'killing a whole family of seven people and 200 sheep'.<sup>23</sup>

Again: 'Along the street, dead horses there were, glass, shards, it was a disaster';<sup>24</sup> 'There was some of everything, rubble, you couldn't walk, and I remember a carriage with its horses all broken, all cut, and I also saw the driver broken up';<sup>25</sup> 'On the Tiburtino bridge, I saw a horse with its legs sticking up in the air, squirting blood, squirting blood all over. It had been strafed. I think by Clark Gable, because Clark Gable was on those planes';<sup>26</sup> 'Along via Prenestina, dead bodies and animals, horses all gutted out, and my poor dad kept telling my mother, "look away", and she'd turn one way and saw corpses, she'd look the other way and saw animals, and so on. This was the first bombardment in Rome';<sup>27</sup> 'I happened to be in this tavern, lots of people, near Gondrand, the transport firm that used horses, and there were dead horses on the ground, they still used horses for transport in those days'.<sup>28</sup>

No wonder the definitive novel on the vision of bombardments from below is called *Slaughterhouse 5*. In Mossul, Rome, Milan, Terni, Dresden, men, sheep, women, horses, dogs, children are slaughtered together, amalgamated in a general crisis of distinctions and reason:

*Manlio Tosti*. A wall fell on him, and there was a gap you could go in through, and the bomb fell and cut off his head. Later, we were working on the site and trying to clean up a little, and we found him, his head was missing and I was told later that it was found but it wasn't there when I saw him, so I said to myself, 'They were right, we are meat to the slaughter. But I didn't accept it!' You heard it all the time, someone saying, 'We're meat to the slaughter' And it was right, we were meat to the slaughter, more of a slaughter than that, headless, the wall fell on top of him, then we told his wife and what happened happened.<sup>29</sup>

## The heritage of fascism and the broken-hearted pilot

No one, however, is satisfied with the mere contemplation of chaos and shambles. Memory is more than a record of the experience and an archive of data; rather, it functions as an incessant work of interpretation and reinterpretation, and of organization of meanings. This labour of memory is well represented by two 'texts' from the bombed neighbourhood of San Lorenzo. One is about historical memory and political conscience; the other, folklore and imagination. One is probably a male expression, the other female.

The first of these two texts is a huge hand-made graffiti painted on the exposed inner wall of a bombed building,

that read: 'Legacy of Fascism' ('Eredità del fascismo'). It was later erased, in what seems an apt metaphor for the whitewashing of memory, as the neighbourhood became more gentrified, touristy, and respectable. The graffiti was a signal example of how street-level, rank-and-file vision can rise to a clear understanding of the broad historical patterns that determine the lived experience; it was the expression of the political culture and historical memory of a working-class neighbourhood whose identity has long been founded on its resistance, from the very beginning, to the Fascist regime.<sup>30</sup> The people of San Lorenzo were able to conjugate the tangible and concrete experience with the more abstract, distant, political and historical causes. San Lorenzo knew who the real enemy was, and that sign on the wall was a judgment on the responsibilities of Fascism:

*Luciano Pizzoli*. When I was six, my thought was that there was a war on, and these were the consequences of war (as a childhood memory). The grownups said that this was a great tragedy to which we had been brought by Fascism. Others distanced themselves because even though they might have supported Fascism, they had said no to the war from the start. By the time I was thirteen or fourteen, I remember those times and even though I didn't understand what they said, yet within a few years I understood what they meant, what they thought.<sup>31</sup>

The graffiti is an example of that strand of memory and political orientation that saw Allied bombs as a means to hasten the end of the war and the fall of Fascism. This attitude was eloquently voiced by another graffiti on the walls of Rome during the war: 'Better the Americans on our heads than Mussolini on our balls'.<sup>32</sup> In Terni, another red working-class town, most narrators insisted on the responsibility of Fascism for the slaughter of the war. The belief that bombs shortened the war was widespread at the time. The historian and partisan Claudio Pavone (the author of the definitive book on the Resistance)<sup>33</sup>, told me several times in conversations and seminars that this was the prevalent attitude among the partisans in Milan. More recently, writing about the memory of the war in Milan and Lombardy, the historian Francesca Valtulina reports narratives of massacres and disasters but mentions no judgment, either of responsibility or of gratitude, toward the Allies or the Fascists.<sup>34</sup>

The other text is a story. Cesare De Simone, in his book on the bombardments in Rome tells it this way: 'The women [of San Lorenzo] also tell about a Negro pilot whose bomb hit a shelter and many people died; when he comes in from his mission and learns what happened, he dies of a broken heart'.<sup>35</sup>

The meaning is clear: if they knew what they were doing, it would break their hearts. Indeed, some believe that they could not know because they were not fully conscious of their actions. Gianfranco Capozio, a college professor, recalls: 'My father always told me that on Colle Oppio, I don't know if you know about this, an American plane, the pilot was drunk, and it lit upon a hospital. It hit

there, while they were doing surgery. Drunk, he drove his plane right into this hospital, he killed them all. Anyway, this is what my father told me, I didn't hear about it myself'. 'In war, when they send you on a mission, they send you out half drunk so you don't realize much. Our people were the same too, you know'?<sup>36</sup>

A variant of the story of the broken-hearted pilot was emailed to me by Mirella Sartori, a teacher, who heard it from her mother. Once again, the line of transmission is matrilineal; and the story focuses about the most maternal place of all, a maternity clinic:<sup>37</sup>

Well, my mama [...] remembers when during World War Two the Americans bombed the open city of Rome.<sup>38</sup> On the Verano cemetery – she explains, because they thought there were German bases in it. A 'Bepi' or 'Pippo',<sup>39</sup> an Italian-American pilot of a B29 (which the Italians called a flying fortress; I don't know whether the Americans did, too) dropped its bombs like all the rest. But it was one of his, perhaps, that fell on the Sant'Anna hospital and killed some people. All over the world, Saint Anne's hospitals are maternity clinics, and so was the one in Rome, not far from San Lorenzo. Somehow, our Pippo learned about it as he returned to his airport in Sardinia [...]. It seems that this guy had to be sent home soon afterwards, for treatment, because he couldn't deal with the remorse for being responsible for the deaths of mothers and babies.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the neighbourhood of San Lorenzo produced two narratives about the air raids: a narrative of political consciousness, the 'heritage of Fascism'; and a narrative of resentment, the drunkenness and guilt of the bombers. However, as in Billy Pilgrim's conversation with Professor Rumfoord only one statement could be publicly articulated, as part of the narrative of national liberation, while the statement of resentment was censored or ironed out.

There is a sharp contradiction between these two narratives: the former recognizes the historical meaning and sense of the bombardment (its message is the same as that of the Anpi plaque on the Roman wall); the latter couches it in terms of madness, drunkenness, nonsense. The problem is how we keep these stories together, how we recognize that they are part of the same social context, of the same culture. Indeed, as Claude Levi Strauss's analysis of myth tells us, the power to deal with irreconcilable contradictions is precisely what keeps a culture working. A culture, we might say, is a machine that allows us to reconcile the irreconcilable and to live with ambivalence.

On the other hand, cultural hegemony functions precisely by breaking this delicate balance. All the weight of power is thrown on one side of the dilemma, which becomes the only legitimate one, while the other is sunk into silence and irrelevance.<sup>41</sup> This is the case also with the two narratives from San Lorenzo: 'legacy of Fascism' is recognized as a correct and mature expression of political consciousness, while the 'broken-hearted [or drunk] pilot' is relegated to the emotional subordination of folklore (and women).

## Who was bombing you?

Maggiorina Mattioli, an old lady from Terni, spoke at length about the war, the bombardments, the loss and damages she suffered along with her family and neighbourhood, for which she firmly blamed the Fascists. Something, however, must have sounded strange, because for the first time I asked a question that I had taken for granted before: 'Who was bombing you?' The response was startling: she stuttered, 'the Fasc... those who were bombing us'. She could literally not bring herself to utter what she knew: that the Fascists were responsible for the war and for the bombardments, but those who destroyed her city and her home were others.<sup>42</sup>

Maggiorina Mattioli's stutter and tautology are the sign of an implicit difficulty in the memory of individuals who have a hard time dealing with contradictions they cannot articulate, expressing feelings and resentments that have no legitimacy in public discourse. I asked the question, 'who was bombing you', more often from then on, and frequently met with aphasia, silence, contradiction: 'It was the Fascists – I mean, the Allies'; 'What do I know about aeronautics – It was the Germans, I guess'; 'I don't know, the bolts struck from above, but we don't know who it was that bombarded us from the airplanes'; 'Oh, it wasn't our side'.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, this is not 'objectively true' – on the other hand, there is always a meaning in the gaps between memory and 'fact', especially when – as in this case – the error is not an isolated case. The actor and storyteller Ascanio Celestini, who has worked in schools in the periphery of Rome, told me that the belief that Rome was bombed by the Germans is widespread among the children. It is found, however, also in older generations and in coeval memory. Pietro Barrera, a Cabinet head in the Rome Province administration reported that part of the population of Frascati (a town near Rome that was carpet-bombed on 8 September, 1943) thought that the town had been hit by the Germans. The historian Tommaso Baris writes: 'At Piglio (another historically Left-wing town) the people believe that the bombardment of 8 April, 1944, in which ten people lost their lives in the collapse of the church, was in fact a German punishment on the town, following the retaliation of 6 April (for a partisan action)'.<sup>44</sup>

Two factors help shape this uncertainty. First of all, there is a fatalistic perception of the war as destiny, of the bombs as a 'bolt' from above, unleashed by an invisible hand. A local historian describes in rich detail the bombardment that destroyed the town of Pontecorvo, near Cassino, also hitting a nunnery and a church where most of the population had gathered, killing 600 people, on All Saints' day, 1943. His interpretation, however, is couched in verses that describe the event as an 'hellish chaos' brought about by meta-historical, universal 'ungodliness': 'A hellish, glittering chaos \ Broke on us from an ungodly sky \ And the rumble and roar of bombs \ Shook the ancestral walls'.<sup>45</sup>

And then, a short-circuit of memory and conscience: if we blame the Fascists for the disaster, it is logical to surmise that they and their allies were the perpetrators;

the more we identify Fascism and Nazism with evil, the more logical it is to expect that this evil was their doing. This way, we are no longer forced to deal with the fact that it was the 'good guys', 'our side', those with reason and humanity on their side, that destroyed your house and killed your family. How can the gun that kills us be 'liberating'?

In fact, at least one narrator – who systematically refers to the Allies as liberators – has a neat solution for this problem: since at least two areas of the city were hit, she attributes one bombardment to each side. But then, they end up being on the same side...

*Clara Pagliarini.* When they bombed here [in San Lorenzo], it was the Americans; the one on via Prenestina, it was the Germans, not the Americans..

*Incalza.* On via Prenestina?

*Pagliarini.* Yes: here where we are, it was the Americans, the liberators.

*Incalza.* I mean, who bombed via Prenestina?

*Pagliarini.* The Germans, it was, not the Americans.

*Incalza.* How come it was the Americans at San Lorenzo and the Germans on via Prenestina?

*Pagliarini.* Because the Americans and the Germans, used to be allied, and then...<sup>46</sup>

### Why do they kill us?

Tarry a little; there is something else.

This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood.

The words expressly are 'a pound of flesh':...

Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh

Shed thou no blood...

(William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Sc.1)

*Gianfranco Capozio.* And my father, digging nearby, where you could hear, I heard them too, these words – if you don't mind I'll repeat them – of a grandmother with a child that she was trying to protect, then the grandmother died and all you could hear was this child, screaming that he wanted us to get him out. But we got to him too late. I still have this voice, in my ears, in dialect, this child that kept saying, 'it was the Americans, those sons of a bitches', excuse my language, 'it was the Americans, these sons of a bitches'. This little boy. And then he died.

A few blocks away, a seven-year old child, Antonello Branca, was asking his father: 'If they're coming to liberate us, why do they kill us?'<sup>47</sup> This is the crucial, unanswered question, of all 'just wars' fought from the air. The problem of history from above is that it is unable to hear this elementary question. In this way, however, history and politics erase a complex memory steeped in a deep and unvoiced current of resentment and ambiguity.

There are other feelings and attitudes, of course. The partisan Marisa Musu remembers 'the shock, and the horror'; Massimo Prasca, a former Communist official, recalls 'nothing but fear, and the hope they would do as much harm as possible to the Germans'.<sup>48</sup> Prasca's hope is part of the politically correct narrative of gratitude, based on the belief that bombs would bring the war closer to the end. The key word, however, is 'harm to the Germans'. The narrative of resentment, in fact, is based on the awareness that those who suffered weren't only (or even primarily) the occupying army, but also the civilian population, including the pro-Allies majority. Raul Crostella, a steel worker from Terni, explains: 'Whenever I saw a bombardment on a military target, I thought it shortened the war. But you didn't shorten the war by bombing kindergartens, churches, schools, or hospitals'.<sup>49</sup>

*Alberto Sergenti.* Yes, the bombardments, and I must say that in fact the Americans were criminals because they didn't just drop bombs. Here on via Collatina there was a gunpowder plant, they didn't know exactly where, so in order to hit it they covered with bombs all the area from San Lorenzo to Bagni, because they didn't know where it was.<sup>50</sup>

The narrative of resentment, then, thrives on the feeling that bombs fell indiscriminately on military targets and civilian areas, with no respect for human life: 'They dropped it just carelessly, they just bombed. Well, the Americans were no better than the Germans, I guess'.<sup>51</sup> In Alberto Sergenti's version, the image of indiscriminate bombing evokes by contrast the myth of German precision, as if reflecting back on the Germans in the '40s the myth of the 'surgical bombings' in turn-of-the-century wars: 'The Germans drove right to the target, while the Americans didn't, theirs were terrorist bombings, from here to there to hit what was in the middle. If we destroy everything, we'll build it back. This is the Americans' idea. They're cowards, they're not brave at all!'

Sergenti defines as 'terrorist' the indiscriminate killing of civilians, (and, as in much post-September 11 public discourse, associates it with cowardice). The next step, in fact, is the shift from the charge of carelessness and disregard for human life, to the accusation of intentional attack on the civilian population: 'That's what they aimed at: destroying families'; 'The bombing of San Lorenzo, it wasn't a carefully aimed bombardment; it was a bombardment meant to terrorize'.<sup>52</sup> In San Lorenzo, some actually believed that the neighbourhood was hit intentionally, in order to wipe out a 'Red' working-class area.<sup>53</sup>

*Gianfranco Capozio.* Anyway, the Americans, who bombed indiscriminately – those dead in San Lorenzo have only one meaning. Just like the intentional delay of the march from Anzio to Rome – without which the massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine wouldn't have happened. But that's exactly what the Americans wanted – in my personal opinion: they were going to [wait until the Germans would] kill all the Communists, all the resisters, all the Left wingers, kill them



good. Because the Fascists had disappeared, only the Communists were left. They thought, in six months they'll kill most of them; after which, we'll move on to the city.

'Unlike the enemy', said George W. Bush in his speech to the United Nations, 'we seek to minimize – non maximize – the loss of innocent life'. *Minimize*, of course, means that the loss of innocent life is inherent to what we do: the bombs are not *aimed* at civilians, but we already know that they will be hit, and killed.<sup>54</sup> Many narrators are willing to give the benefit of doubt to high-altitude bombings, in which 'errors' and 'collateral damage' may occur. The problem, however, is that not all collateral damage is unintentional: the suffering of the civilian population is one of the unstated aims of aerial warfare, for the purpose of collapsing the enemy's morale and, possibly, inducing the victims to rebel and ask for surrender. As the Jesuit historian Giovanni Sale put it in a recent two-part article:

Of course, Luftwaffe and Bomber Command documents never mention premeditated bombing of civilian targets: the official targets were factories, airfields, harbours, shipyards, important railroad junctions, and so on. However, the military and the politicians were well aware that bombs made no distinction between industries and towns, between shipyards and workers, especially when targets were intentionally defined in generic terms. The primary aim of those attacks, in fact, was to strike as many civilians as possible, in order – as planned by Bomber Command chief, A. Harris – to sap the morale of the civilian population and thus induce it to revolt against National Socialism and Hitler.<sup>55</sup>

Here is the rub: bombing military targets is considered legitimate; killing civilians is always illegitimate. Does the illegitimate (but fully expected) consequence become acceptable in the context of 'legitimate' warfare, or does the bombing of military targets become itself morally questionable when it knowingly entails the death of innocents? Are the civilian deaths the 'drop of blood' to the military target's 'pound of flesh'?<sup>56</sup>

Criticism becomes sharper when considering another form of aerial warfare, the strafing of civilians in the streets by low-flying aircraft, in which intentionality appears to be beyond doubt. The partisan Lucia Ottobriani fought with the Allies on the roads around Rome; however, she recalls: 'I was not afraid [of the planes], but I hated them, because they strafed the people, those poor wretches walking the roads, and I didn't feel it was right'.<sup>57</sup> Alberto Sergenti, again: 'Anyway, when they came to bomb Rome, they strafed the people in the streets; in piazzale Prenestino, people were running [for shelter], and some were hit and some weren't':

*Giuseppe Bolgia*. Around noon, one p.m., they began to strafe the neighbourhood, strafing and bombing. I was playing in the street, it was summer, mother was at home and dad too, he was shaving. Dad was a railway worker, he came out of the house, and they

began to strafe. He took me by the hand, and we crossed the square [to the shelter] and thus we were saved. Mother came out later, because she had been helping a lady who had just delivered a baby. She lost those precious moments – fifteen, twenty minutes – just when the strafing hit, they caught her... my cousin said she saw a lady lying on the ground, it was my mother, dead. We never did find her.

Giuseppe Bolgia's father was later killed by the Nazis in the massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine. 'Who do I blame [for her death]? I blame the Americans, in that case it was the Americans, not the Germans. They, too, did their part'.<sup>58</sup>

### Divided memory

'I mean, you know what they did at Porta Maggiore? They flew low, and all those people... Later, they saved us, but, my God, they got us out of the claws of that other one'. Silvana Corona is one of the few narrators who manage to hold in one sentence both images: the strafers and the liberators. In most cases, one image prevails and erases the other. The memory of liberation forgets the memory of destruction, imputes it to some other agent, or deals with it as a fatal wages of war and a necessary price for liberation. The memory of destruction, on the other hand, blurs the vision of liberation: 'They were not acclaimed as liberators, those who dropped the bombs; in fact, some preferred the Germans because, they said, at least they never dropped bombs on us'.<sup>60</sup>

*Mirella Casanica*. They keep talking about, the Americans, they saved us and all – later, because at the time, during the war, I don't know whether you have experience of it, but here was this square and people mad with terror running in all directions and the flying fortresses saw them running, saw that they were not military, and yet they would fly low and – ta-ta-ta – bomb them. I have little affection for the Americans, honestly. Because in my way of thinking, I remember all these girls cheering [when they came], but not me. Instinctively, I never took them for liberators. We didn't talk much, you know, but they did cause a lot of deaths, they didn't always hit the target because they also hit places that had nothing to do with it. But I never thought of them as liberators.<sup>61</sup>

Italian historiography has developed the formula of 'divided memory' to describe the conflicting narratives of World War Two.<sup>62</sup> 'Divided memory', however, usually means a division between the separate memories of separate, opposing subjects. In a deeper and more dramatic sense, however, memory is divided, lacerated, within itself, within the unreconciled double consciousness of individuals and social groups. For instance, the historian Antonio Parisella describes in such terms the memory of the people of Cisterna, a small town halfway between Anzio and Rome. For them, he writes, 'war had meant the total destruction of their town by bombardments, in 126 days of life in caverns, and, after 19 March, 1944, in living up to two years in refugee camps':

Though it was clear – he goes on – that the Germans were the occupiers and the oppressors, they told me that they had a hard time recognizing as liberators the Allies, that is, those who destroyed their town and deprived them of the essentials of their livelihood. Before they could fully comprehend the meaning of these events, they had to wait until the war was over, and they were able to go back to the town, and to gradually reconstruct their homes and their work. For some time, their conscience had been a sort of 'no man's land'.<sup>63</sup>

'No man's land' is a good metaphor for the mixed feelings and ambivalence of this memory. In order to make sense of their lived experience, the people of Cisterna had to take inventory of their memories and feelings, and separate the legitimate ones from those that were best forgotten in the light of the overall war narrative. In order to construct a coherent memory, then, they had to mutilate it first. Their memory became acceptable only after the memory of resentment was relegated to the no man's land of the shameful and unutterable.

There are plenty of reasons why this internal division of memory became established. The political climate of the post-war years saw on the one hand anti-Fascism as the Left's political priority, and Atlantic loyalty as the choice of the moderate, conservative camp. Thus, while the Left insisted on the 'legacy of Fascism', the centre and centre-right would hear nothing critical of the British and the Americans.<sup>64</sup> Gratitude was also grounded on the fact that the war was also fought on the ground and, as the Allied military graveyards scattered all over Italy reminds us, at a very heavy price in Allied lives. After all, it was the ground troops that were greeted and cheered as they entered Italian cities thus bringing the war to an end for them (although this festive greeting has generated the myth, tragically operative at the turn of the millennium, that if one bombs an oppressed people, they will thank you for it).

And yet, in the narratives of celebration, novelty, change, there lurks an unpleasant shadow: 'Then the Americans came in, the coloured troops, and they were throwing around condensed milk, chocolate... Then it happened that the coloured troops attacked the women, and this left me with the sense that for me – perhaps because I was a child – it was all an adventure'. As Ralph Ellison says, the problem here is less the colour of the skin of these soldiers, than the 'disposition of the eyes' of observer.<sup>65</sup>

### The black pilot

Let us then go back to most surprising and problematic motif in the story of the broken-hearted pilot: the fact that he is imagined as black.

Just as the pilots cannot distinguish from above the persons below, likewise looking from the bottom up it is impossible to see the pilots. However, some narrators insist that they could see them clearly – they were women, they were black... Although African American pilots were in fact part of the Allied air forces over Italy, yet this is clearly an imaginary detail.<sup>66</sup>

*Goffredo Cappelletti.* We went up to the top of Gianicolo hill, by the Garibaldi monument, and looked at this bombardment. You could see bunches of bombs coming horizontally down and gleaming in the sun, tied together and falling in bunches. Yet, a fighter plane flew by real low, almost level with Garibaldi's monument, and the pilot looked out; it was so low that we saw him, and I said, 'it's a Negro!' It was the first Negro I saw in my life.' No, it must be the plane's shadow, how can he be a Negro, he's American, not African. The Africans, not the Americans, are the black ones. Americans are white'. That's what we learned, anyway, we didn't know all that had gone on, and that there were Negroes in America as well.<sup>67</sup>

However, precisely because it is imagined, this motif calls for interpretation. At first sight, I had ascribed to the image of the black pilot to the belief, found especially in Southern Italy, that black people are more like us, more humane and sensitive. This interpretation is confirmed by the version in which the pilot is said to be Italian-American.

I had, however, to revise this optimistic interpretation – or, at least, integrate it with another possibility. This was going on in the 1940s, when Fascist propaganda, including school books, depicted 'beastly negroes' [lower case in the original] as the epitome of the forces of barbarism and savagery that invaded and violated the sacred soil of Italy, cradle of civilization. Shortly after the bombardment of San Lorenzo, Rome's most popular paper, *Il Messaggero*, claimed that the officer in charge of the bombardment was 'a general of the purest Judaic race', chosen in order to invest the mission with 'a specific anti-Christian and anti-Roman significance'. A broadside sheet that circulated in Rome, under the headline 'Savage Tribes Hurlled against Rome', explained that the bomber crews were formed 'in the majority by negro Americans [lower case in the original]... the infected president Roosevelt, to add insult to injury, has chosen to send his worst men, the negroes, the new savage tribes'.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, the memory of bombardments coalesces with the memory of the mass rapes perpetrated by Moroccan troops under French command, part of Allied forces, in the Cassino area: 'it was the blacks who gored men, women, at Monte Cassino, they had no respect for anybody'.<sup>69</sup> The shift from 'Moroccans' to 'Africans' to 'black' to 'foreign' ultimately involves all armies, occupiers and liberators, in one 'black' memory of rape: 'No, there were no Moroccans; they were black, they were the comrades that came with them. Maybe not the Americans, the white Americans; it was all these coloured people, Scotsmen, they got drunk, it's beyond words'.<sup>70</sup>

*Incalza.* Who did you see first, blacks or whites?

*Pasqualini.* All mixed – the Germans, what they did to us! I had to put pillows under my clothes to make a belly [as if I were pregnant], or else they'd have killed us all. They stole everything we had, the Germans,

chickens, cattle, oil, they'd take everything, kick us out of our house and take it over, and then all over the house, everywhere, on the beds, they dirtied everything.

*Incalza.* The Moroccans?

*Pasqualini.* All one blackness, all one mixture.

The implication of these stories, then, is that 'they sent savages to bomb us'. The two readings, however, are not mutually exclusive: a culture is always broad and complex enough to contain contradictory meanings of the same narrative. However, the racist version helps us question the belief that the victims' discourse from below is always more accurate, more noble and pure. In this case, in fact, the narrative of resentment, rooted in traumatic memories, is contaminated on the one hand with the racism still lurking in Italian culture, and on the other with the top-down message of Fascist teaching and propaganda.

Indeed, this contamination is made easier precisely by the exclusion of these feelings of resentment and violation from the dominant post-war discourse. On the one hand, the very illegitimacy of these feelings drives them into the darker, hidden corners of conscience and memory; on the other, they are made even more unutterable by the fact that they were fostered by Fascist propaganda, and are therefore identified with a rejected political identity. A problem in the memory of bombardments is, indeed, that the discourse of resentment was appropriated by the regime during the war, and relegated to right-wing memory afterwards.<sup>71</sup>

As is often the case, then, the negation of a difficult meaning did not result in its disappearance, but rather in its corruption and pollution. More people were killed in Rome by Allied bombardments than by Nazi repression; yet, to mention this fact is to lay oneself vulnerable to the charge of 'revisionism' or negationism, so that it became ultimately the exclusive patrimony of revisionists and negationists. Yet, one need not deny the Shoah or the Ardeatine Caves massacre in order to face the fact of Hiroshima, of Dresden, of the massacres on the Eastern Italian border – or to equate and balance them all, blurring all meanings and responsibilities in a fog in which everyone is guilty and therefore no one is responsible.<sup>72</sup>

## Red wheelbarrows

I happened to tell a University of Chicago professor at a cocktail party about the raid [on Dresden] as I had seen it, about the book I would write. He was a member of a thing called The Committee on Social Thought. And he told me about the concentration camps, and about how the Germans had made soap and candles out of the fat of dead Jews and so on.

All I could say was, 'I know, I know, I know'.<sup>73</sup>

Again, Kurt Vonnegut helps us – somewhat unwittingly, this time – to perceive the ambiguities in the victims' narrative, and those of historical memory. Along with his own

memory of the bombing of Dresden retold through Billy Pilgrim, he quotes a number of historical sources on that event. And one long quote is from '*The Destruction of Dresden*, by an Englishman named David Irving'. Of course, Kurt Vonnegut could not know that David Irving, still respected then by many as a World War Two historian, was already evolving into the most notorious spokesman for the negationist theories that deny the Shoah. Indeed, in his book about Dresden he was already inflating the number of casualties by at least 500 per cent, so as to make it comparable with the Shoah.<sup>74</sup>

This name in this book, then, is bound to evoke mixed feelings today: what is the relationship between Billy Pilgrim's 'I was there' in Dresden, and Irving's use of the story of Dresden as the starting point for the negation of the Shoah? On the other hand, what is the relationship between Billy Pilgrim's mention of Dresden and the professor's quick shift of discourse to the Shoah? Can't we consider both, each in its own dimension? It is as though seeing one horror prevented acceptance of the existence of the other: the Shoah is excluded from Irving's narrative of Dresden just as the story of Dresden is excluded from Rumfoord's official history and replaced by the Shoah in the Chicago professor's response.

One need not equate Dresden, or Hiroshima, with the Shoah in order to realize that this contradiction reveals the implicit Manichaeism of war narratives, and especially of the narratives of the so-called 'good war', World War Two<sup>75</sup>: the moral need to establish a clear distinction between good and bad guys, between perpetrators and victims makes it almost impossible to conceive that the perpetrators could also be victims, that the 'liberators' could also be guilty of war crimes. It is, in fact, this rejection of complexity and contradiction that has sustained Western expectations in Iraq, Kosovo, Afghanistan.

On Monday, 1 July, 2002, American planes bombed a wedding party in the Oruzgun province in Afghanistan. The body count ranged between 48 and 54 dead and 120 wounded, in three distinct villages. A correspondent for *The Washington Post* reports:

It was the worst single episode of civilian casualties, and the second such incident in Oruzgun, where U.S. special forces killed 21 villagers in a raid Jan. 23...

The incident, widely reported on Afghan-language radio here, has upset and angered many people in this bustling Pashtun-dominated city... Some asked why the American military, which has such sophisticated weaponry and operating methods, could not be more accurate in picking and attacking targets.

We have heard that this is a computerized war, and we have seen on television that the American planes can pick out objects as close as 4 millimetres from the ground', said Ahmed Jawad, a doctor at Mirwais Hospital. 'How can they mistake a wedding party for an attack?'<sup>76</sup>

The Italian daily *La Repubblica* carried photographs of two of the village women. Neither wore the burkha, the symbol of Taliban oppression of women. Both were lying

wounded in a hospital while some of their relatives were dead. I wonder what narrative – gratitude for the end of the burkha, resentment for the destruction of their village – these ‘innocent victims of the liberating bombs’ will tell – if anyone ever bothers to ask them.

Finally: listening to oral histories can help us understand a little better William Carlos Williams’s poem. What, exactly, depends on the red wheel barrow, and

why? I think that he is talking about our eyes and our feelings, about our capacity to see the world. And I think that he is talking about the fact that our capacity to see the whole world depends on seeing single, small details like that. Everything depends on a red wheel barrow, or a red bus in Kosovo, on 250 sheep in Iraq, on a wedding party in Afghanistan, on a dead horse on a street in Rome. If only we could see them.

## NOTES

1. Giuseppe Mogavero, *I muri ricordano. La resistenza a Roma attraverso le epigrafi (1943-1945)*, Rome: Massari, 2003, p 185 (with photograph).

2. Vanna Vannuccini, ‘Bombe su un autobus, nuova strage della Nato’, *la Repubblica*, Rome, 4 May 1999, p 3.

3. Alden Rigby, quoted in Frederick Taylor, *Dresden. Tuesday 13 February 1945*, London: Bloomsbury, 2005, p 487.

4. Rodolfo Walsh, ‘Operación Masacre’ (1958), Buenos Aires, Ediciones de la Flor, 23rd edition, 2001, p 50. Frederick Taylor, *Dresden*, p 103, notes that ‘If air attacks were the half-blind work of an instant for the perpetrators, for the human beings on the ground they amounted to an unimaginable melange of horror, fear, and loss’. He argues that therefore the “‘facts’” remembered by the people on the ground are ‘sometimes objectively disputable’ or “‘tainted’” (his quotes). The same, of course, may be true of the ‘facts’ related by the pilots or documented in the official record.

5. Astrid Dakli, ‘Le bombe intelligenti sbagliano perché sono troppe’, *il manifesto*, Rome, 30 April 1999, p 2.

6. As of the writing of the first version of this paper (May, 2000, after six weeks of bombing), the list of ‘collateral damage’ officially admitted by Nato in Kosovo included about 300 civilian casualties. Many civilian victims never made it to the news; for one exception, see Steven Erlanger (*New York Times News Service*), ‘Still in Kosovo, Albanian Family Struggles Along’, *International Herald Tribune*, New York, 10 May 1999, p 7. According to the US Department of Defense, over 4,600 persons were killed since March in ethnic cleansing operations; 900,000 Albanians have left Kosovo, and 650,000 are homeless refugees inside the region. No Serbian data on this account are available. (All data from *la Repubblica*, 8 May 1999, pp 2, 5, and 9 May, p 1. For an assessment of collateral damage in Afghanistan based on Western sources, see Marc W Herold, ‘A Dossier on Civilian Victims of United States’ Aerial Bombing of Afghanistan’, [http://www.cursos.org/stories/civilian\\_deaths.htm](http://www.cursos.org/stories/civilian_deaths.htm).

7. Owen Brown, “‘Bus Hit’ Claim as War of

Words Heats Up’, *The Guardian*, Manchester, 26 October 2001.

8. Taylor, *Dresden*, p 381

9. Herold, ‘A Dossier on Civilian Victims of United States’ Aerial Bombing of Afghanistan’, quoted in Richard Norton-Taylor, ‘The Return of the B-52’, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2001; Owen Brown, “‘Bus Hit’ Claim as War of Words Heats Up’.

10. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969), London: Vintage, 2000, p 139.

11. See the discussion in Alberto M.Cirese, *Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne*, Palermo: Palumbo 1973; and *Il folklore come studio dei dislivelli interni di cultura delle società superiori*, Università di Cagliari, 1961/62.

12. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse 5*, pp 140-41, 144-45.

13. Alberto Arbasino, ‘Ma il fascismo non parlò mai di gay’, *la Repubblica*, 8 October 2005.

14. Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, London: Granta, 2001, no page numbers, section 4.

15. For a similar paradox, see Taylor’s *Dresden*, p 351: ‘Around 40 of the 170 Jews still living in Dresden died there, at the hands of their liberators’ (my italics).

16. Maria Pia Galloni (born 1936), homemaker, interviewer Giusi Incalza (from here on, GI), 24 May 2001. Unless otherwise designated, all interviews are mine. All interviews quoted here are from the Archivio Sonoro ‘Franco Coggiola’ of the Circolo Gianni Bosio in Rome.

17. Diana Casalini (1925), homemaker, GI, 25 June 2001.

18. Rosario Bentivegna (1922), physician, partisan, 11 September 1998.

19. Giovanni Nardi (1910), tailor, Terni, 16 July 1980. See also A. Portelli, *Biografia di una città. Storia e racconto*. Terni 1831-1984, Turin: Einaudi 1985, p 248 ff.

20. Grazia Spione (1923), home maker, GI, 23 June 2001.

21. Renata Pallotti (1927), office worker, interviewer Maria Chiara Mattesini, 10 January 2003.

22. Gesuinda Pezzotta, Milan, quoted in Francesca Valtulina, “‘Era un’allucinante, apocalittica notte’”. La memoria dei bombardamenti su Milano e la Lombardia’,

*Studi e ricerche di storia contemporanea*

(Ist. Bergamasco per la storia della Resistenza e dell’età contemporanea), 62, December 2004, pp 33-43. Another recurring animal metaphor refers to death in shelters and cellars: ‘we died like mice’ (Angelo Remigi, 1921, Salesian lay brother, 26 June 2000); ‘dying like mice’ (Carlo Castellani, 1928, civil servant, 3 June 1998).

23. Stefano Chiarini, ‘Bombe su Mossul: sette morti’, *il manifesto*, 8 May 1999, p 6.

24. Lidia Montecaggi, (1918), merchant, Terni, interviewed by Marcello Ricci, 1979.

25. Manlio Tosti (1929), construction worker, GI, 23 April 2002.

26. Gianfranco Capozio (1938), university professor, 16 August 1998. For this and the following interviews, see also A. Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out. History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*, New York: Palgrave, 2003, pp 78 ff.

27. Fernando Carrocci, GI, 2003.

28. Vincenzo Cesario (1931), office worker, GI, 21 May 2001.

29. See note 24. The final tautology – ‘what happened happened’ is a frequent verbal device to express the lack of adequate words for ‘what happened’.

30. See Lidia Piccioni, *San Lorenzo. Un quartiere romano durante il fascismo*, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1984.

31. Luciano Pizzoli (1937), transport worker, 4 July 1997.

32. Cesare De Simone, *Venti angeli sopra Roma*, Milan: Mursia, 1993, p 280.

33. Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio sulla moralità nella Resistenza*, Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995.

34. Valtulina, ‘Era un’allucinante, apocalittica notte’; see also Giovanni De Luna, “I bombardamenti”, in G De Luna et al., eds, *Torino in guerra*, Turin: Gribaudo 1995.

35. De Simone, *Venti angeli*, p 285.

36. G Capozio, see note 25; Alberto Sergenti (1922), union organizer, GI, 8 May 2001. See Marco D’Eramo, ‘Il doping del top gun’, *il manifesto*, 13 August 2002, who quotes the *Christian Science Monitor* on the supplying of dexedrine to members of the US military in recent wars. For an anecdote



on drunkenness on a bombing mission over Germany, see Eddie Costello's story in Studs Terkel, *The Good War' An Oral History of World War Two*, New York: Ballantine, 1985, p 208.

37. Mirella Sartori, teacher, email to the author, 24 April 2003.

38. Rome was only declared an open city after another massive air raid, on 13 August; this status, however, was never officially recognised by the Allies or respected by the Germans. However, the phrase 'open city' is functional to the narrator's intention in this story.

39. Legendary narratives spread all over Italy tell of a plane called 'Pippo' (like 'Bepi', a homey, friendly nickname). In some versions, Pippo's function was to explore the ground in preparation for a bombardment; in others, it is supposed to have been an Italian aircraft. In this story, Pippo merely designates any aircraft involved in a raid. See Cesare Bernani, *Spegni la luce che passa Pippo. Voci, leggende e miti della storia contemporanea*, Rome: Odradek, 1996.

40. According to Lundqvist, *A History of Bombing*, section 215, forty-five pregnant women were killed in the paediatric hospital in Dresden during the Allied raid.

41. For a more detailed analysis, see my *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and other Stories. Form and Meaning in Oral History*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991, pp 157-60 (chapter 8, 'Sports, Work and Politics in an Industrial Town').

42. Maggiorina Mattioli (1899), seamstress, Terni, 28 February 1980. On Maggiorina Mattioli, see *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, chapter 13: *Absalom, Absalom!*: Oral History and Literature', pp 270-82.

43. Irene Guidarelli (1896), textile worker, Terni, 16 July 1980; Antonietta Mazzi, factory worker, Gl, 7 June 2001; Nadia Bertini (1934), homemaker, Gl, 3 July 2001; Raul Crostella (1926), factory worker, Terni, 14 December 1983.

44. Pietro Barrera, comments during a meeting of a committee for the celebrations of the anniversary of Rome's Liberation, 2 October 2003; Tommaso Baris, *Tra due fuochi. Esperienza e memoria della guerra lungo la linea Gustav*, Bari: Laterza, 2003, p 56.

45. Bernardino Pulcini, 'L'Ognissanti del Quarantatré', in *Pontecorvesità*, self-published, Fomia, 1999, p 23. Pulcini quotes the motivation for the bronze medal awarded to the town in the 1960s, which praises the 'stoical resignation' with which Pontecorvo endured the horrors of the war (p 30).

46. Clara Pagliarini (1916), homemaker, Gl, 6 September 2002.

47. Antonello Branca (1936-2002), filmmaker, 31 July 1997. Antonello Branca was the author of brilliant documentaries on the arms industry, on the Black Panthers, and on the movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

48. Marisa Musu (1925), partisan, journalist, 24 July 1997; Massimo Prasca, 7 January 2002.

49. Raul Crostella, see note 40.

50. Alberto Sergenti, see note 34.

51. Rina Del Pio (1923), seamstress, 11 May 1998.

52. Annamaria Tresca, Gl, 17 May 2001; Luciano Pizzoli, see note 29.

53. The historian Lidia Piccioni, author of a book and many essays on San Lorenzo, has told me in conversation that she, too, has heard this story often in the course of her research in the neighbourhood.

54. Quoted in Laura J Rediehs, 'Evil', in Joan Collins and Ross Glover, eds, *Collateral Language. A User's Guide to America's New War*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2002, p 71.

Osama bin Laden also makes the distinction between the intended target and the unintended victims: 'The 11 September attacks were not targeted at women and children. The real targets were America's icons of military and economic power' (11 November 2001 interview, <http://www.observer.co.uk/waronterrorism/story/0,1373,591508,00.html>, in Andrew D. Van Alstyne, 'Freedom', in Collins and Glover, eds, *Collateral Language*, p 83).

55. Giovanni Sale SI, 'I dubbi sulla guerra aerea nella seconda guerra mondiale', *Civiltà Cattolica*, 3 September 2005.

56. The definition of 'military target' is uncertain: certain 'targets', like water treatment plants or bridges, may also be necessary for the survival and well being of civilians. Also, the insistence on civilian deaths should not blind us to the fact that the death of soldiers is also tragic (else, why so many monuments and war cemeteries and shrines?), and that soldiers are often personally innocent and unwilling.

57. Lucia Ottobri (1924), partisan, 15 July 1997.

58. Giuseppe Bolgia (1931), office worker, 13 March 1998. 'In via Bosio there was a public fountain, where around lunch time everyone went to get water; our maid used to go there for water and that day she happened to stay home; but all those who went to the fountain were killed, all those women died': Caterina Pierantoni (1915), 29 May 1998.

59. Silvana Corona (1921), office worker,

Gl, 26 June 2001.

60. Santino Cappanera (1933), steel worker, Terni, 12 September 1979.

61. Mirella Casanica (1929), Gl, 31 November 2000.

62. Giovanni Contini, *La memoria divisa*, Milano: Rizzoli, 1997.

63. Antonio Parisella, *Soprawvivere liberi. Riflessioni sulla storia della Resistenza a cinquant'anni dalla liberazione*, Roma: Gangemi, 1999, pp 38-9.

64. In San Miniato, Tuscany, on 22 July 1944, fifty-five people were killed when an American grenade hit the church where the Germans had ordered the population to gather. For a long time, in a region wounded by dozens of Nazi massacres, the dominant narrative was that the massacre was a German retaliation against the town. See Costanza Orlandi, 'Rappresaglia o fatalità? La strage del Duomo di San Miniato del 22 luglio 1944' and Alessio Petrizzo, 'Il "discorso della strage" tra verità storica e biografia individuale. Il caso di San Miniato', both in Pietro Clemente and Fabio Dei, eds, *Poetiche e politiche del ricordo. Memoria pubblica delle stragi, nazifasciste in Toscana*, Roma: Carocci, 2005, pp 134-162 and 163-190; and Leonardo Paggi, ed, *L'eccidio del duomo di San Miniato. La memoria e la ricerca storica (1944-2004)*, Comune di San Miniato, 2004.

65. Nadia Bertini (1934), homemaker, Cinecittà, Gl, 3 July 2001; Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952), Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1972, p 7.

66. *The Guardian*, 9 July 2002, p 18, announces the passing of Lt Gen Benjamin Davis, commander of the 332nd Fighter Group, a unit of the US Air Corps composed of African Americans, that escorted bombardiers on missions over Germany and Italy. See also Vivian R. Bournazian, 'Explorations - Tuskegee Airmen', Voice of America, [www.manythings.org/voa/03/031105](http://www.manythings.org/voa/03/031105); and Joseph P Gomer, 'Honour Thy Father: A Tuskegee Airmen', [aarla.denverlibrary.org/events\\_exhibits/tuskegee.html](http://aarla.denverlibrary.org/events_exhibits/tuskegee.html).

67. Goffredo Cappelletti (1930), construction worker, 11 September 1997. Another narrator claims that she was able to distinguish the pilot's gender: 'I was in line for fish on via del Pigneto and suddenly those planes flew low, very low, and you could see that a woman drove them': Teresa Dappelo (1923), sales lady, Gl, 25 June 2001. A woman designated only by the nickname 'Mimina' recalls the unexplained 23 July 1943 bombing of the rural village of Nardò (Puglia), in which 10 civilians were killed, and says: 'Some

people said that the pilots were women': *Nardò, 23 luglio 1943*, CD-Rom, published by the Nardò (Lecce) municipal administration, 2003.

**68.** De Simone, *Venti angeli sopra Roma*, pp 266-67.

**69.** Tito Proietti (1933), office worker, GI, 28 May 2002; see Tommaso Baris, 'La memoria plurale dell'esperienza bellica in Ciociaria. L'uso delle fonti orali nell'indagine storiografica', *Annale Irsifar*, 2000, pp 93-125.

**70.** Angela Borzetti (1921), homemaker, GI, 25 June 2001

**71.** On the anniversary of the liberation from Fascism, 25 April 2005, the walls of Rome were covered with posters from an extreme right-wing group contrasting the memory of liberation with that of the bombardments.

**72.** Gabriella Gribaudo notes that in Capua, a rural and very historic town near Naples, the Germans caused around 40 victims in a number of separate incidents, while in a few minutes, on 9 September, the Americans killed 1,067 people – a massacre that was never mentioned. Gribaudo also notes that because the mass rapes by Allied troops had been perpetrated by the 'liberator' Allies, they were never discussed':

G Contini, G Gribaudo, P Pezzino, 'Revisionismo e ortodossia. Resistenza e guerra in Italia 1943-45', *Quaderni storici*, CXI, 2002, 3, pp 786-821.

**73.** Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse 5*, pp 7-8.

**74.** Richard J Evans, *Telling Lies About Hitler. The Holocaust, History, and the Irving Trial*, London: Verso, 2002.

**75.** The concept of 'the good war' is commonly used in public discourse in the

United States, and corresponds to Italian representations of World War Two as a 'just war'. In a note to his *The Good War*, Terkel explains: 'It is a phrase that has been frequently voiced by men of [...] my generation, to distinguish that war from other wars, declared and undeclared. Quotation marks have been added, not as a matter of caprice or editorial comment, but simply because the adjective 'good' mated to the noun 'war' is so incongruous'.

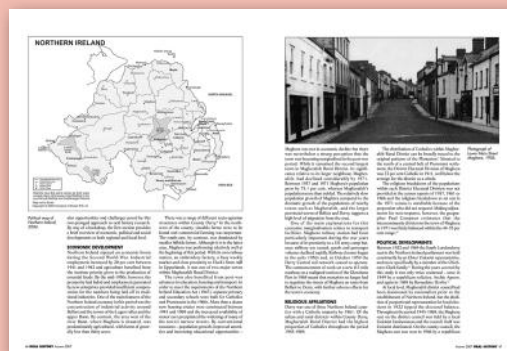
**76.** Pamela Constable, 'At wedding, the bombs came. Afghan victims question U.S. "computerized war"', *The International Herald Tribune*, 4 July 2002, pp 1 and 4; for the body count, see *The International Herald Tribune*, 14 July 2002; David Corn, 'Accountability Ignored in Kakrak Errant Bombing', AlterNet, 11 July 2002.



# 'Whatever you say, say nothing': Researching memory and identity in Mid-Ulster, 1945-1969

by Anna Bryson

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The research described in this article was conducted for a PhD that I completed at Trinity College Dublin in 2003. I had originally planned to focus on a pre-existing collection of interviews conducted with Ulster veterans of the revolution and civil war period in Ireland but my supervisor, the late David Fitzpatrick,

persuaded me to turn my attention to the much less scrutinised post-World War Two period and to set about conducting my own interviews. My initial objective was a broad one – to write a 'from below' history of this period. As the work evolved I became increasingly interested in the dynamics of cross-

community interaction and in variables such as class, gender and political conflict. I needed a site that would lend itself to examination of the intersection of all these variables. The compelling logic of a detailed local analysis – coupled with the practicalities of access – led me to focus on my

home town of Maghera. The fixing of the timeframe at 1945-1969 was deliberately designed to test the authenticity of the much vaunted notion of a pre-Troubles 'golden age'. As discussed in the article, the fact that I was an 'insider' was a key factor. I was initially reluctant to attempt a

cross-community study but David insisted that I should at least give it a go. He was right. It demanded agile and tenacious footwork but securing interviews with a cross-section of men and women from different religious, social and political backgrounds was more 'doable' than I thought.

Although I wasn't fully conscious of it at the time, the period in which I conducted the interviews was significant. I definitely benefitted from the 'feel-good' factor and increased confidence generated by the peace process and in particular the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. In hindsight I think that this was an important 'moment in time' and I am not sure that the same project would be possible today.

Aside from changes in the local political climate, it is significant that eight of the fourteen interviewees have since passed away. None of these individuals bequeathed diaries, memoirs or private papers and as such their transcripts and voice recordings (now being

digitised thanks to the Save Our Sounds project) are a unique record of these individuals' life and times. As chair of QUB Law School's ethics committee, I spend quite a bit of time these days pondering the potential negative consequences of our work. Whilst I can't say for certain that everyone I interviewed for this project had a positive experience I was greatly touched by the feedback that trickled through over the years. In particular I was touched to learn that one interviewee had died peacefully in bed with a copy of his transcript beside him (his friend later told me that it meant so much to him that he kept it in the bedside locker). The family of another interviewee read passages from his transcript at the funeral service – all reminders of how important this work can be to individuals and their families.

There is of course a downside. As someone with a primal sense of this place and its people I felt a deep sense of accountability to the individuals and families that kindly opened their

homes to me. The consent form was in many ways irrelevant – what was transacted was their trust in me. Whilst there is nothing particularly sensational or provocative in the content of the interviews I know only too well that a word out of place in a publication – the mere hint of a slur on an individual or their family – can generate grievances that are nurtured for generations. Indeed revisiting this article caused me to reflect on just how apt the title was.

Unpicking the rationale for this privileging of caution provokes wider questions about the role and place of history in post-conflict communities. My academic pathway has taken me in precisely that direction – to work on legacy issues in the field of socio-legal studies known as 'transitional justice'. As I reflect on the broader context for writing and rewriting the history of Northern Ireland – for the negotiation, filtering and hijacking of individual and collective memories – I am increasingly

convinced of the importance of taking a longer view. Indeed the welcome news that this article is to be re-published has encouraged me to think that this discrete study might make a useful contribution to broader 'dealing with the past' debates. My resolve stems both from renewed enthusiasm about the validity and interest of the data and the sense that my own perhaps overly prescriptive approach to exposing personal oral histories to the public is worthy of further reflection. In wrestling with my long-held instinct to say *nothing* I increasingly feel the responsibility to in fact say *something* – to give a voice to people who have in effect asked for it by consenting to be interviewed in the first place. The ongoing challenge is, of course, to recognise and own our editorial role as we attempt to balance ethical obligations to our interviewees with the pursuit of understanding and meaning.

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**Abstract:** The influence of collective memory on political identity in Ireland has been well documented. It has particular force in Northern Ireland where there is fundamental disagreement about how and why the conflict erupted and how it should be resolved. This article outlines some of the issues encountered by an 'insider' when attempting to record and analyse the conflicting memories of a range of Protestants and Catholics who grew up in Mid-Ulster in the decades preceding the Troubles. In particular, it considers the challenges and opportunities presented by a two-pronged approach to oral history: using testimony as evidence about historical experience in the past and as evidence about historical memory – both collective and individual – in the present.

**Keywords:** Northern Ireland, insider, collective memory, individual memory





Although Northern Ireland is arguably 'one of the most heavily researched areas on earth',<sup>2</sup> relatively little has been written about the pre-Troubles period. A number of general histories span the period between the Second World War and the outbreak of widespread violence in 1969 but there are few micro-studies to account for the intense levels of sub-regional variation.<sup>3</sup> Rather than adding to the body of literature on political developments, I employed an oral history methodology to capture the experiences of a range of individuals who grew up in the town of Maghera in the period 1945–1969.<sup>4</sup>

At one level these interviews were designed to provide factual detail about the nature of society and politics at this time. Such evidence was processed in much the same way as any other source – it was carefully scrutinised for internal consistency and cross-checked with a range of other primary and secondary sources. As the interviews progressed, however, I became increasingly interested in the manner in which a range of Catholics<sup>5</sup> and Protestants<sup>6</sup> presented their past.<sup>7</sup> I thus re-examined the transcripts in search of key themes which might enable me to systematically compare their accounts. The isolation of collective memory, however, did not fully represent the complexity of experiences

recorded. In order to document the shadings, contradictions and tensions within each testimony, I began to examine the context in which individuals departed from established communal narratives. This paper presents some of the key findings of my research and considers the particular opportunities and challenges posed by this two-pronged approach to oral history research. By way of a backdrop, the first section provides a brief overview of economic, political and social developments at both regional and local level.

### Economic development

Northern Ireland enjoyed an economic boom during the Second World War. Industrial employment increased by 20 per cent between 1941 and 1942 and agriculture benefited from the wartime priority given to the production of essential foods. By the mid-1950s, however, the prosperity had faded and employment generated by new enterprises provided insufficient compensation for the numbers being laid off in traditional industries. One of the main features of the Northern Ireland economy in this period was the concentration of industrial activity around Belfast and the towns of the Lagan valley and the upper Bann. By contrast, the area west of the river Bann, where Maghera is situated, was predominantly



Photograph of Lower Main Street Maghera, 1956.

agricultural, with farms of generally less than thirty acres.

There was a range of different socio-agrarian structures within County Derry.<sup>8</sup> In the north-west of the county, sizeable farms were to be found and commercial farming was important. The south-east, by contrast, was dominated by smaller hillside farms. Although it is in the latter area, Maghera was performing relatively well at the beginning of this period. With its own railway station, an embroidery factory, a busy weekly market and close proximity to Clark's linen mill in Upperlands, it was one of two major towns within Magherafelt Rural District.

The town also benefited from post-war advances in education, housing and transport. In order to meet the requirements of the Northern Ireland Education Act (1947), separate primary and secondary schools were built for Catholics and Protestants in the 1960s. More than a dozen new housing estates were constructed between 1945 and 1969 and the increased availability of motor cars precipitated the widening of many of the town's narrow streets. By conventional measures – population growth, improved amenities and increasing educational opportunities – Maghera was not in economic decline but there was nevertheless a strong perception that the town was becoming marginalised in the post-war period. While it remained the second largest town in Magherafelt Rural District, its significance relative to its larger neighbour, Magherafelt, had declined considerably by 1971. Between 1937 and 1971 Maghera's population grew by 75.1 per cent, whereas Magherafelt's population more than trebled. The relatively

slow population growth of Maghera compared to the dramatic growth of the populations of nearby towns such as Magherafelt, and the larger provincial towns of Belfast and Derry, suggests a high level of migration from the area.

One of the main explanations for this economic marginalisation relates to transport facilities. Maghera railway station had been particularly important during the war years because of its proximity to a US army camp but, once military use ceased, goods and passenger volumes declined rapidly. Railway closures began in the early 1950s and, in October 1959 the Derry Central rail network ceased to operate. The commencement of work on a new 8.5 mile roadway on a realigned section of the Glenshane Pass in 1968 meant that motorists no longer had to negotiate the streets of Maghera en route from Belfast to Derry, with further adverse effects for the town's economy.

### Religious affiliations

Derry was one of three Northern Ireland counties with a Catholic majority by 1961. Of the urban and rural districts within County Derry, Magherafelt Rural District had the highest proportion of Catholics throughout the period 1945-1969.

The distribution of Catholics within Magherafelt Rural District can be broadly traced to the original patterns of the Plantation.<sup>9</sup> Situated to the north of a central belt of Protestant settlement, the District Electoral Division of Maghera was 33 per cent Catholic in 1911, well below the average for the district as a whole.



Map of Northern Ireland Showing Local Government Boundaries and Co. Boroughs of Belfast and Derry, 1961.



Map of Magherafelt Rural District in 1961 showing District Electoral Division of Maghera.

The religious breakdown of the populations within each District Electoral Division was not provided in the census reports of 1937, 1961 or 1966 and the religious breakdown as set out in the 1971 census is unreliable because of the proportion who did not respond. Making adjustments for non-response, however, the geographer Paul Compton estimates that the intercommunity division in the town of Maghera in 1971 was finely balanced within the 44-55 per cent range.<sup>10</sup>

### Political developments

Between 1922 and 1969 the South Londonderry seat in the Northern Ireland parliament was held consistently by an Ulster Unionist representative, and more specifically by a member of the Chichester-Clark family.<sup>11</sup> During the years covered by this study it was only twice contested – once in 1949 by a republican solicitor, Archie Agnew, and again in 1969 by Bernadette Devlin.<sup>12</sup>

At local level, Magherafelt district council had been dominated by nationalists prior to the establishment of Northern Ireland, but the abolition of proportional representation for local elections in 1922 tipped the electoral balance. Throughout the period 1945-1969, the Maghera seat on the district council was held by a local Unionist businessman and the council itself was Unionist dominated. On the county council, the Maghera seat was won in 1946 by a republican businessman, Willie Noone, by a margin of less than twenty votes, but a Unionist candidate, JR Crawford, regained the seat in 1949 and held it without contest for the remainder of this period.

Charlie O'Hara, a Catholic publican from Maghera represented the Clady division on the county council. He held the position of vice-chairman from 1927 until his death in 1962. In the absence of regular electoral contests for either the South Londonderry seat at Stormont or the Maghera seat on the rural district or county council, it is very difficult to gauge the relative levels of support for constitutional and militant nationalism during this period.<sup>13</sup> Support for the latter, however, was clearly in evidence during the

1955 Westminster election when Sinn Féin<sup>14</sup> fielded candidates in all twelve constituencies in Northern Ireland and returned two prisoner candidates, Tom Mitchell for Mid-Ulster and Philip Clarke for Fermanagh-South Tyrone.<sup>15</sup>

There was also a degree of local involvement in the IRA's 1956-1962 campaign<sup>16</sup> to force a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.<sup>17</sup> Officially launched at midnight on 11 December 1956, 'Operation Harvest' prescribed a series of attacks on police stations, B Special<sup>18</sup> huts, transport and communication networks, customs posts and government buildings across Northern Ireland. Magherafelt courthouse was among the first targets to be struck in December 1956. There was a bomb explosion at a B Special hut in Upperlands, three miles north of Maghera, in January 1957 and the RUC station in the nearby village of Swatragh was attacked by gunfire in August 1957 and again in January 1958. By this stage, the IRA had been literally forced to go underground and a total of nine hidden dugouts were subsequently unearthed in the Maghera district.<sup>19</sup> There were some further attacks on local electricity transformers, telephone exchanges and bridges and in August 1958 a machine gun was fired at a police sergeant in Maghera. By 1959, however, the campaign was winding down and a ceasefire was finally declared in February 1962.

Rising educational levels and civic expectations, combined with an interest in human rights and direct-action politics, wrought a dramatic change in the Catholic community in the 1960s. New pressure groups, such as the Campaign for Social Justice, began to collect and publicise evidence of discrimination against Catholics, particularly in housing and the gerrymandering of elections. Republicans had also regrouped under various different titles since the proscription of Sinn Féin in 1957. The idea of launching an official civil rights campaign originated at a conference of one such front, the Wolfe Tone Society, at the home of Maghera solicitor, Kevin Agnew. At this meeting in August 1966 Eoghan Harris, a young history graduate from Cork, read a paper agreed by the IRA army council on a civil rights strategy for Northern Ireland. This strategy appealed to a



broad cross-section of society and in January 1967 the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was formed in Belfast. The political controversy generated by the civil rights movement brought Northern Ireland to the brink of collapse. It also precipitated a radical reorganisation of constitutional nationalism which re-emerged in 1970 in the form of the SDLP.

The paucity of electoral contests makes it equally difficult to assess intra-unionist divisions during this period. In spite of virtually uninterrupted electoral success at both provincial and local level, it clearly became increasingly difficult to maintain unity within the Ulster Unionist Party. A series of incidents in the early 1950s, including the banning of an Orange march<sup>20</sup> in County Down and the curtailment of a Coronation parade in the nearby town of Dungiven in June 1953, for example, provoked accusations that certain Unionist leaders had abandoned loyalism.<sup>21</sup> Eight Independent Unionist candidates challenged the government in the general election of October 1953 and an Ulster Orange and Protestant Committee was formed to organise opposition to any such appeasement of nationalists in the future.

Divergence of opinion over the rights and wrongs of seeking accommodation with Catholics in Northern Ireland intensified with the election of Terence O'Neill as prime minister in 1963. O'Neill advanced a new strategy of pursuing general economic growth alongside conciliatory gestures towards the Catholic community. These measures provoked a deep-seated crisis within the Ulster Unionist Party and, eventually, across Northern Ireland as a whole. A series of civil rights demonstrations and counter-demonstrations made for an increasingly volatile political climate in the summer of 1969, culminating in the deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland on 14 August.

## Social segregation

While some of the factors that facilitated mixing between Protestants and Catholics will be discussed in the second section of this paper, the extent of social segregation must be acknowledged. Fionnuala O'Connor notes that official Catholicism played a crucial role in defining and sustaining Northern Catholic identity from partition until at least the late 1950s. She states that, 'for a community that disliked and felt alien from the wider state, the parish became the main civic unit...the Church by default was the acknowledged chief source of authority and social coherence in a "state within a state"'.<sup>22</sup> On grounds of both religious and political principle, the Catholic Church strongly resisted secular interference in the running of their schools with the result that the vast majority of Catholics and Protestants went to separate schools. The link between religious and social life was clearly in evidence in the town of Maghera where the majority of social organisations to which Catholics subscribed were organised in association with the Catholic clergy and convened in the local National hall. Conversely, while social functions in the Maghera Assembly hall did attract a cross-section of Protestants and Catholics, the local Orange hall was the main forum for meetings of Protestant social and political groups.

There were cricket and rugby clubs in nearby towns such as Dungiven and Magherafelt but the two main sports clubs

in Maghera at this time were the Maghera Reds soccer club and Watty Graham's Gaelic Athletic Club.<sup>23</sup> The ban upheld by the latter until 1971 on engagement in 'foreign games' (in practice, soccer and rugby union) and the insistence of many Protestants that 'Sunday Observance' precluded them from partaking in Gaelic football matches meant that there was also a significant degree of segregation in organised sport.

Casual socialising between Protestants and Catholics was also strongly discouraged by representatives of both the Catholic Church and the Orange Order. Expressing his fear that such mingling might lead to a mixed marriage or, worse still, conversion to Protestantism, Dr Farren, Bishop of Derry, warned parishioners at a Confirmation ceremony in Maghera in May 1951 that:

If you allow your children to be contaminated by those who are not of the fold, then you can expect nothing but disaster [...] it is too late when your boy cries out that he prefers Barrabas to Christ and will give up his Church and soul rather than the girl he is infatuated with.

While he stressed that Catholics should try to live in peace with their non-Catholic neighbours, he concluded that the salvation of their souls must come first.<sup>24</sup> The following year, Brother Roy Shiels, Worshipful Master of the nearby Curragh 'Rising Sons of Joshua' Loyal Orange Lodge 855, similarly cautioned that many young people were being 'lured away to attend Roman Catholic dances and sports meetings' and noted that some were 'drifting away to Romish beliefs' as a result of mixed marriages. He concluded that, 'Surely there were sufficient Protestants halls, Church halls and Orange Halls where youth of their own could have entertainment and social enjoyment at its best'.<sup>25</sup>

With regard to mixed marriages, the situation in Maghera broadly tallied with the findings of Richard Rose who calculated from his 'attitudes survey' data of 1968 that only 4 per cent of the population in Northern Ireland married across religious lines.<sup>26</sup> The equivalent figure in Moxon-Browne's survey of 1978 was 4.5 per cent.<sup>27</sup> On the rare occasions when a mixed marriage did take place one partner usually changed their religion ensuring that social interaction, for most individuals, was contained within their own religious community. Observing a similar pattern in the rural border town of 'Ballybeg' in the 1950s, Rosemary Harris concluded that, 'Protestants and Catholics form two endogamous groups probably more separated from each other in sexual matters than most white and Negro groups in societies which supposedly abhor miscegenation'.<sup>28</sup> This is the stark, and in many ways remarkable, social landscape that I sought to examine more closely. What were the shadings and ambiguities, and how should they be understood?

## Collective memories

The role of collective memory in shaping Irish history has been well documented.<sup>29</sup> Academic interest undoubtedly intensified with the eruption of the Troubles in Northern Ireland as past and present became embroiled in an increasingly bloody and violent conflict. Although my interviews focused on the period 1945-1969, memories were inevitably





Photograph at a meeting of South Derry Unionists in Maghera Orange Hall on 25 January 1948, to mark the completion by Mrs Dehra Parker of twenty-five years' service as Member of Parliament for the division. Left to right (front): Mrs J. Love, Mrs H.J. Cousley, (secretary of the Women's Association, Magherafelt); (back): Mr W. Clark, Mr R. Evans Burns, Mrs Parker, Mr H.E. Thompson, Mr J. M. Shearer and Sir Basil Brooke.

filtered through the prism of the Troubles. It was not surprising, therefore, to detect two distinct communal narratives, each carefully reinforced with reference to both the recent and distant past.

Green cautions, however, that, 'oral historians are increasingly focusing upon the ways in which individual recollections fit (often unconscious) cultural scripts or mental templates'.<sup>30</sup> Noting that collective memory studies are inclined to ignore or at least diminish the contradictions and complexities of an individual's life, she calls for a renewed interest in the 'ways in which individuals negotiate competing ideas or beliefs, or find space within or between dominant discourses'.<sup>31</sup> In order to trace the contours between collective and individual memory in my interviews, I tried to separate the many references to 'them' and 'us' from the less obvious allusions to individual experience. By analysing the context in which individual experiences were presented, I was then able to identify two types of agency: those which reinforced the communal boundary and those which facilitated a departure from it. Whilst acknowledging the influence of contemporary and historical discourses on interviewees' memories, I was thus equally concerned to account for the complex interplay within and between the individual and the collective.

The most striking theme in my interviews with Protestants was their depiction of the post-war period as a golden age of community relations. To illustrate the lack of animosity between Protestants and Catholics at this time, Ian Gordon recalled that:

At that time, there was never any talk about Protestant/Catholic or anything. As I said, there were Catholics went to the Protestant school and I would say it was vice versa, and we all played football together [...] things changed dramatically in this country.<sup>32</sup>

It was also repeatedly stressed that large numbers of Catholics attended dances in the local Orange hall and that, conversely, many Protestants attended functions in the local Catholic hall.

In stark contrast to this depiction, many Catholics opened their recollections of the post-war period with references to both public and private discrimination against their community. Such discussion also inevitably provoked stereotypical depictions of the Protestant and unionist community. Paddy Murphy, for example, recalled:

They had no conception, the Protestants and Unionists, at that time, of being in a democratic government [...] they were just in charge of everything, they ruled the roost and they thought it could go on forever.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, Peter O'Kane suggested that the rationale for such discrimination was a mixture of superiority and fear:

I discovered in my time with them [...] there's a fear of losing their position all the time, fear was their main thing [...] they had this feeling that 'you're down there, boy, and we're up here', and they were scared of losing that.<sup>34</sup>

Catholics did not discount the fact that there was more mixing between Protestants and Catholics before the Troubles, but they were much more inclined to qualify it. Any suggestion of a golden age of community relations was restricted to discussion of the war years. It was suggested that Catholics were more inclined to socialise in Protestant halls at this time and that, for special dances, the bands stopped playing the British national anthem at the end of the night.<sup>35</sup> It was also noted that the arrival of evacuees from Belfast after the German bomb attacks on the city promoted

increased mixing between the two communities.<sup>36</sup> To John Convery, this camaraderie faded in the immediate post-war period and he even suggested that the Unionist Party had been so alarmed by it that it actively encouraged the Orange Order to 'drum up' sectarianism again.<sup>37</sup> Even Mary Armstrong, whose parents had a mixed marriage and who emerged as the Catholic interviewee who had socialised most freely with her Protestant neighbours throughout her life, qualified her account as follows:

There was always them and us. Always, no matter what happened [...] sectarianism was there underneath – all you had to do was sweep it a wee bit away – it was there...they were in charge and there was no way anybody was going to rock their boat – they could afford to be nice the odd time, as long as you didn't ever put a foot wrong.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to querying Protestant assertions that a large proportion of Catholics would have attended dances in the local Protestant hall in the post-war period, a number of Catholic interviewees deprecated the type of Catholic who did so. They were, for example, described by one interviewee as 'milk and water Catholics' and later as 'the type that lived down in that part of the town, the bottom end of the town'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, while many Protestant interviewees referred to the camaraderie which existed between the old constitutional Nationalist MPs and their Unionist counterparts as an illustration of communal harmony, a number of Catholics concurred with this fact but berated these politicians as 'quislings'.<sup>40</sup> In a further example of conflicting interpretation, one Protestant interviewee referred to the fact that the local Hibernian<sup>41</sup> and Protestant bands occasionally shared instruments and banners but this practice was independently referred to by a Catholic interviewee as evidence that one should 'never trust a Hibernian'.<sup>42</sup>

The contrasting emphasis placed on various celebrations, riots and disturbances by Protestants and Catholics reverberates strongly with Passerini's detection of silences in the accounts of Italian workers under fascism.<sup>43</sup> While the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 was recalled by a number of Protestants as an occasion of great celebration for both sides of the community, for example, this event was referred to by only one Catholic interviewee, and this in the context of a scuffle which had broken out between Catholic and Protestant schoolchildren in the nearby town of Magherafelt.<sup>44</sup>

On the whole, therefore, Catholic interviewees did not subscribe to the notion of the post-war period as a golden age of community relations, yet it was nevertheless possible to unpick generalisations about the two communities by carefully contrasting collective statements with evidence of individual experience. Peter O'Kane clearly stated that Protestants generally viewed themselves as superior to Catholics. Later in the interview, however, he recalled that the few Protestant children who lived in the townland of Lisnamuck, about three miles outside the town of Maghera, attended the local Catholic primary school and he reflected that:

It's a funny thing, the lads, the Protestant lads that were at Lisnamuck school in my day, you hadn't the same feeling about them as you would have about the ones that weren't, you know, you would have a closeness with them.<sup>45</sup>

This allusion to intensely local demography was also evident in the depiction of Catholics who attended dances in the local Orange hall as 'the type who lived down at the bottom of the town'. O'Kane also noted in passing that, through his interest in greyhound racing, he became very friendly with a Protestant man from Bushmills.<sup>46</sup> Employment emerged as another factor that encouraged a certain degree of mixing. Mary Armstrong, for example, recalled that, although her religion strongly restricted her choice of employment, she did eventually secure a job as a primary school cook in an almost exclusively Protestant village. While she noted that her initial reaction was, 'to work in Amper-taine or Tobermore – I thought, my God, you might as well say "the gates of heaven"', she went on to say that she got on very well with the staff and that she was sorry in the end to leave.<sup>47</sup>

Not surprisingly, class cut across both communities. Both Protestants and Catholics agreed, for example, that businessmen of all denominations were inclined to socialise together during this period. In particular it was noted that the local republican solicitor was quite friendly with both Roy Crawford, a local Protestant councillor, and Joe Burns, the Unionist MP for North Derry. Mary Armstrong explained that:

You see, there was no Protestant lawyer in Maghera until Burns came. And then when he came the Presbyterians didn't want him to know their business [...] and that was how Archie Agnew's father, and even Archie and Kevin, had to keep friendly with Roy – it was through business [...] You see the Protestants would have gone in and said that they had a field or something, land to sell. And then they would explain to the Agnews, 'But I don't think any of you boys need apply for this one.'<sup>48</sup>

In spite of generalisations about the Protestant community, there was also a recurrent suggestion that ordinary decent individual Protestants were held to ransom by agencies within their own community. Mary Armstrong, for instance, recalled that her Protestant friend apologised that she couldn't give Mary a job in the local library because her 'hands are tied'.<sup>49</sup> John Convery also claimed that, while a small number of his Protestant friends did play Gaelic football in the immediate post-war period, they were pressured into stopping. He went on to express the view that the 'cream' of the Protestant community emigrated at this time because they felt stifled by the restrictions placed upon them by agencies such as the Orange Order.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, while all Protestants stressed that the pre-Troubles period was characterised by communal harmony and referred to friendship between individual Unionist and Nationalist politicians, and their own friendship with members of the Catholic community, a certain distinction was made between the Catholic Church as an institution and individual Catholics. David Wilson, for example, clearly expressed his opinion that



the Catholic Church was wrong to insist upon segregated education and that this had a very negative effect on community relations.<sup>51</sup>

That they might have held totally opposing political views did not, as we have seen, necessarily deter friendship between Protestants and Catholics. It is clear, however, that the authorities differentiated between constitutional nationalists and republicans. While he alluded to general discrimination against Catholics, for example, Peter O'Kane added that the specific reason he waited so long to be allocated a house by Magherafelt district council was that he had chosen a republican councillor to 'do his fighting for him'.<sup>52</sup> During a discussion about the local police force, John Convery also recalled that the police often stood outside the local Catholic church on Easter Sunday to observe which Catholics were sporting an Easter lily.<sup>53</sup>

It is also possible to connect the political divisions within each community to the dynamics selected to explain historical developments. Some Catholic interviewees, for example, contended that developments in education were a key factor in bringing about a reform of the state in the 1960s, while others referred to the IRA raids of the mid-50s and the subsequent military campaign as having 'awakened nationalism throughout the north'.<sup>54</sup> Some Protestants did not offer any explanation for the dramatic eruption of conflict in the late 1960s but others referred to the civil rights movement and the Provisional IRA as agencies that destroyed this golden age of community relations and, furthermore, robbed them of their sense of Irishness.<sup>55</sup>

### Insider issues

While the foregoing discussion of collective memory referred frequently to two distinct religious and political communities, Portelli notes that, 'oral history can never be told without taking sides, since the "sides" exist inside the telling'.<sup>56</sup> In the case of this study, the fact that I was originally from the local Catholic community undoubtedly influenced the nature of the evidence collected. Indeed, although I appreciated the compelling logic of studying the two main religious communities together, rather than in isolation, I was initially apprehensive about approaching Protestant interviewees. I was concerned that approaching them might be a little awkward; that they would query my motivation in writing a history of this period; and that, even if they did agree to be interviewed, their responses might be somewhat stilted.

There were, however, a number of encouraging factors. Firstly, the local political climate had thawed considerably in the five years following the Provisional IRA and loyalist ceasefires of 1994.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, in contrast to urban areas such as Belfast and Derry, the religious and political boundaries in a rural community tend to be less tightly drawn along residential lines and are thus more permeable for researchers. Thirdly, I felt reasonably confident that both gender and age (I was in my early twenties when I commenced interviewing) might serve to soften the edge of my religious and political identity.

My first effort to interview an elderly Protestant neighbour, however, seemed to confirm my original fears. While she provided some interesting detail on the nature of local



Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O'Neill in conversation with an RUC county inspector in January 1969 about the possible re-routing of a Civil Rights march from Belfast to Derry so as to avoid the town of Maghera.

shops and businesses at this time, any mention of the relationship between Catholics and Protestants was studiously avoided. My entire relationship with her was based on an acceptance of this, and I found it very difficult to bring up potentially sensitive topics relating either to religion or politics. On a follow-up interview with a Catholic interviewee, however, I mentioned my apprehension about approaching members of the Protestant community. He explained that he had been very friendly with a well-known unionist family in the town throughout this period and, on his recommendation, I set up interviews with two members of this family. Thereafter, I combined a 'snowball sampling' method, based on recommendations from interviewees themselves, with my own network of contacts.

While the clear benefit of not being from the area under scrutiny is that it is easier to convey a neutral perspective, there is also some truth in the old joke about a Jewish visitor to Belfast being asked whether they were a 'Catholic Jew' or a 'Protestant Jew', as it underlines a very real danger of

outsiders being hijacked by one side or the other. In his recent study of 'Ballybogoin', for example, William Kelleher similarly states that, although he had hoped to establish networks with 'both sides of the house', he was not able to do so and, instead, concentrated his research on the local Catholic community.<sup>58</sup>

While my identity as a local Catholic was clear to all those I approached, in many ways I had a more leverage than an outsider. I was instinctively aware of the multiple gradations within, and between, the local Catholic and Protestant communities and was ultimately able to employ a range of different contacts to ensure that I reached out to a broad range of respondents. A prior knowledge of my family background also saved the time and energy usually expended on delicately ascertaining the religious and political background of a stranger.<sup>59</sup>

Although the experience of my first interview with a Protestant was not repeated, my identity did to some extent influence the tone of many subsequent interviews. I found that most Protestants were at pains to stress at the outset that they had been brought up never to discriminate against Catholics. Raymond Brown, for example, stated within the first few minutes of his interview that:

I mixed with everyone – I would safely say that most of my friends and the people that I played around with [as a child] were all Catholics – so I was never brought up to discriminate between Catholics and Protestants because of that, probably. And my mother and father never were that way inclined either.<sup>60</sup>

It seemed likely that the desire to establish this clearly at the outset was motivated by an awareness of my own religious background but this recollection was, however, linked to the genuinely persistent theme in Protestant testimonies of a golden age of community relations. In the end, while I certainly found that, as a Catholic, it was easier to elicit frank information from Catholics about prejudices and stereotypes, I was nevertheless satisfied that the diversity of experience recounted by Protestants provided for a reasonably balanced comparison.

Indeed, while one must always be constantly vigilant to the influence of the interviewer on the tone and content of interviews, I was often equally struck by people's insistence, once started, on telling their own stories. In particular, the fact that I was born several years after the Troubles began allowed interviewees to delight in explaining how different

(whether positively or negatively) their experience of growing up in the same town was.

### Conclusion: ethical issues in facing up to the past

Although all interviewees read and approved their transcripts, many expressed concerns that, if published, negative references they had made to various individuals might upset those relatives who continued to reside in the town of Maghera. This fear prompted a number of people to request that their real names would not be used in the event of publication.<sup>61</sup> A more troublesome issue, however, was that the fact that, having highlighted their concerns, almost all interviewees indicated that they were content to leave judgement on this issue to my own discretion. This implicit trust in turn caused me to reconsider my interpretation of their accounts. Although my study was concerned with factual information about Maghera in this period, my analysis ultimately concentrated on the way in which memories – both collective and individual – were presented. While the dissection of individual accounts for communal myths and evidence of contrasting individual experience made for interesting academic analysis, it provoked an age-old dilemma between the duty to produce good history and the sense of responsibility towards real people, including, in this case, neighbours and friends.

Although the exploration of collective memory in Ireland, and in Northern Ireland in particular, is a well-established academic pursuit, there thus remains a paradox which has infected much oral history research. There is a rich oral culture and a strong sense of community identity built around story-telling and well-rehearsed versions of local and communal history. At the same time, the existence of long local memories provides precisely the rationale for the reluctance to publicly verse these accounts.<sup>62</sup> This was particularly true of this study as the trust that interviewees placed in me was based on unwritten references from family and friends who would stand to absorb some of the criticism that could be generated by complete publication.

On a more positive vein, it has already been noted that the political climate in Northern Ireland has thawed significantly in the last decade. While the instinct to 'say nothing' was reinforced by dynamics of violence, repression and fear, there is now an increasing acceptance that facing up to the past is an essential part of moving beyond the conflict. In keeping with the contours of this study, however, this process will involve on-going negotiation between the collective and the individual, the past and the present.

### NOTES

1. This maxim was immortalised by Seamus Heaney in his 1975 poem, 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', *North*, London: Faber & Faber, 1975.

2. John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, p viii.

3. General histories include Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State*, London: Pluto Press, 1976; Patrick Buckland, *A History of Northern Ireland*,

Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1981; David Harkness, *Northern Ireland Since 1920*, Dublin: Helicon Press, 1983; and Sabine Wichert, *Northern Ireland Since 1945*, London: Longman, 1991.

4. I interviewed a total of fourteen people for this project – seven Catholics and seven Protestants. While the inclusion of both Protestants and Catholics was the main control factor for the sample, I deliberately sought out people of differing political persuasions, tried to maintain a reasonable

balance of men and women and, as far as possible, endeavoured to include members of different social classes. Although this was a relatively small sample of the local population, I transcribed more than 200,000 words and felt reasonably confident that the patterns presented were worthy of in-depth analysis.

5. The term 'Catholic' refers throughout to 'Roman Catholics' as opposed to Anglican Catholics.

6. The term 'Protestant', as understood in



Northern Ireland, encompasses Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists and Methodists as well as a range of smaller Christian groups.

**7.** This focus on identity meant that the analysis shared much common ground with a range of Northern Ireland participant observation studies, conducted mainly by anthropologists. Rosemary Harris's seminal study of attitudes in the rural border area of 'Ballybeg' in the 1950s provided a particularly valuable comparative framework. Rosemary Harris, *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ulster: A Study of Neighbours and 'Strangers' in a Border Community*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972.

**8.** The official title given to the county at the time of its creation was 'Londonderry'. The title 'Derry', emanating from the name of an ancient Christian settlement (Doire), has always been preferred by nationalists. It was also the term adopted by all interviewees, including Protestants.

**9.** The Plantation of Ulster, which began in 1607, was a systematic attempt to plant or settle English and Scottish Protestants on land which had been confiscated from Gaelic Irish chieftains.

**10.** Paul Compton, in association with A Smith *et al*, *Northern Ireland: A Census Atlas*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978, p 83.

**11.** In 1929 the seat was won by Captain James Lenox-Conyngham Chichester-Clark. He was replaced in a by-election in 1933 by Dehra Parker (formerly married to Chichester) and she was then replaced upon her retirement in 1960 by her grandson, Major James Dawson Chichester-Clark. He held the seat until the Stormont parliament was suspended in 1972.

**12.** In 1949 Major James Chichester-Clark, the Unionist candidate, held the seat with 9195 votes, a majority of 3383, on an 83.5% turnout. In a by-election for the Mid-Ulster seat at Westminster in April 1969, Bernadette Devlin defeated the Unionist candidate, Anna Forrest, on a 91.5% turnout with 33,648 votes, a margin of 4211.

**13.** After partition, the difference between constitutional nationalists and republicans was most clearly reflected in the degree of accommodation which they were prepared to afford to the Northern Ireland state. Although they occasionally contested elections to test their support, Sinn Féin refused to take their seats at either Stormont, the seat of the Northern Ireland parliament, or at Westminster, the seat of the United Kingdom parliament. Constitutional nationalists, meanwhile, attempted to steer a pragmatic course

between abstention and constitutional opposition.

**14.** Originating in 1905, Sinn Féin emerged into a modern political party primarily concerned with the re-unification of Ireland.

**15.** Tom Mitchell and Philip Clarke had each been sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for their role in a failed attack on Omagh Barracks in October 1954. The raid had been designed to secure arms for a projected IRA campaign. Mitchell's election agent for Mid-Ulster was Kevin Agnew, a republican solicitor based in Maghera. Both candidates were subsequently unseated by legal process because of their convictions before the courts but Mitchell stood again in a by-election for the Mid-Ulster seat. He won the election with an increased majority but this time was precluded on petition from taking the seat and the Unionist candidate was duly elected. Charles Beattie was later disqualified, however, for holding an office of profit under the Crown and, in a third contest, a constitutional nationalist, Michael O'Neill, ran alongside Mitchell. This split in the nationalist vote ensured that the Unionist candidate, George Forrest, won an overall majority. He held the seat until April 1969.

**16.** Building on a long tradition of militant resistance to British rule in Ireland, the Irish Republican Army emerged from the Irish Volunteers who fought in the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921). Following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921 and the establishment of the Irish Free State, the IRA split into pro and anti-Treaty factions, culminating in the Irish Civil War (1922-1923). Pro-Treaty forces won the Civil War and established the Irish Defence Forces. There was a further diminution of the IRA in 1926 when the majority of those who had opposed the Treaty regrouped under a new political party, Fianna Fáil. This party recognised the Irish Free State and subsequently endeavoured to suppress the IRA. The IRA continued in existence throughout the 1930s and directed a brief bombing campaign in England (1939-1940). Wartime internment and repressive measures by both the British and Irish governments all but defeated the IRA in the 1940s but they subsequently reorganised and prepared for a new campaign directed at targets of British military occupation in Northern Ireland.

**17.** Two Maghera men were convicted for their involvement in the IRA campaign – Liam Flanagan was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment at Belfast Commission in April 1959 and Michael McEldowney was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment at the Special Criminal Court in Dublin in December 1961. Up to a dozen local men

were also interned without trial at Belfast prison.

**18.** The Ulster Special Constabulary (based on the Special Constabulary [Ireland] Act of 1832) was a largely voluntary armed militia. Recruitment for this exclusively Protestant force commenced in 1920. It was originally divided into three categories (full-time members operating across Northern Ireland known as A Specials; part-time members restricted to their own districts known as B Specials; and a reserve force known as C Specials). Only the B Specials continued beyond the 1920s.

**19.** Wallace Clark asserts that this was, 'more per square inch than were found anywhere else in the Province.' Wallace Clark, *Guns in Ulster*, Upperlands: Wallace Clark Booksales, 2002, p. 115.

**20.** Originally known as the Orange Society, the Loyal Orange Institution was formed in 1795 as a fraternal organisation to defend Protestantism and its political principles in Ireland. It played a central role in the campaign to resist Home Rule in the late nineteenth century and later provided a crucial support network for the Ulster Unionist Party. It is most popularly associated with the annual march and parade on the Twelfth of July to commemorate the defeat of Catholic King James II in 1690.

**21.** The dispute in County Down arose when members of the Orange Order proposed to change their traditional route to link up with a newly built Orange hall. Their proposal to march along the mainly Catholic Longstone Road was strongly resisted by Catholics in the area and the parade was eventually banned by the Minister for Home Affairs. The Dungiven incident arose due to local resistance to the Coronation parade being led by the loyalist Boveagh band, with whom there had been trouble in the past. The distinction between Unionism and loyalism in this instance separates members of the Ulster Unionist Party from rank and file Protestants, whose loyalty to Protestantism and the Crown remained untainted by political exigencies.

**22.** Fionnuala O'Connor, *In Search of a State: Catholics in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1993, p 274.

**23.** Founded in 1884 by Michael Cusack, the Gaelic Athletic Association is primarily concerned with the promotion of Gaelic games such as Gaelic football, hurling and camogie. It also supports the Irish language, Irish music and dance. It is organised on the traditional parishes and counties of Ireland and, with a membership of approximately 800,000, it is the most popular organisation in the country. The first Gaelic football club was formed in Maghera in

1933 and it was officially reconstituted as 'Watty Graham's Gaelic Athletic Club' in 1948.

**24.** *Derry Journal*, 4 May 1951.

**25.** *Northern Constitution*, 19 July 1952.

**26.** Richard Rose, *Governing Without Consensus*, London: Faber and Faber, p 507.

**27.** Edward Moxon-Browne, *Nation, Class and Creed in Northern Ireland*, Aldershot: Gower, 1983, p 130.

**28.** Harris, 1972, p x.

**29.** See, for example, Ian McBride (ed), *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

**30.** Anna Green, 'Individual Remembering and "Collective Memory": Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates', *Oral History*, vol 32, no 2, 2004, p 35.

**31.** Green, 2004, p. 43.

**32.** Interview with Ian Gordon, 28 March 2001.

**33.** Interview with Paddy Murphy, 6 December 1999.

**34.** Interview with Peter O'Kane, 10 August 1999.

**35.** Interview with Peter O'Kane, 10 August 1999. The playing of the British national anthem at the end of a dance would have deterred many Catholics, on principle, from attending.

**36.** Interview with Mary Armstrong, 26 March 2001. Further evidence of this improvement in community relations was displayed when the members of Maghera Orange Lodge were publicly thanked by the Padraig Pearse Amateur Dramatic Club for the loan of chairs for a performance at Gulladuff. PRONI, HA/32/1/828: Inspector General RUC to Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, 22 March 1945.

**37.** Interview with John Convery, 14 June 1999.

**38.** Interview with Mary Armstrong, 26 March 2001.

**39.** Interview with Anne McDaid, 31 October 2001. In common with many towns in Northern Ireland, Maghera has one long main street, one end of which has traditionally been associated with Protestantism, the other with Catholicism. This division would seem to have intensified

following a dispute about the placement of banners associated with the Orange Order at the Catholic upper end of the town in 1938.

**40.** Interview with Michael Convery, 14 July 2000.

**41.** The Ancient Order of Hibernians emerged from a number of eighteenth-century Catholic defence organisations. Although banned by the Catholic Church until 1904, it expanded rapidly through its association with the constitutional Irish Parliamentary Party. After partition it faded in southern Ireland but maintained reasonable support in Northern Ireland. It is a fraternal Catholic society boasting a somewhat similar array of passwords, titles, collars, bands and parades to that of the Orange Order. During this period, animosity between local Hibernians and republicans was often quite intense.

**42.** Interview with Michael Convery, 14 July 2000.

**43.** Luisa Passerini "Italian working class culture between the wars" *International Journal of Oral History*, 1980, vol 1, pp 4-27.

**44.** Interview with Mary McKenna, 18 September 1999.

**45.** Interview with Peter O'Kane, 10 August 1999. Such non-team sports and hobbies, unlike soccer and Gaelic football, facilitated social interaction between Protestants and Catholics.

**46.** Interview with Peter O'Kane, 10 August 1999.

**47.** Interview with Mary Armstrong, 29 October 2001.

**48.** Interview with Mary Armstrong, 29 October 2001. The intense sensitivity about the sale of land in Northern Ireland was captured in a famous play by Louis J Walsh called 'The Pope in Killybuck'. The play charts a deal made between a Hibernian and a Protestant auctioneer to inflate the price of a farm by pretending that the Hibernian is secretly bidding on it.

**49.** Interview with Mary Armstrong, 26 March 2001.

**50.** Interview with John Convery, 14 June 1999.

**51.** Interview with David Wilson, 8 January 2001.

**52.** Interview with Peter O'Kane, 10 August 1999.

**53.** Interview with John Convery, 14 June 1999. The Easter lily, an artificial paper badge, was introduced by Cumann na mBán, a women's republican organisation, in 1926 to commemorate those who died during (and since) the Easter Rising in 1916. Proceeds from the sale of the badge went to the Irish Republican Prisoners' Dependents Fund. The lilies are traditionally sold outside Church gates on Easter Sunday and are worn at republican commemorations.

**54.** Interview with Paddy Murphy, 6 December 1999.

**55.** Interview with David Wilson, 8 January 2001 and interview with Ian Gordon, 28 March 2001.

**56.** Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different?' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, p 73.

**57.** In August 1994, the Provisional IRA declared an indefinite ceasefire. A similar announcement was made in October by the Combined Loyalist Military Command, an umbrella group for loyalist paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland.

**58.** William F Kelleher Jr, *The Troubles in Ballybogoin*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003, p x.

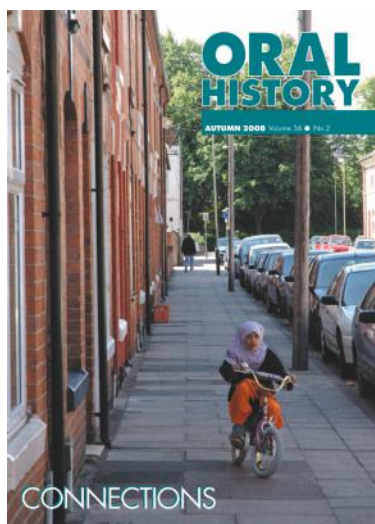
**59.** This process of delicately ascertaining the religious and political persuasions of a stranger before engaging in any meaningful dialogue is described by sociologists of Northern Irish society as 'telling'.

**60.** Interview with Raymond Brown, 23 January 2001.

**61.** For the purposes of this article, pseudonyms for all interviewees have been employed.

**62.** For a fuller exposition of this dilemma see Guy Beiner and Anna Bryson 'Listening to the Past and Talking to Each Other: Problems and Possibilities Facing Oral History in Ireland', *Irish and Economic Social History*, vol 1, 2003, pp 71-78.

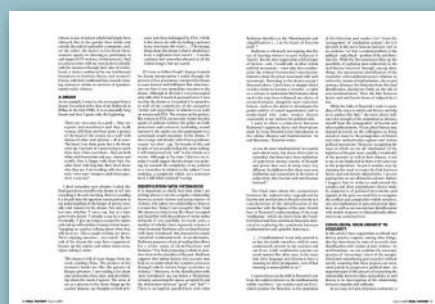
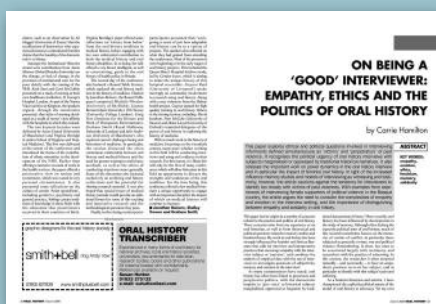
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# On being a 'good' interviewer: empathy, ethics and the politics of oral history

by Carrie Hamilton

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I wrote this article shortly after the publication of my book *Women and ETA: The Gender Politics of Radical Basque Nationalism* (University of Manchester Press, 2007), which drew on oral history interviews with women who had been active in, or supporters of, the armed organisation ETA during

the late twentieth century. I had conducted the interviews in the mid 1990s, when the Basque conflict was still 'hot'. During these years ETA committed a number of assassinations throughout Spain, there were regular violent clashes between young ETA supporters and

police riot squads in the Old Town of Bilbao where I was living, and relatives of ETA's several hundred prisoners held weekly protests outside the Arriaga theatre on the banks of the Nervión river. Some outsiders expressed concern for my personal safety while conducting research in such conditions; but I

was more aware of the political, emotional and intellectual challenges of investigating a history that was still happening, and that shaped the lives of all those around me, including the women I interviewed. I was particularly conscious that interviewing people who had been directly

involved in or had once (and in many cases, still) defended the use of political violence complicated any political affinity or emotional empathy I might feel for my interviewees.

Like many left feminist historians, I had been introduced to oral history as a methodology that 'gave voice to the voiceless'. By interviewing those largely left out of the official record, oral historians were engaged in the consciously progressive political project of recovering lost radical histories, in the process democratising the historical record and contributing to social justice in the present. But for all their leftist credentials, ETA members and supporters did not entirely fit the image of the victims of history. I began to question the assumption that the subjects of oral history are necessarily oppressed and that historians were in a position of unproblematic solidarity with them.

My approach to oral history was also very

much conditioned by the turn to memory, subjectivity and emotion in the 1980s and 1990s. I was especially influenced by Luisa Passerini's writing on memory, gender, generation and subjectivity. But even in the work of Passerini I detected a tendency to assume that radical historians are on the right side of history, capable of distinguishing between good and bad subjects and political movements. The rise of trauma studies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries seemed further to entrench the categories victim and perpetrator, and to promote the ethical duty of oral historians to side with victims of past violence. The case of my interviewees, many of whom expressed ambivalent attitudes to political violence, alongside the evidence of brutality committed by the Spanish state against ETA members and supporters, made me doubt this straightforward good

victim/bad perpetrator dichotomy. Furthermore, if identifying the good victim was no easy task, how was I to understand my own ethical and political position? What was I to make of my ambivalent feelings towards interviewees, who were not always so good? And how could I confront my own desire to be a 'good' interviewer, in both senses of the word?

These questions rubbed at me throughout the process of writing my history of women and ETA. They were a big part of the story, but I wasn't sure how I could integrate them into the book without drawing attention away from the historical narrative. Like many oral historians who write about our own subjectivity, I didn't want reflections on my emotional engagement with the project to take over the tale. So once the book was off my desk, I went back to the interviews and homed in on those aspects – discomfort, conflict, friendship, fantasy –

that had not made it into the chronological account. The resulting article is more than a behind-the-scenes description of the interviews, or reflection on the challenges of conducting interviews during a period of political conflict, including managing my own conflicts. It aims, ultimately, to account for some of the ways historians, and all witnesses to past political conflict, construct the very subjects whose histories we write. Looking back on it, I see that the intellectual and ethical questions at its core are the ones that still drive much of my writing and political activism. In this sense, I've come to see the article in many ways as the main story: not because I am at the centre of it, but because the questions it asks about empathy, ethics, solidarity and conflict are relevant far beyond the specific historical context in which they were originally framed.

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**Abstract:** This paper explores ethical and political questions involved in interviewing informants defined simultaneously as 'victims' and 'perpetrators' of past violence. It recognises the political urgency of oral history interviews with subjects marginalised or oppressed by traditional historical narratives. It also stresses the important work on power dynamics in the oral history interview and in particular the impact of feminist oral history. In light of the increased influence of memory studies and models of interviewing as witnessing and testimony, however, the article cautions against the tendency for interviewers to identify too closely with victims of past violence. With examples from experiences of interviewing female supporters of political violence in the Basque country, the article argues for the need to consider the complexities of empathy and emotion in the interview setting, and the importance of distinguishing between empathy and solidarity in oral history.

**Key words:** empathy, emotion, ethics, feminism, memory, solidarity



This paper has its origins in a number of concerns related to the practice and politics of oral history. These concerns arise from my experience as an oral historian, as well as from theoretical and political questions related to memory studies and feminist theory. My work in oral history has been strongly influenced by feminist oral history literature that calls for interview and interpretative practices that encourage empathy with the interview subject or 'narrator', and combines the analysis of empirical data with the use of interviews to investigate questions of subjectivity, memory and emotion in the interview.<sup>1</sup>

As many commentators have noted, oral history has often been linked to grassroots and progressive politics, and to the democratic impulse to 'give voice' to historical subjects marginalised, oppressed or forgotten by traditional documentary history.<sup>2</sup> More recently, oral history has been influenced by developments in the study of memory. Although often lacking the expressly political aims of oral history, much of this research nonetheless focuses on the memories of victims of conflict, in particular those subjected to genocide, torture, war and political violence. Remembering, in short, has come to be associated largely with testimony, and researchers with the practice of witnessing. In this context, the researcher is often assumed naturally – and necessarily – to have an empathetic position vis-à-vis her subject, and in particular to identify with that subject's pain and suffering.

As a feminist historian and activist, I have championed the explicitly political nature of the model of oral history as advocacy. Yet my own experience of research has prompted me to reflect upon the intellectual and political implications of this model, to the extent that it assumes that interview subjects are by definition oppressed or marginalised, and that their hitherto silenced voices will challenge dominant discourses in a progressive way. In the mid-1990s, I interviewed a number of Basque women who had participated in or supported political violence, sometimes resulting in injury and murder. Most of these women had also experienced, directly or through someone close to them, state and state-sanctioned 'anti-terrorist' violence, including arrest, torture, imprisonment and paramilitary attacks.<sup>3</sup> The experience of conducting and analysing these interviews has made me conscious of the need for a theory and practice of oral history that takes into account the complexity of such narrators' relationship to regimes of power and violence, and of our relationship to them as researchers.

I am not the first researcher to interview subjects who have participated in or supported violence against others; there are many examples of oral histories and ethnographic studies conducted with members of far-right, fascist and racist political movements.<sup>4</sup> In Holocaust studies, historians and other scholars have debated the ethics of reading and writing about perpetrator testimonies.<sup>5</sup> These debates have helped to shape my own thinking about research with narrators who are not, or are not only, victims. However, most such examples maintain a necessary distinction between racist or fascist perpetrators, on one hand, and their victims, on the other. As such, they are based on the assumption that both the researcher and reader (often presented as a unified 'we') will be hostile to history as

recounted by the oppressors, and will automatically identify with their victims, both emotionally and politically. In other words, the advocacy or witnessing model of oral history presupposes the ethically sound and politically progressive stance of the researcher.

My aim in this paper is not to challenge the politically urgent task of interviewing and publishing the stories of groups whose history has largely been ignored by traditional history, or the equally valuable project of documenting memories of people who participate in violence against others in order to understand, in Kathleen Blee's words, 'the historical attraction of ordinary people' to violent political movements.<sup>6</sup> My intention, rather, is to consider how oral historians can continue this project without reinforcing what Blee calls the 'epistemological dichotomy'<sup>7</sup> that places the oral historian in solidarity and empathy vis-à-vis certain narrators and in a position of distance and objectivity in relation to others.

Oral history's engagement with theories of memory, trauma and witnessing has yielded theoretically rich studies and important ethical discussion. Similarly, recent developments in cultural theory that emphasise affect and emotion are of value to oral historians, for whom the question of feeling in the interview is often paramount.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, I argue that it is necessary, in the light of these multiple theoretical influences, to define our terms carefully and to remain aware of the differences as well as the links between political commitment, on one hand, and emotional engagement, on the other. Finally, I caution against the tendency – found in much work on oral history, as well as studies about witnessing and trauma – to assume that the researcher necessarily occupies a politically progressive stance by virtue of conducting interviews with victims of past atrocities. Political commitment, unlike empathy, requires an objective analysis of wider social conditions, as well as some form of action beyond the confines of research. In other words, while there is often a relationship being a good (that is, ethical and rigorous) interviewer and a politically committed researcher, the two are not necessarily the same thing.

## Empathy and Oral History

In an important article on oral history, the novel and nostalgia in Spain, Gina Herrmann argues that one of the premises of oral history is that it 'insists on empathy'.<sup>9</sup> For Herrmann, empathy is both an ethical and political position. Drawing on the psychoanalytical theories of Heinz Kohut, Herrmann offers 'empathetic inquiry'<sup>10</sup> as a counter to narcissism, which she defines as a solipsistic position in which 'historical memory is useless'.<sup>11</sup> According to Herrmann, 'Insofar as oral history is an overwhelmingly liberal discipline that has traditionally sought to externalise the memories of its own ideological heroes, it has always been a nostalgic enterprise.'<sup>12</sup>

I agree with Herrmann that the oral history interview cannot work without a degree of empathy. I am also sympathetic to her political claims for oral history: that it can prove an important tool in contesting amnesia as well as false memories of past and present violence and repression.<sup>13</sup> But I am less convinced by the implied relationship between the

liberal (or progressive) politics of oral history and the empathy it necessitates. What happens when the narrator is not an 'ideological hero', and is instead someone whose political views the interviewer does not share, or indeed may even detest?

In an article entitled 'Evidence, empathy and ethics', Kathleen Blee discusses some of the difficulties and dilemmas of interviewing what she calls 'politically abhorrent informants',<sup>14</sup> in this case former members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Among these challenges, she identifies the need for the interviewer to be alert to the potential for narrators to deceive, for example through stories that emphasise the positive emotions that arose from participation in the KKK as opposed to the destructive effects of racism on the organisation's victims.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the classic feminist model that assumes that an ethically-informed oral history is based on both emotional and political affinity between interviewer and narrator, Blee reports that she 'was prepared to hate and fear (her) informants',<sup>16</sup> and was consequently taken aback when she found many of them 'interesting, intelligent and well-informed'.<sup>17</sup> Blee attributes the 'apparent ease of rapport' between herself and her narrators to the fact that they took for granted that she, as a white woman, would share their racist views.<sup>18</sup> Yet, she adds, 'rapport with politically abhorrent informants can be surprisingly, and disturbingly, easy to achieve in the oral history interview'.<sup>19</sup>

One might interpret this unexpected ease in a number of ways, including cultural and social connections between interviewer and narrator that surpass political divides, or the dynamics of the inter-generational interview, which can lend itself to a familiar teacher-student interaction between narrator and researcher. However, I suggest that even if the interviewer in these circumstances holds on to her hatred and fear of her informant, it may be precisely these feelings, and the dynamic they help to create in an interview through the dialectic of emotions, that helps to '(propel) the interview along'.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the very fact of engaging directly with an informant whose politics one detests can be the source of a certain satisfaction in an interviewer's progressive politics and in her ability to stand her political ground in the face of adversity.

I am thinking of a particular interview I did with a woman only a few years older than I, who had been active in ETA at a young age, and who, by the time I met her when she was in her mid-thirties, had already spent many years in hiding and prison. I was excited about meeting this well-known activist, even as I was somewhat daunted by her past. Following the interview, I wrote in my research diary:

The fact that I felt nervous interviewing someone who was more or less my age and had been in ETA recently made the interview stilted and defensive on my part. X was friendly enough, though I was put on guard by her straightforward, confident manner and political dogma.

The subsequent interview is best described as a 'sparing match'. I frequently challenged and disagreed with the narrator and she in turn rose to the occasion by presenting

what at the time I considered a rigid and frighteningly straightforward defence of ETA violence. I later regretted my inability to sit back and let the narrator speak on her own terms, and was embarrassed that I had so flagrantly broken one of the golden rules of oral history: to listen and keep one's mouth shut. Yet, in retrospect, and in spite of its weaknesses, this interview yielded some of the most important material I gathered with regards to women's participation in ETA violence and of gender relations inside the organisation.<sup>21</sup>

My experience with this narrator highlights a complexity in empathy itself. As Kohut stresses, '(...) empathy does not mean love or compassion. Empathy can be used decisively for hateful purposes. I figure out where your weak spots are so I can put the dagger in you.'<sup>22</sup> But, he adds, '(e)ven a hostile empathic environment is vastly preferable to an indifferent one'.<sup>23</sup> From an ethical perspective, this definition of empathy reminds us that as oral historians we have ultimate authority over our narrators' words. While I have taken precautions – including granting anonymity to all my narrators – to guarantee that their stories will not be quoted out of context, some narrators may feel that my interpretation of their interviews amounts to a metaphorical stabbing. While I did not feel, as Blee thought she might, either hatred or fear for any of my Basque narrators, in the above example I did experience what Kohut calls a 'hostile empathic environment'. Although this may have hindered the interview in some ways, my negative feelings for the narrator and her politics played a significant factor in 'propelling the interview forward' and, therefore, in gathering interesting research material.

It is instructive to contrast this experience with a very different one in which I established a more conventional empathic interaction with an older narrator. After transcribing an interview in which the widow of an ETA leader talked softly about her experiences in exile, her husband's death, and her ongoing commitment to radical nationalism – an encounter that ended, for her, in tears – I wrote:

There is an entry in my diary dated April 26, and I don't know if I wrote it before or after the interview. It is the long entry about objectivity and respecting my informants and their political positions notwithstanding my disagreements with them. I suspect it may have been inspired by the way Y touched me with her honesty and her pain, and also with her gently worded, but seemingly uncompromising, plea that their cause was an essential life force for her, her family, and her people.

The diary entry in question was a reflection on the ethics of oral history, on the risks of betraying one's narrators by misrepresenting or disagreeing with them in writing. In short, it was about the challenges of the power dynamics in an interview, challenges that have preoccupied feminist and other politically committed interviewers for decades.<sup>24</sup> But the word that struck me some years later, when re-reading the passage, was 'touched'. Returning to this quotation and the interview that inspired it, I recall feeling deeply moved by this interview and by the narrator's stories. A positivist model of fieldwork would stress the

need for the researcher to remain distant and objective in such a circumstance, to avoid the danger of being 'taken in' (or, in Blee's terms, 'deceived') by the narrator's subjective interpretation of ETA violence. But such an approach would ignore the fundamentally inter-subjective nature of the interview.

In retrospect, this was a landmark interview, one that brought me face to face – quite literally – with a chilling dilemma: for most ETA supporters, commitment to political violence was and is inextricably linked to strong emotional attachments to family, friends and community, many of whom have suffered armed attacks, torture, imprisonment and death. For this narrator and many others, what supporters of ETA call the 'armed struggle' (that is, violent attacks on thousands of people over the past several decades in the name of Basque independence) is a 'life force'. It was my discomfort at being 'touched' by the informant's feelings of love and commitment that alerted me to the importance of considering a variety of emotions – including love and compassion, as well as hatred and anger – in relation to the Basque conflict. This experience points to something beyond the rather obvious conclusion that we can like people whose politics we hate. My exchange with this narrator, like Blee's interviews with former members of the KKK, suggests that understanding in oral history may depend at times upon the interviewer's emotional discomfort and her willingness to abandon, albeit temporarily, the security of her political position.

## Death

Another challenge in interviewing narrators who have been both perpetrators and victims of violence arises from the problem of confronting stories of death. My experience of death in interviews with supporters of ETA contrasts with the assumption present in much of the literature on testimony and witnessing, that memories of war and violent death are often repressed by the speaker. In these situations, an urgent ethical task of the academic is to create new strategies for listening to and writing about that silence, as well as to cope with the difficult emotions that arise through the experience of second-hand witnessing. In the case of the violence against ETA members, quite the opposite claim can be made: death and the dead occupy a privileged and very vocal position in the public language of the radical Basque nationalist movement. In my interviews with women whose partners or other family members had been killed by police or far-right paramilitary squads, the dead occupied a central place in the narrators' life stories, to the point where in some cases memories of a dead relative structured the narrative itself. Although all of these men had died violent and sudden deaths, in most cases after being targeted by paramilitary squads, the memories of these deaths were neither repressed nor silenced in the interviews. There is no doubt that talking to me about the deaths of their loved ones was difficult for my Basque narrators. But this does not mean that writing about these deaths was necessarily difficult for me.

This is because within the wider public discourse of radical nationalism, ETA's 'martyrs' are accorded a central position that serves, among other things, to keep memories

of them vivid. In the light of this privilege – one that has played an important role in maintaining the gendered power relations in the radical nationalist movement – the primary ethical challenge I faced was actually to *resist* writing about the dead men as heroes, and to be conscious of the ways in which their memory could be, and had been, used to justify the perpetuation of violence against others. I was alerted to the central, and for me generally comfortable, position occupied by the ghosts of dead nationalists in my interviews precisely by my feelings of unease during an interview in which the ghost remained silent. In one of the least comfortable interviews I conducted, the narrator never mentioned directly the death of her partner in a paramilitary attack. Yet I knew through my archival research that the attack on her partner had been given massive publicity at the time of his death, and that the narrator, as his girlfriend, had figured prominently in those accounts. After the interview I wrote:

I went to Z's house. While she was kind and served me coffee, I wouldn't say that she was friendly – certainly one of the cooler characters I came across doing interviews. She was never very forthright, and I found I had to keep prompting her to get her to talk; indeed a couple of times she asked me to ask her more questions. As a result I didn't feel very comfortable and didn't ask some of the more intimate questions about (her partner)'s death – the atmosphere just didn't seem right.

In retrospect, I can speculate that the 'atmosphere didn't seem right' because the narrator did not adapt her life story to the affective structure of the radical nationalist narrative of the martyr. While at the time I thought her interview was one of the more dogmatic in terms of defending the 'party line', I now realise that by remaining silent about her dead partner the narrator may have been claiming a private space for her own memory and mourning in the face of the more general pressure to make the dead into public martyrs. Silence in this case can be interpreted not as repression or protection from pain, but as a form of resistance, both political and personal.

## Torture

If writing about the deaths of family members and friends of my narrators was not difficult, the greatest ethical challenge I faced involved recording and relating narrators' testimonies of torture. Unlike the deaths of ETA members, which have been amply archived and publicised, women's stories of torture, and in particular sexual torture, have received little attention in public expressions of radical nationalist history, and almost none in journalistic and academic accounts of ETA. More importantly, writing about torture brought me up against a central ethical dilemma: that of bearing witness to horrific tales of state-sponsored sexual violence against women without presenting my narrators – many of them former members and ongoing supporters of ETA and its violence – as victims.

The majority of academic studies of ETA, written from a perspective critical of radical nationalist violence, avoid

the question of torture altogether. In addition, as William Douglass and Joseba Zulaika write, torture is virtually taboo in the Spanish and Basque mainstream media. In the face of this official silence and denial, researchers wishing to write about the complexities of the Basque conflict, including state-sanctioned violence, have, I believe, an ethical obligation to address the 'taboo' issue of torture. In their book *Terror and Taboo*, Douglass and Zulaika provide a relatively rare analysis of the torture testimonies of accused ETA members and supporters. Their contribution is important, but their method – that of including torture testimonies in the same chapter as stories of survivors of ETA violence – is problematic.<sup>26</sup>

By bringing together 'experiences of victimisation and torture',<sup>27</sup> Douglass and Zulaika stress the communal suffering of ETA members and their victims. The authors cite the example of the daughter of a man killed by ETA who identifies with the suffering of the mother of a young man tortured to death in police custody. 'She discovered', write Douglass and Zulaika of the murdered man's daughter, 'that the common pain that bound all the victims of the violence was far more intense than that which separated them ideologically'.<sup>28</sup> But this strategy of comparing the torture of accused ETA members with the suffering of ETA's victims obscures both the specificity of the suffering of ETA's victims and the role of individual ETA members in causing the victim's pain. Moreover, it privileges the experiences of pain and suffering above political commitment as the defining feature of ETA militancy, a strategy that echoes the victimist tone of much radical nationalist rhetoric. Finally, it is not a coincidence that the victims cited by Douglass and Zulaika are women. In the gendered politics of pain manifest in most public representations of the Basque conflict, women's mourning is presented as natural and pre-political, stemming from their capacity for motherhood. The reverse of this equation is that women have limited access to political subject positions beyond motherhood.<sup>29</sup>

In my study of women and ETA, I wanted to write about torture, but in a way that neither equated the suffering of torture victims with the victims of ETA violence, nor repeated clichés about women's heroic ability to withstand pain. In the end, I tried to emphasise women's multiple strategies for resisting the pain and humiliation of sexual torture rather than their passive but stoic victimisation in the face of police abuse. Moreover, as in my analysis of sexualised representations of female ETA members in the Spanish and Basque press,<sup>30</sup> I stressed the need to resist categorising these women as alternately 'terrorists', victims or heroines, and to understand their stories of political activism within the wider historical context in which their choices were made. Such an interpretation does not absolve individual activists of an ethical responsibility for their actions, including acts of violence leading to injury and murder. To the contrary, it puts women's choices and agency, whether as armed activists or detainees facing torture, at the centre of historical analysis.

Writing about the torture of women who supported and committed political violence brought me up against a seeming double bind in my position as a feminist

researcher: on one hand, the need and political impulse to bear witness to acts of torture which had largely been silenced due to the gender bias inside and outside the radical nationalist community; and, on the other, the desire to forefront these women's agency in choosing to participate in and support ETA violence. In this process, I had to come to terms with my own desire to identify with the narrators through their tales of victimhood, a desire reinforced by my intellectual formation in feminist theory and women's history, with their traditional bias towards treating women as victims or survivors of (predominantly male) violence.

### A dream

As an example, I want to cite an excerpt from a dream I recorded at the time of my fieldwork in Bilbao in the mid-1990s. It is an unusually long dream and here I quote only the beginning:

There are two men in a park – they are rapists and murderers and they stalk women, kill them and then paste a picture of the head of the corpse on a wall with dozens of other such pictures – all in rows. The latest I see them paste has a slit throat sewn up. I am part of a team trying to catch these men. I have seen them – they are both white with brown hair and eyes, sinister and scruffy. One is bigger with short hair, the other short with long hair. But I don't know who they are. I am working with two other men – two cops – trying to catch these guys. Am I a cop too?

I don't remember now whether I asked this final question to myself in the dream or as I was recording it the next morning. But in re-reading it a decade later the question seems pertinent to my understandings of the images of power, sexuality and violence in the dream. Not only am I not sure whether 'I' am a cop, but at a later point in the dream 'I' mistake a cop for a rapist. Eventually, 'I' give up trying to escape the rapists and end up with another woman in their house, 'lounging on couches talking about what they will do to us – like a couple of ditzzy sex slaves. We're enjoying ourselves – not scared'. By the end of the dream the cops have reappeared, beaten up the rapists and taken them away. Upon waking I wrote:

This dream is full of scary images from my work, reading, films. The pictures of the women's heads are like the posters of Basque prisoners. I am reading a lot about rape and torture these days, and also thinking about the movie *Copycat*. The sense of me as a prisoner in the house brings up the scariest mixture: my thoughts of both prisoners and those kidnapped by ETA. I think it also has to do with me feeling a prisoner in my own home this week (...) The strange thing about this dream is that it should have been a nightmare but wasn't – I awoke confused and somewhat alarmed at all the violent images, but not scared.

If I were to follow Freud's famous formula for dream interpretation I could, through the process of free associ-



ation, interpret this dream as some form of wish fulfilment. But what interests me here is my immediate reaction to the dream. Although at the time I was preoccupied only with what it meant in personal terms, I now see that the dream as I recorded it is expressive as well of the complexity of the categories 'victim' and 'perpetrator' in relation to my work on women and ETA. The women on the posters, like women in ETA, are not only victims but also agents of political violence; the police are both protectors and torturers (including sexual torturers); the rapists are also participants in a consensual sexual encounter. In the dream, 'I' also occupy and identify with diverse positions: voyeur, 'sex slave', cop. Yet in spite of this, and in spite of not actually feeling fear upon waking, I still interpreted my 'self' in the dream as a victim. Although at the time I did not see it, today I would suggest that the dream was pointing me towards the complexity of my position as a researcher in relation to the subject I was studying, a complexity which, on a conscious level, I still failed (resisted?) seeing.

### Identification with victimhood

It is important to clarify here that what I am writing about is not the complex relationship between actual victims and perpetrators of violence, but rather *my* relationship to them as a researcher. Today I can recognise that I had this dream at a time in my life when I occupied and identified with the position of victim rather defiantly, if very painfully. In recent years, a number of scholars have expressed concern at what Susannah Radstone calls an identification with 'pure victimhood' that characterises much 'canonical' testimonial work. As an alternative, Radstone proposes a form of reading that allows for a wider range of identifications and fantasies.<sup>31</sup> Far from proposing a relativist position vis-à-vis the atrocities of the past, Radstone suggests that taking fantasy into account may help us to understand the complex processes through which victims forge resistance to violence.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, in the identification with 'pure victimhood' one can detect a 'Manichean certainty concerning the spaces occupied by and the distinctions between "good" and "bad"'.<sup>33</sup> There is an implicit parallel here with what Radstone identifies as the 'Manicheanism and simplification (...) at the heart of Fascism itself'.<sup>34</sup>

Radstone is obviously not arguing that the act of bearing witness to past violences is 'fascist'; but she does suggest that a full critique of fascism – and, I would add, of other violent political movements – must take into consideration the witness's/researcher's unconscious fantasies about the power associated with such movements. Returning to the dream excerpt I discussed above, I don't have to imagine that it reveals a desire to become a 'terrorist', a rapist or a torturer to understand that fantasies about such roles may have informed my choice of research project, alongside more conscious factors, such as the desire to investigate the gender politics of armed organisations, and to understand why some women choose consciously to use violence for political ends.

I want to draw a connection between Radstone's argument above and observations made by Luisa Passerini in her introduction to the volume *Memory and Totalitarianism*. 'As oral historians,' Passerini writes:

We use the term 'totalitarianism' in a partial and critical sense, but above all in order to remember that there have been similarities of oppression among systems of thought and power that were in many ways very different. In addition to this, there were even similarities and connections in the forms of subjectivity that Fascism and anti-Fascism fostered.<sup>35</sup>

The final note about the connections between the subjectivities engendered by fascism and anti-fascism is directly relevant to a consideration of the identification of the researcher with the figures of the past. Crucial here is Passerini's understanding of the term 'totalitarian', which she draws from the Frankfurt School and from anti-fascist historians interested in exploring the continuity between totalitarianisms and capitalist democracy:

(...) 'totalitarianism' is not only external to us but also inside ourselves, with its roots continuously present in our societies and our lives; (and) totalitarian systems are social systems like other ones, in the sense that their language and discourse have a meaning for their protagonists, even if that meaning is unacceptable to us.<sup>36</sup>

I want to focus on the shift in Passerini's text from the explicit reference to the totalitarianism within 'ourselves', 'our societies and our lives', which includes the historian, to the separation of the historian and reader ('us') from the 'protagonists' of 'totalitarian systems'; for it is precisely in this move from an inclusive 'our' to an exclusive 'us' that a central problem of the political – and ethical – position of the oral historian lies. While the first statement offers up the possibility of exploring inter-subjectivity in the oral history interview through, among other things, the unconscious identification of the researcher with totalitarian power relations as well as the victims of totalitarianism, the second sentence distances the historian from this dual identification, placing her firmly on the side of anti-totalitarianism. Thus the link between fascist and anti-fascist forms of subjectivity is lost.

While the bulk of Passerini's work is exemplary of the ways in which oral history can help us to explore this link,<sup>37</sup> the move above indicates the strength of the temptation to distance oneself from the 'protagonists' of fascism and other totalitarianisms. Yet an ethical history may depend precisely on the willingness to bring ourselves *closer* to the protagonists of fascism and other authoritarian regimes and violent political movements. Moreover, recognising the ways in which we are all 'implicated' in the injustices of the past (*and*, crucially I would add, of the present), as well as their silences, is not to say we are implicated in them *in the same way* as the perpetrators. To put it another way: by claiming the need to retain the link between fascist and anti-fascist subjectivities, I am not arguing that we are all fascists at heart. Rather, I suggest that in order to understand the complex and often contradictory choices made by supporters of political movements and regimes in the past, we need first to recognise the conflicts and complexities within ourselves, our own implications in past and present injustices, as well as our unconscious identifica-

tions with models of power we find politically abhorrent in our conscious lives.

### Conclusion: From empathy to solidarity

In this article I have argued that an ethical oral history practice requires, among other things, that the interviewer be wary of an overly close identification with victims of past violence. As oral historians, we can continue the necessary practice of 'recovering' voices of the marginalised and remembering past atrocities without naively assuming that these projects are motivated purely by progressive political aims. An important part of this process of reassessing the relationship between ethics and politics in oral history is an interrogation of the relationship between empathy and solidarity.

In an essay on Latin American *testimonio*, a genre with close links to oral history, Alberto Moreiras argues that it is the call to solidarity that distinguishes *testimonio* from the 'literary text'.<sup>38</sup> Solidarity, he writes, is 'the emotional apparatus that enables our metaphoric identification with the other, and a double conversion of the other into us, and of us into the other'.<sup>39</sup> I agree with Moreiras that the uniqueness of *testimonio* lies in its explicitly political character, and specifically its association with the voice of the Latin American subaltern. As texts that typically bear witness to acts of terror, including torture and genocide, *testimonios* also evoke strong feelings in the reader. Like much oral history, *testimonio* is both emotionally and politically charged.

I depart from Moreiras, however, in his definition of solidarity as 'an emotional apparatus', an 'affective phenomenon'. Solidarity is something more, and perhaps something less, than a feeling. As such, it should not be confused with empathy. Solidarity involves both an analysis of relations of power in the past and a commitment to action in the present. It may begin with an emotional identification, through empathy, with the victims of oppression, but it does not end there. Conversely, some of the perceived dilemmas posed by interviews with narrators from violent political movements may be overcome if we remember that establishing empathy in an interview does not imply support for the narrator's political position. To the contrary, an ethical interview may depend precisely on a willingness to distinguish between empathy and solidarity, and to allow emotional discomfort to lead to a ques-

tioning of political pieties, both those of the narrator and of the interviewer.

As the influence of memory studies, trauma and testimony on oral history<sup>40</sup> is joined by an increased academic interest in affect and emotion, it is important that researchers interrogate the relationship between key terms such as empathy, solidarity, emotion, ethics and politics. In her work on the cultural politics of emotion, Sara Ahmed describes the relationship between feelings and political and legal concepts of justice and injustice as 'complicated'. She writes:

The effects of violence are something to do with why violence can be judged as 'bad'. Now, this is not to say that what makes violence bad is the other's suffering. To make such a claim is dangerous: it makes the judgement of right and wrong dependent upon the existence of emotions.<sup>41</sup>

Ideas about 'right' and 'wrong', insists Ahmed, must be formed through an understanding of both norms and affects.<sup>42</sup> I would add here that being aware of the complicated relationship between injustice and badness makes us alert to the equally complex relationship between justice and goodness. While researchers should not abandon the crucial political project of bearing witness to past oppressions, ethical research necessitates an exploration of our own subjectivity, and of our investment in witnessing.

Just as maintaining a distance from 'politically abhorrent' narrators may help to reaffirm an interviewer's confidence in her own political position, identifying with informants as victims may make the researcher, on some level, feel good about herself. Ultimately, it is this quest for goodness that I want to question in the model of oral history that associates empathy with solidarity, and interviewing with witnessing – or at least an empathy that does not take into account the danger of the dagger – and a witnessing that does not adequately acknowledge its 'darker side'. I am not suggesting that we ignore or refuse to condemn badness when we see and hear about it, whether the use of violence or support for dangerous political organisations. Nor am I questioning the idea that some interview narrators are bad, and some much worse than others. What concerns me is the seeming eagerness of many researchers to identify our subjects, and perhaps above all ourselves, as good.

### NOTES

1. See for example, Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, London and New York, Routledge, 1991.

2. Kathleen Blee, 'Evidence, empathy and ethics: Lessons from oral histories of the Klan' in Rob Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp 333-43; Gina Hermann, 'A usable nostalgia for Spain: oral history and the novel', *Journal of Romance Studies*, vol 2, no 2, 2002, p 74; Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone

'Introduction' in Hodgkin and Radstone (eds), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, New York and London, Routledge, 2003, p 4.

3. Carrie Hamilton, *Women and ETA: The Gender Politics of Radical Basque Nationalism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

4. See for example, Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991 and Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1987.

5. See for example the 'Afterward' of the second edition of Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York, Harper Collins, 1998, pp 191-223. Thanks to Kat Hall for this reference.

6. Blee, 1997, p 341, note 3.

7. Blee, 1997, p 333.

8. See for example Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004 and 'Happiness', special issue of *New Formations*, no 63, 2008. For an interesting example of a literary critic using

theories of trauma and affect in oral history, see Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham, N.C. and London, Duke University Press, 2003, chapters 5 and 6.

9. Herrmann, 2002, pp 76-7.

10. Herrmann, 2002, p 77.

11. Herrmann, 2002, p 72.

12. Herrmann, 2002, p 74

13. Herrmann, 2002, p 76.

14. Blee, 1997, p 340.

15. Blee, 1997, pp 336-7.

16. Blee, 1997, p 339.

17. Blee, 1997, p 339.

18. Blee, 1997, p 339.

19. Blee, 1997, p 340.

20. Blee, 1997, p 340.

21. For a more detailed analysis of this interview see Carrie Hamilton, 'Political Violence and Body Language in Life Stories of Women ETA Activists', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol 32, no 4, 2007, pp 911-32. Reprinted in Karen Alexander and Mary E. Hawkesworth (eds), *War & Terror: Feminist Perspectives*, Chicago

and London, Chicago University Press, 2008, pp 137-58.

22. Heinz Kohut, *Self Psychology and the Humanities: Reflections on a New Psychoanalytic Approach*, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1985, p 222.

23. Kohut, 1985, p 222.

24. See Gluck and Patai, 1991.

25. William A. Douglass and Joseba Zulaika, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables and Faces of Terrorism*, New York and London, Routledge, 1996, p 207.

26. Douglass and Zulaika, 1996, pp 191-226

27. Douglass and Zulaika, 1996, p 191.

28. Douglass and Zulaika, 1996, p 195.

29. Hamilton, 2007.

30. Hamilton, 2007.

31. Susannah Radstone, 'Social Bonds and Psychical Order: Testimonies', *Cultural Values*, vol 5, no 1, January 2001, p 75.

32. Radstone, 2001, p 75.

33. Radstone, 2001, p 61.

34. Radstone, 2001, p 65.

35. Luisa Passerini, 'Introduction' in Passerini (ed), *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories*, vol 1, Totalitarianism, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p 6.

36. Passerini, 1992, p 7.

37. See especially *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy 1968*, Hanover and London, Wesleyan University Press, 1996; *Fascism in Popular Memory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

38. Alberto Moreiras, 'The Aura of Testimonio' in Georg M. Gugelberger (ed), *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, Durham, NC and London, Duke University Press, 1996, p 198.

39. Moreiras, 1996, p 198.

40. See for example, the special issue of *Oral History*, 'Oral History as "Healing"?', vol 34, no 1, Spring 2006.

41. Ahmed, 2004, p 193.

42. Ahmed, 2004, p 203, note 2.

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Looking back, I am also reminded of the strong emotional investment (made by interviewees, interviewers, project partners) in the project's aim to give voice to young care leavers and enable their stories to be heard, so connecting policy with lived experience. The widespread use of *Care Stories* (films and



booklet) in professional training has gone some way towards achieving this, although there has been no systematic attempt to evaluate its impact on professional audiences. Authority was shared well in the planning and conduct of the interviews but less so in their interpretation. Ultimately, I regret that we were not able to involve the young participants further in the process of editing the film.

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This article enables readers to hear the voices of young people who have lived in care. It opens many issues about asking questions, listening and understanding emotion: how words are used, how labels are ascribed, how roles are defined, how beliefs and policies shape practices, how vulnerable young people become more vulnerable. It exposes the importance of trust, love and being valued as a person and the subjectivities of individual and shared

experience of having and not having people to call family. This article sets the study of emotion within a broader disciplinary framework whilst highlighting the value of approaching 'emotions as cultural': the suggestion that emotions are not some preformed kind of given, somehow unchanging and independent of time and place but rather historically and culturally situated is such a helpful way of engaging inter-generationally or cross-culturally with the meaning of spoken and

unspoken perceptions, feelings and attitudes both in and away from interviews. Empathy is important but acknowledging the unknowable chasms of difference in experience is important too. This article is a powerful reminder of the complexity that opens up whenever and wherever anyone seeks to ask or answer a question.

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**Abstract:** This article outlines a cultural studies approach to studying emotion and use this to look again at a series of interviews with young care leavers, focusing on what they had to say about 'care'. It explores how specific emotion words are deployed as critical analytical terms by interviewees reflecting on their experiences and representing their subjectivities and social realities in relation to others. Such analysis articulates historically and culturally specific meanings of care.

**Key words:** cultural studies, emotion, care, love, subjectivity, power relations, relationality

This article considers the role of emotion in the production and interpretation of oral history. It explores the implications of viewing emotions not only as individual and personal but also as cultural and collective phenomena. It does this by analysing talk about care and love in interviews with young people in the process of leaving local authority care.

Emotion can play an important part in the creation, interpretation and reception of oral narratives. Empathy may be a crucial ingredient in producing 'thick dialogue' in oral history and other forms of qualitative interviewing, although for some researchers this is contentious.<sup>1</sup> Emotion may also be a topic of inquiry in oral history, for example in generating accounts of certain emotions – such as fear, despair, shame, joy and hope – in specific cultural and historical contexts.<sup>2</sup> Emotion may provide categories of analysis in the interpretation of oral accounts collected for other purposes.<sup>3</sup> Emotion may be a significant aspect of audiences' engagement with oral history as they variously experience sympathy, pride, anger and so on.

Emotion and emotion words – pride, anger, fear, love, hope, joy – are often deployed in uncritical ways as if their meanings are self evident and stable. Yet, there are numerous ways of conceptualising and investigating emotion,

each making different assumptions about epistemology and the ontology of the subject. Such assumptions are the focus of recent academic debate.<sup>4</sup>

### Thinking emotion as cultural

Academic interest in emotions has been growing across the humanities and social sciences. Why? To a certain extent, this is part of a broader challenge to essentialism and deep-rooted dichotomies in Western thought.<sup>5</sup> Some social and cultural theorists have turned to the study of emotion as part of a broader critique of contemporary social hierarchies and power relations.

Since the seventeenth century, reason has come to be seen as essential to the production of objective, reliable and universal understandings of reality. Emotion has been seen as the opposite of reason and, therefore, likely to subvert inquiry. Feminist philosophers and critics of science (for example, Evelyn Fox Keller, Sandra Harding, Alison Jaggar, Jane Flax and Hilary Rose)<sup>6</sup> have pointed out that such thinking has relied on, and reinforced, further conceptual dichotomies – culture/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion, objectivity/subjectivity – in which the former, systematically associated with the masculine, dominate the latter, linked with the feminine.<sup>7</sup> Dominant

political, social and cultural groups (white, middle class, male) have been aligned with reason and objectivity and subordinate groups (black, working class, female) with subjectivity, bias and irrationality. Alison Jaggar argues that this 'assignment of reason and emotion' works to further bolster the epistemic and political authority of dominant groups and discredit subordinate groups, constituting a process of 'emotional hegemony'.<sup>8</sup>

Essentialism,<sup>9</sup> intrinsic to scientific inquiry, has sometimes also been applied implicitly or explicitly, to the study of social organisation. Here, categories such as gender, race/ethnicity, class and sexuality are understood to describe universal characteristics and functions – innate essences – located in the biological individual and, as such, unchangeable, which in turn give rise to social differences and identities. In contrast, critics (for example, Stuart Hall, Elizabeth Grosz, Kobena Mercer and Jeffrey Weeks) have argued that social differences are the historically located effects of political, social and cultural relations.<sup>10</sup>

Emotions have mainly been studied within the disciplines of biology, cognitive psychology and psychoanalysis. Despite some variation in approach and focus, these disciplines have tended to locate emotions in the bodies and psyches of individuals, treating them as both essential and universal characteristics. They have paid little attention to the social, cultural, and historical aspects of emotions. Such understanding resonates with everyday popular perceptions. The essence of emotion is understood as 'what we feel inside' and our innermost feelings constitute who and what we truly and deeply *are*. That is, what we feel is taken to be the authentic essence of *both* emotion *and* self.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, emotions are personal and private. They belong to the individual and work their way, or leak, out into the social.

This 'inside out' model of emotions<sup>12</sup> has been rejected by historians and sociologists of emotion who have viewed emotions as culturally created, the results of changing social and cultural practices – rules, discourses, institutions – that 'get inside' and condition the individual.<sup>13</sup> However, researchers have tended to regard the manifestation of emotion in forms available to intellectual inquiry, as the *effects* – and, even, distortions – of an authentic, underlying emotional essence or experience located in the individual, as a thing or state she/he 'has'.<sup>14</sup>

Others argue that both the 'inside out' (psychological) and the 'outside in' (sociological) models of emotions are too narrow and offer inadequate tools for fully thinking through the dynamics and, indeed, politics of emotion.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, some cultural theorists argue that emotions are *not* complete, finished, fully accessible and knowable products and not solely properties of/in the individual. Instead of thinking about emotions as 'things' people 'have', cultural theorists focus on what emotions 'do'.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, the researcher is concerned with how emotions function as cultural practices in changing circumstances, how they accrue specific meanings and the effects of these. A cultural analysis of emotions focuses on context, power and relationality. Emotions are investigated in context as historically specific, always changing and contested, cultural forms and practices. Power is seen as

central and productive, pervading every level of social interaction, working both to constrain and enable subjectivities and social hierarchies. Relationality refers to the ways culture, context and power operate interactively.<sup>17</sup>

Relationality is especially significant because it assumes that the subject is neither fully autonomous nor culturally determined but constituted in relations with others. Viewing emotions as 'relational' involves understanding them as part of the simultaneous production of subjects and the social and the relationship between them.<sup>18</sup> From this perspective, emotions 'produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they were objects'.<sup>19</sup> For example, discussing hate and the politics of racism, Sara Ahmed argues that hate is not contained in an individual subject, body, object or sign. Rather, hate is involved in the very negotiation of boundaries between selves and others, and in the distinctions between communities. Hate works to 'secure collectives' and 'align some subjects with some others and against other others', producing notions of 'the other' as a source of fear and insecurity. In this way, identities are brought into being through hate.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, hate can be used as a critical concept with which to generate new understandings of the reproduction of national identities and racism.

In her discussion of grief, Judith Butler considers how emotion may blur as well as define boundaries: 'I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well'.<sup>21</sup> The death of another, and the process of grieving, reveals 'a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as the *tie* by which those terms [I and you] are differentiated and related'.<sup>22</sup> Grief reveals our ties to others and, in doing so, exposes the extent to which we are constituted by those ties. Further, contrary to the popular belief that it is private and non-political, grief operates visibly in the sphere of politics.<sup>23</sup> Vulnerability (to war, disease, poverty) and grief are not evenly distributed and a hierarchy of grief exists in public discourse whereby some lives are publicly acknowledged as more grievable than others and some as not grievable at all.<sup>24</sup>

Grief, understood as inevitably relational and historical, may be used as an analytical tool for identifying inequalities and possibilities for political transformation at a specific historical juncture. Similarly, Carolyn Steedman demonstrates the strategic possibilities of introducing emotion into historical and political analysis though her discussion of a 'politics of envy'.<sup>25</sup> For those living in circumstances of poverty and deprivation, envy is a response to experienced material and political differences, a sign of 'the felt injuries of a social system,' which neglects the existences and desires of certain groups.<sup>26</sup> Taking envy seriously involves recognising social exclusion and 'the impossible unfairness of things'.<sup>27</sup> However, envy, commonly understood as subjective and trivial, is ignored as a critical category and potential force for social or political change.<sup>28</sup>

Thinking 'emotions as cultural' provides important new tools of analysis. Emotions can be put to work as critical categories in analysing social practices and relations, where

they (emotions) are understood not as already formed but as historically situated inter-subjective processes produced through, and helping to produce, subjectivities, social structures, institutions, patterns of organization and power relations. In particular, I argue, emotion categories can be used in analyses of oral narratives to generate new understandings of specific social realities.

The production of autobiographical narrative in an interview can be seen as a process through which subjectivity is negotiated and performed, experience evoked and appraised, in collaboration with an interviewer and anticipated future audience. This creative work on the past and self necessarily draws on the repertoire of discourses available to subjects at the time. Interview texts can be analysed for how, at particular historical moments, subjects enact subjectivity in relation to others and specific discourses.

In this article, I examine 'emotion talk' by young people as part of the production of subjectivities, social realities and power relations. Focusing on talk about care and love in accounts of being looked after by a local authority, I also consider how these terms are discursively and historically constituted.

### Care stories

*Care Stories* was a project in which university staff and students, working with staff from community-based organisations (family therapists, social workers, youth workers), used oral history and digital media methodologies to investigate and represent the experiences of 'looked after' young people.<sup>29</sup> *Care Stories* aimed to record young people's accounts of 'being in care' – what worked and what did not work, and what could have been different and how – and to represent their emotional needs in their own words. Detailed individual interviews were video recorded, analysed and edited to produce a film for use in professional training. The project, following a more formal 'needs assessment' exercise, explicitly aimed to 'give voice' to care leavers and to make a difference by influencing service provision.

At 31 March 2004, there were 61,200 looked after children in England (an increase of five per cent from 2000).<sup>30</sup> The term 'looked after' was first used in the 1989 Children Act<sup>31</sup> to refer to 'all children in public care, including those in foster or residential homes, and those still living with their own parents but subject to care orders'.<sup>32</sup>

The history of public care of children in the UK, supported by successive legislation since the 1908 Children Act,<sup>33</sup> has focused consistently on the goal of 'saving' and 'protecting' children by intervening to remove them from their homes when the risk of leaving them there was considered too great.<sup>34</sup> This has been a highly contentious area of policy and practice not least because of high profile cases of abuse leading to death of children in their families (for example, Baby Peter, Khyra Ishaq and Victoria Climbié)<sup>35</sup> and institutional abuse scandals (for example, in North Wales, Leicestershire and the London Borough of Hackney),<sup>36</sup> and the tendency to blame maternal deficiencies for failures in child protection. Recently, there has been a move to consider increasing the use of 'kinship care'.<sup>37</sup>

Ritchie argues that it is not clear whether children in care have been 'saved' or whether their life chances have been diminished.<sup>38</sup> Young people leaving care have usually experienced breakdowns in foster and residential care, with three quarters experiencing breakdown in the final two years of placement.<sup>39</sup> Young care leavers are disadvantaged compared with other children and are more vulnerable to unemployment, homelessness, poverty, lack of emotional or material support systems, and health and mental health problems.<sup>40</sup> Ritchie argues that, whilst it is not possible to say that children will be better 'looked after' by their extended families, there is evidence that maintaining children in their own homes is more likely to promote the 'welfare of the child' by enhancing social capital – resulting from relationships with family members and community – self-esteem and a sense of identity and cultural heritage.<sup>41</sup> Currently, attention is being turned back to the family unit partly as a result of the cost of public carer, poor outcomes and shortage of foster carers.<sup>42</sup>

Discourses on public care and protection of children have been highly contentious and persistently challenged, in particular by feminist critics. Feminists have questioned assumptions about the nature of child abuse and the tendency to equate it with maternal deficiencies despite research showing that men are more often perpetrators of sexual and physical abuse.<sup>43</sup> Feminist criticism has also been directed at the construction of the discursive figure of 'the child'.<sup>44</sup> As Barbara Baird points out, 'the child' is a powerful and highly mobile signifier, long deployed as part of 'diverse political and cultural agendas' and invoked as a discursive strategy with which one cannot disagree.<sup>45</sup> The power of the child as a discursive resource is that it is located outside history and politics.<sup>46</sup> The child in all politics pivoting on the discursive figure of "the child" is not specified, yet is 'laden with racialised, gendered, classed and sexualised cultural assumptions'.<sup>47</sup> Other identities are co-constructed with that of the child – especially that of the child in need of protection – including mother and father, where mother especially is an already fraught status for women.<sup>48</sup> Clearly, 'care' needs to be considered within the context of complex historically and politically located relations.

This article focuses on the perspectives of young people leaving care in London in 2003/04. Whilst project partners fully appreciated the need also to consider the perspectives and experiences of carers, such investigation was unfortunately beyond our resources at the time. However, detailed research into the work and lives of those providing care for vulnerable children and young people has been conducted by others, in particular, Brannen *et al.*<sup>49</sup>

*Care Stories* involved university staff members in project design, preparing students to conduct, film and edit oral history interviews. Students were taking either an undergraduate programme in oral history research methods or a postgraduate programme in digital media. In summer 2003, project partners invited care leavers to a series of meetings at which the project was explained. They were invited to talk indirectly about their experiences when asked 'what are the sorts of things that ought to be in the video?' 'What should people know about being in care?'

Seven young people were interviewed. They were all self-selected, aged between 16 and 19 years of age, in the process of leaving care and being supported in this by the local authority's leaving care team. They were from either black or minority ethnic (BME) or mixed heritage backgrounds. Interviewers had little prior experience of interviewing, although they received detailed training as part of the project and their associated studies. Interviewees and interviewers had much in common – age, social and cultural background and shared leisure interests. Interviewers spent time, on two occasions, at social events, talking informally with interviewees and getting to know about their experiences and concerns. These encounters, together with related reading and tutorial discussion, formed a basis for planning interviews as well as developing a rapport.<sup>50</sup>

### Empathy in oral history

How important is empathy to interviewing and knowledge production in oral history? Oral history and feminist oral history have tended to place emphasis on giving voice to the marginalised and oppressed. The interviewer is assumed to be on the side of and to empathise with the interview subject and, in particular, to 'identify with that subject's pain and suffering'.<sup>51</sup> But, such assumptions based on the notion of shared ideology are not unproblematic and indeed have been challenged. Hamilton (who interviewed subjects who were simultaneously victims and perpetrators of violence) and Blee (who interviewed former members of the Ku Klux Klan) both illustrate how empathy may be ethically and politically problematic and fail to provide a secure basis for knowledge.<sup>52</sup> Others have shown that when an interviewer assumes the position of insider – identifying with the social position, perspective and experience of the interviewee – her/his assumptions may well constrain the interview exchange by shaping not only the questions posed but also interpretations of responses and follow-up questions.<sup>53</sup>

In other words, empathy may lead to fuller interviews, or it may not. Similarly, absence of empathy may be productive in different ways. To be sure, feelings play a creative role in interview dynamics, even if they are not adequately represented by empathy. Consideration of empathy needs to be historically, culturally and socially defined and located, and its conditions of possibility need to be examined in specific instances.

The emotional dynamics between interviewees and interviewers were a topic of discussion in the project *Care Stories*.<sup>54</sup> At first, interviewers were concerned about how they would manage emotion in the interviews. They worried that interviewees would be overwhelmed by their feelings when talking about going into care and that they (the interviewers) would not know what to do. They were anxious that interviewees would find interviews intrusive and withdraw from the project.

As it turned out, pre-interview interaction enabled interviewees and interviewers to get to know each other, discover common interests and establish trust. They realised that they were on the same side and that together they wanted to communicate a message to professionals

working with children in care. Interviewers and interviewees got on very well with each other and engaged in mutually reflective conversations about what it means to be a young person and the emotional resources needed to develop a sense of independence. Interviewers reflected on their own family relations and lives in emotional terms.

In all interviews, interviewee and interviewer communicated with warmth, enthusiasm and openness. Interviewees related 'highly personal, emotionally charged, and powerful stories'.<sup>55</sup> Project partners felt that the stories told were especially frank and the result of a distinctive interview relationship, characterised in this instance by a heightened sense of empathy and 'shared authority'.<sup>56</sup> However, interviews were undoubtedly also limited by the interviewers' desire to get on with interviewees and, in some cases, a (protective) reluctance to probe more deeply.

### Care and love – emotion as a topic in oral history

The project aimed to investigate the emotional needs of young people. Emotion was a topic at the heart of the project but not defined in precise terms. Interviewers did not ask about specific emotions beyond 'how did you feel about that?' However, it was striking that certain emotion words – specifically, care and love – cropped up frequently. Interviewees spoke at length about the circumstances in which they went into care and what it was like, and in the process described what they thought caring can and should mean.<sup>57</sup> They also talked about feeling unloved and unlovable, wanting love and what love means to them.

All interviewees expressed a sense of profound loss and sadness that their birth parents had not been able to care for them and prioritise their needs. Michael<sup>58</sup> said of his birth parents, 'they only live for today, they only care about themselves they never cared for their kids'.<sup>59</sup> Diane asked why, coming from a very large extended family (with twenty one siblings on her mother's side and twenty two on her father's) she was in care? Why couldn't they care for her? Was there something wrong with her?<sup>60</sup>

Diane said that, in foster care, it is impossible to get away from the fact that you are living with strangers – even when they are trying very hard to meet your needs – and what you want, more than anything, is to be with your 'real' family receiving love from them.

Since leaving care, Diane has tried unsuccessfully to re-establish relations with members of her birth family but has now given up and says that she is caring for herself. With mixed feelings, she admitted, 'to tell you the truth, social services are my family, they are my family'.

Michael explained that he felt unloved by his birth family and, consequently, unlovable and unable to trust foster carers:

Well basically I am not saying everyone is bad, there are .. lots of nice people around...but basically I had some rough times beforehand ..till you get used to them, those nice people you kinda make their lives hell if you want to or not, because you can't trust them straight away, because you hurt, and your feelings have been



broken before, and your trust is being lost, and how do I say the first thing you know is that they are not your family that the thing that the problem when you break up that point when you realise you are all by yourself that you won't get anyone to love you, your family never loved you that why you are in care, now that I say, if you didn't receive love from your family, no one else will give it to you.

(...)

I do search for love in other people but they don't give it to me, or the way you expect because they are professional.<sup>61</sup>

In these examples, interviewees considered that only birth parents could provide the kind of love a child needs. Six out of seven interviewees spontaneously expressed a deep sense of disappointment and regret at their perception that foster carers had cared for them not out of love but for money. From this perspective, there was a contradiction between love and care in fostering and the possible meanings of 'care' were severely limited by remuneration:

...I'm not saying that people shouldn't become foster carers but you have to have the love, you have to, you cannot be selfish. If you wanna become, you know erm what's it called, a foster carer, but you have to love and care for children, you have to know it's not about the money, but, you know, it's all about love, and, you're just trying to help the person, it's not always about the money, so erm that's all I can say...<sup>62</sup>

I think the best way is like... I don't think looking after a child for money is the best thing either. So... my ideal foster carer would be a person who doesn't care about money, who care about you... And puts you the first because that's, that's you'... Actually children in care are missing is somebody putting them first. No one actually puts you first.<sup>63</sup>

These young people criticised a system in which they perceived that foster carers and social workers prioritised their own income and career development. They felt that their emotional needs were subordinate to the material concerns of carers and social services.

Michael said of one carer: 'she kind of didn't like having a kid to take care [of] the only thing she was caring about was the money that she was earning from the kid that she is looking after'. What was missing, he indicated, was a sense that he belonged and was part of a family. When he attempted to tell his visiting social worker that he felt excluded, he was not believed, he says, because the house and his room looked clean and the foster carer treated him differently. The consequence of this, in emotional terms, was further loss of trust in other people:

...when the social workers comes indoors ya they treat you different, the house will be all clean, they even come and clean your room to be looked nice, but

when you say that to them and they don't see they don't live with us you know they don't believe it they only believe to what the foster carer says, but with the other person you will always be a liar they don't call you a liar but they just don't believe you and that makes you do more doubt and that makes you lose the trust of other people around you.<sup>64</sup>

Here, Michael distinguishes outward, material signs of care – a clean house and bedroom – from an invisible reality and asserts that care should involve more than surface appearances. Kathy also indicated how care can be understood in terms that are easily observable – the smooth running of daily routines and evident practices – to the detriment of a child's emotional needs and development. Speaking specifically about living in a children's home, she said:

...And I don't know when you're in a home you don't learn the values of love or the values of trust or the values of anything. The only thing you learn is what time to wake up, what time your breakfast is, what time your lunch and then your dinner... That's the only thing that you actually learn.<sup>65</sup>

Several interviewees, like Michael (above), focused on 'feeling welcome' as an important aspect of care. Both Paula and Kathy described as 'bad' placements those in which they were made to feel like outsiders:

... she made me feel like, feel, she made me feel uncomfortable, she didn't make me feel welcome at all and she's actually supposed to, I didn't know nothing about my rights.<sup>66</sup>

Kathy talked about how strange she feels and how foster carers are meant to be more like a parent. Describing her first foster placement, she said:

It was more like a Bed and Breakfast. Like you know when you go to a bed and breakfast you get introduced to the things that you're allowed to use, the equipments that you're allowed to use and nothing else – those are the things that I was using. And it was like... It was really strange to me 'cause I was like, it was really strange to me 'cause I was only ten years old and I'm meant to have someone who is more like a parent to me more than acting like a ... what you call it? A hostess? She was acting more like a hostess. ....<sup>67</sup>

Here, interviewees articulate a sense of what they ought to be able to expect as children – a dimension of care that involves being welcomed and made to feel as though they belong – and the possible consequences of its lack for their sense of self and constitution as (excluded) subjects. Here, a focus on practicalities and the material aspects of care takes precedence over emotional needs. In this way, the meanings of care in the context of local authority provision are defined and critiqued.

## Making it personal

Interviewees saw their lives and subjectivities as shaped by institutional rules, practices and policies, and directed by people they never met. In their view, carers responded to children with reference, and strict adherence, to 'the rules' laid down elsewhere (probably by social services). Interviewees felt they were treated as generic 'types' rather than as individuals. Often such stereotypes were negatively construed. However, they did not reject the idea of rules *per se*. What they craved was 'personalisation' – that is, the sensitive application of rules tailored to their needs and welfare in specific situations, at specific times.

Kathy strongly asserted that being cared for properly should mean being put first and being seen as a unique individual. She was highly critical of the fact that, as she saw it, her care was shaped by managers who make decisions based on their own experiences and those of their own children or other children in care, and not on knowing *her*:

And some for like some of the managers out there I don't really think they know what being in care really means, they don't understand what being in care means because when they give you a decision based on their life or based on somebody else's life and you're like: I'm not someone else and I'm not your child and I'm not... the child's parent. I'm just literally me. That's... me, me, me. That's it! (laugh).<sup>68</sup>

Kathy said that she longed to be taken care of by one person who knew her on a long-term, continuous basis. When friends find out that she is in care they think this means freedom (from parental control, arguments) and material advantages (pocket money, always being able to afford to go on school trips, your own room), which they envy. But, she said, she would give anything to swap places with other children. She talked about how hard it is trying to keep track of all the people, strangers, who are involved in making decisions about her care and 'trying to act like parents'. She vehemently asserts 'this is not a child's life'.

For Kathy, the application of rules by one individual signifies caring. George also spoke about the importance of rules being applied to you because carers are concerned about your individual welfare and development rather than their own rule-keeping behaviour. This, he reflects, is a sign of caring and inclusion in a family. His best placement by far was with a family who 'treated me like I wasn't a foster child like I was actually part of the family'.<sup>69</sup>

Asked what he would like to see in place for young people in care, George said that professional carers should take time to listen to the children in their care and understand what they need. That is, they should respond to them individually and personally rather than sticking rigidly to institutionally defined rules and norms:

... they should be encouraged to listen to you, if a child comes to them they need to take the time to listen, to listen to what they have to say rather than going by the book because what they do will affect that child for the rest of its life they should take the time to listen. If they

were to sit down on a regular basis and talk to that child individually then they would stop feeling alone and think that somebody actually cares enough to take the time to talk to them and find out what they want'.<sup>70</sup>

The idea that caring involves taking time to talk with and listen to a child and what really matters to him/her was expressed by a number of other interviewees. Kathy and Diane described examples of foster carers who took time to try to understand them and help them, particularly with homework.

Experiences of feeling cared for and (a degree of) personalisation included instances where a one-to-one relationship with a specific foster carer or social worker was established and continued over time. Diane mentioned keeping in touch with a social worker, to whom she could talk and who was 'always there' for her.<sup>71</sup> Kathy talked of a social worker who 'stayed around' for three years and sorted out most of her problems and was 'like a mother to me'.<sup>72</sup>

Several interviewees articulated visions of what parents would provide that foster carers did not. As mentioned earlier, one was unconditional love. In addition, there was being told that you are loved, made to feel good about yourself, and being unconditionally supported in the decisions you make about what you want to be in life – the idea that parents are there for you 'no matter what'.

Several interviewees spoke about how children in care are perceived as bad and trouble. Kathy said that social services and foster carers do not trust children and put up barriers to protect themselves. Children do the same. Mutual lack of trust works against emotional engagement and meeting children's emotional needs. In addition, information about a child precedes her as she arrives at each new placement, shaping the new carer's expectations of her before they meet and causing both child and carer to become defensive.

## Being heard

*Care Stories* used interview and digital media methods to 'give voice' to young care leavers and to enable them to 'be heard'. The project encouraged individuals to put experience into words and, in the process, to attach growing legitimacy and authority to their understandings and representations of their lives. It embodied the belief that biographical methods can 'connect policy with lived experience' and capture 'the lived qualitative, subjective and emotional experience of what it is really like'.<sup>73</sup> Project partners believed that showing 'what it was really like' via video might form an especially effective part of professional training. And, as Steven High argues, digital technologies potentially create new opportunities for community and public engagement and also 'sharing authority in the research process'.<sup>74</sup>

'Being heard' was a dominant theme in the project's design and implementation and it struck a clear chord with all interviewees. They were keenly aware of the professional audience for the film and of video as a means of representing themselves to those who made decisions about their lives. At one point, Michael said forcefully 'those kids in

care they want to be heard' and, turning to camera, said 'Whoever is going to look at this [film] please sit down and listen and try to understand'. To what extent did the young people get heard and by whom?

What is said is constrained by the project agenda and questions posed. What is heard is further limited by the researcher's interpretations of responses, video editing, and audience exposure to and engagement with the film. The twenty-minute film was produced from over twelve hours of videoed interviews, organised around strong themes emerging in the conversations between interviewers and interviewees. Young people were involved in the process of planning interviews and, although they did not participate in the editing process, they viewed the edited video and approved it before it was shown to professionals. Project partners had intended that interviewers and interviewees would be actively involved at every stage of the project. But, despite efforts to include the interviewees and interviewers in the editing process, it fell to staff /project partners to edit the film. A key problem was that, as time went on, the momentum for the project eased. The young people had other concerns and things to do whilst the students who had initially kept in touch also had to finish coursework and begin new modules. The film editors did their utmost to reflect the strongly held views articulated in the interviews. In this process, emotion words – care, love, trust and so on – emerged as critical terms and key analytical categories.

The film has been presented at conferences on the emotional needs of looked-after children. Initially, staff from the partner organisation providing mental health services for young people presented the film and explained how it had been produced. Subsequently, in order for the film to be used in training more widely and nationally, a further film and booklet were produced to contextualise the project. This was considered necessary because the original film raised many sensitive issues and the fact that all interviewees were from BME backgrounds. Specifically, some partners anticipated that the film might promote the idea of a 'unitary' and 'fixed' black or minority ethnic community of care leavers and that black or minority ethnic families were not able to care for their children. This film and booklet together with the original video have been widely used in professional training. Whilst there has been no systematic attempt to evaluate the impact of *Care Stories* (films and booklet) on professional audiences, over 200 copies have been requested by local authorities and private fostering agencies for use in training.

The degree to which the young people were given voice and heard was variously mediated by project design, resources and staff. Nevertheless, the young care leavers interviewed also felt enabled in some ways and were brought together as a group.

### What does care mean?

For the seven young people interviewed, care variously included: love; being listened to; being liked; feeling welcomed; feeling that they belonged to a family; having an enduring one-to-one relationship with a carer; being able to trust and be trusted; being disciplined for one's own good; being put first; and being treated as an unique individual rather than a stereotype. There was a strong concern that payment for care precludes the possibility of love and compromises capacity to care.

In this article, I looked again at a series of interviews from a culturalist perspective, examining how interviewees spoke about emotions. I worked with the idea of emotions not *in* but *between* subjects, as inter-subjective processes, which are simultaneously part of the constitution of individuals and collectives, and the relations between them. This involves working against the grain of popular and academic perceptions of autobiographical storytelling as the verbalisation of inner thoughts and feelings, revealing and expressing an authentic hidden self. Indeed, biography and its stabilisation through 'various arts of memory' provides one way in which a sense of self becomes seen as unified, coherent and stable.<sup>75</sup>

I have argued that care and love were deployed as critical terms by care leavers reflecting on their experiences and relations with others, and the institutions, norms, policies and practices, which shape them. Care and love marked them out as different from other children, constituting them as subjects and aligning them as a collective for themselves in relation to and apart from others. These reflections were further framed by contemporary discourses on what childhood and parenting is meant to contain – emotionally, socially and materially – and on 'care' provision by local authorities at a particular historical juncture. They described circumstances in which they felt properly cared for and those in which they did not. Their narratives present a clear view of what these terms mean in a specific discursive and historical context and how they help to form their subjectivities, social realities and relations with others. In the process, love and care were contextually (in specific historical and social circumstances) and relationally constituted.

### NOTES

1. Carrie Hamilton, 'On being a 'good' interviewer: empathy, ethics and the politics of oral history', *Oral History*, vol 36, no 2, 2008, pp 35-43. Hamilton discusses instances in which the interviewer may experience the expectation of empathy as politically problematic. See also Kathleen Blee, 'Evidence, empathy and ethics: Lessons from oral histories of the Klan' in Rob Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The*

*Oral History Reader*, second edition, London: Routledge, 2006, pp 322-331.

2. See, for example, other articles in this edition of *Oral History*.

3. For example, Jennifer Harding, 'Emotional Subjects', in Jennifer Harding and E. Deirdre Pribram (eds), *Emotions: A Cultural Studies Reader*, London, New York: Routledge, 2009, pp 267-279.

4. For example, see Harding and Pribram, 2009; Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of*

*Emotion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

5. Harding and Pribram, 2009, pp 1-23.

6. See: Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Milton Keynes: Open University, 1986; Jane Flax, 'Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory', in Linda Nicholson (ed), *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1990, pp 39-62; Evelyn Fox Keller, 'Gender and science' in Sandra

Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (eds), *Discovering Reality. Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983, pp 187-205; Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism: the life and work of Barbara McClintock*. New York: W. H. Freeman, 1983; Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984; Hilary Rose, 'Hand, Brain and Heart: A Feminist Epistemology for the Natural Sciences' in Sandra Harding and Jean F. O'Barr (eds), *Sex and Scientific Inquiry*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp 265-282; Hilary Rose, Love, *Power and Knowledge. Towards a Feminist Transformation of the Sciences*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994; Alison M. Jaggar, 'Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology', in Harding and Pribram, 2009, pp 50-68.

7. Sandra Harding, 1986, p 23.

8. Alison M Jaggar, 2009, p 60.

9. Essentialism involves a search for the essence or 'reality' behind the appearance of phenomena, that is, the invariable and fixed properties that define an entity. See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989, pp xi-xii.

10. Elizabeth Grosz, 'Conclusion: A Note on Essentialism and Difference,' in S. Gunew (ed), *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990, pp 332-344; Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' in Jonathan Rutherford (ed), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp 222-237; Kobena Mercer, "'1968" Periodising Postmodern Politics and Identity,' in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*, New York and London: Routledge, 1992, pp 424-449; Jeffrey Weeks, *The Lesser Evil and the Greater Good: The Theory and Practice of Social Diversity*, London: Rivers Oram Press, 1994.

11. Harding and Pribram 2009, 10; Deborah Lupton, *The Emotional Self: A Sociocultural Exploration*, London: Sage, 1998

12. Ahmed distinguishes between 'inside out' (psychological) and 'outside in' (sociological) approaches. Ahmed, 2004.

13. See Harding and Pribram, 2009, for examples and discussion of historical and sociological investigations of emotion. From sociology, see Arie R Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley: University of

California Press, 1983. From history, see Peter Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style*, New York: New York University Press, 1994; Peter Stearns, *Jealousy: The Evolution of an Emotion in American History*, New York: New York University Press, 1989; Peter Stearns and Carol Z Stearns, 'Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards', *American Historical Review*, vol 90, no 4 (October), 1985, pp 813-836; Peter Stearns and Carol Z Stearns, *Anger. The Struggle for Emotional Control in America's History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986; Peter Stearns and Carol Z Stearns (eds), *Emotion and Social Change*, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988.

14. Harding and Pribram, 2009, p 11.

15. Ahmed, 2004; Harding and Pribram, 2009.

16. Ahmed, 2004; Harding and Pribram, 2009.

17. For a fuller discussion of a cultural studies approach to emotions see Harding and Pribram, 2009.

18. Harding and Pribram, 2009; Ahmed, 2004; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London, New York: Verso, 2006.

19. Ahmed, 2004, p 10.

20. Ahmed, 2004, p 42.

21. Butler, 2006, p 22.

22. Butler, 2006, p 22; italics in original.

23. Butler, 2006.

24. Butler, 2006.

25. Carolyn K Steedman, 'Stories', in Harding and Pribram, 2009, pp 210-221.

26. Carolyn K Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987, p 114.

27. Steedman, 1987, p 111.

28. Steedman, 1987, p 111.

29. For a fuller description of the project, see: Jenny Harding and John Gabriel, 'Communities in the Making: Pedagogic Explorations using Oral History', *International Studies in the Sociology of Education*, vol 14, no 3, 2004, pp 185-201.

30. Since then, figures have fallen slightly and at 31 March 2008 there were 59,500 children looked according to the Department for Children, Schools and Families: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000810/index.shtml> (accessed 27/4/2010).

31. [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1989/ukpga\\_19890041\\_en\\_2](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1989/ukpga_19890041_en_2) (accessed 27 April 2010).

32. Leon Polnay and Harriet Ward, 'Promoting the health of looked after

children: government proposals demand leadership and a cultural change', *British Medical Journal*, 11 March, 320 (7236), 2000, p 661.

33. For a useful timeline of legislation aimed at protecting children see David Batty, 'Timeline: the history of child protection', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2004/apr/23/childrensservices>. childprotection (accessed 27 April 2010).

34. Charlotte Ritchie, 'Looked After Children: Time for a Change?', *British Journal of Social Work*, 35, 2005, pp 761-767. See also Harry Ferguson *Protecting Children in Time: Child Abuse, Child Protection and the Consequences of Modernity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; and Nigel Parton (ed.) *Social Theory, Social Change and Social Work*, London: Routledge, 1996.

35. 17 month old baby Peter died on 3 August 2007 in the London Borough of Haringey, having sustained over 50 injuries. On 11 November 2008, his stepfather and the lodger were found guilty of causing his death and his mother pleaded guilty to the same charge. Seven year old Khyra Ishaq died on 17 May 2008 from starvation in Birmingham. Her mother and stepfather were charged with murder, but the court later accepted pleas by both to guilty of manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility. Eight year old Victoria Climbié died on 25 February 2000 in the London Borough of Haringey, from multiple injuries. Her aunt and the man with whom she shared a flat were found guilty of her murder on 12 January 2001.

36. For an overview, see Christine Barter, 'Abuse of children in residential care' NSPCC, [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/briefings/abuseofchildreninresidentialcare\\_wda48221.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/briefings/abuseofchildreninresidentialcare_wda48221.html), 2003. For inquiry reports see: Sir Ronald Waterhouse, *Lost in Care: Report of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the abuse of children in care in the former county council areas of Gwynedd and Clwyd since 1974*, London: The Stationery Office, 2000; Andrew Kirkwood, *The Leicestershire Inquiry 1992*, Leicestershire County Council: Leicestershire, 1993; John Barratt *The Report of the 1997 inquiry into the 'Trotter affair': report by J.K. Barratt to the Council of the London Borough of Hackney*, London: London Borough of Hackney, 1998. For a review of relevant literature see: Helen Westcott, *Institutional Abuse of Children – From Research to Policy: A Review*, London: NSPCC, 1991

37. Ritchie, p 761.

38. Ritchie (p 762) points out that, despite various changes to the law, and child abuse/child death inquiries, 'the number of



child deaths at the hands of parents/foster carers has stayed relatively steady in recent years, at between forty-five and sixty per year'. See also: Home Office, *Statistics compiled for 1989-1997 by the Research Development and Statistics Directorate, Crime and Criminal Justice Unit*, 2002. There is a lack of data on abuse in residential and foster care, partly because children do not report it and partly because it has been under researched (Ritchie pp 762-3). Where statistics are available, they suggest that public care may be a greater risk than staying in the family (Ritchie p 763). See also: Keith Pringle, 'Child sexual abuse perpetrated by welfare personnel and the problem of men', *Critical Social Policy*, 36, 1993, pp 4-19.

39. Ritchie, p 763.

40. Ritchie, pp 763-4; Polnay and Ward, 2000; Donald Acheson, *Independent inquiry into inequalities in health*, London, The Stationery Office, 1998.

41. Ritchie, pp 764-5. For a review of the literature comparing kinship care and non-kin foster-care see Joan Hunt, *Family and Friends Carers*, Scoping paper prepared for the Department of Health, London: The Stationery Office, 2003.

42. Ritchie, p 764.

43. Most child abuse studies have focused on mothers and where they mention 'parents' they also focus on mother-child relations. For a review of feminist literature challenging assumptions about child abuse see: Celia Doyle, 'Current Issues in Child Protection: An Overview of the Debates in Contemporary Journals', *British Journal of Social Work*, 26, 1996, pp 565-576. See also: Mary MacLeod and Esther Saraga, 'Challenging the orthodoxy: towards feminist theory and practice', *Feminist Review*, 28, 1988, pp 16-55; Judith Milner, 'A disappearing act: the differing

career paths of fathers and mothers in child protection investigations', *Critical Social Policy*, 13 (2), 1993, pp 46-68.

44. Barbara Baird, 'Child politics, feminist analyses', *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol 23, no 57, September 2008, pp 291-305.

45. Baird, p 291.

46. Baird, p 294.

47. Baird, p 291.

48. Baird, pp 298-9.

49. Julia Brannen, June Statham, Ann Mooney and Michaela Brockmann, *Coming to Care: The work and family lives of workers caring for vulnerable children*, Bristol: Polity Press, 2007. See also HM Government, *Every Child Matters*, London: The Stationery Office, 2003.

50. For further discussion of project design and methods see Harding and Gabriel, 2004.

51. Hamilton, 2008, p 35.

52. Hamilton, 2008 and Blee, 2006.

53. See Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. 'Learning to listen: interview techniques and analyses' in Perks and Thomson (eds), 2006, pp 129-142.

54. For further discussion of the relationship between interviewers and interviewees see Jennifer Harding, 'Questioning the subject in biographical interviewing', *Sociological Research Online*, vol 11, no 3, 2006.

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56. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral History*, Albany: State University of New York, 1990; Michael Frisch, 'Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process', *Oral History Review* 30, 1, 2003, pp 111-112.

57. Harding, 2006.

58. Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees mentioned.

59. Michael interviewed by Tania (not their

real names), November 2003.

60. Diane interviewed by Tania (not their real names), November 2003.

61. Michael interviewed by Tania (not their real names), November 2003.

62. Paula interviewed by Sara (not their real names), November 2003.

63. Kathy interviewed by Elizabeth (not their real names), November 2003.

64. Michael interviewed by Tania (not their real names), November 2003.

65. Kathy interviewed by Elizabeth (not their real names), November 2003.

66. Paula interviewed by Sara (not their real names), November 2003.

67. Kathy interviewed by Elizabeth (not their real names), November 2003.

68. Kathy interviewed by Elizabeth (not their real names), November 2003.

69. George interviewed by Andrew (not their real names), November 2003.

70. George interviewed by Andrew (not their real names), November 2003.

71. Diane interviewed by Tania (not their real names), November 2003.

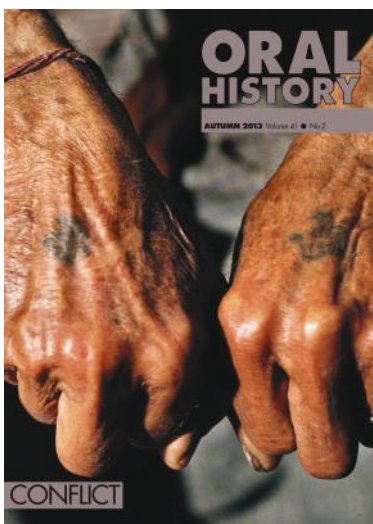
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# 'Shooting at Shadows': Private John Field, war stories and why he would not be interviewed

by Sean Field

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Paradoxes proliferate. It feels paradoxical to write "reflections" about an article involving historical and familial "shadows". But reflections and shadows are not binaries but co-created in relation to each other. This article focussed on my dyslexic father: John Patrick Field. He was born in Dublin in 1924 and was

partly raised in Birmingham, and as a British infantry soldier he survived D-Day and other WWII battles. My aim was to work through his emotional troubles before, during and after WWII. My self-reflexive efforts in writing this academic article shifted my relationship with him and had benefits for both of us. I hope

readers found value in it. Intellectually, the article began my interest in the inter-subjective dynamics of "inter-views" being constituted through both recognition and misrecognition. While oral historians emphasize empathic recognition, we also need to delve into how forms of misrecognition – by both parties in the

conversation – frame relationships. My father and I had many conversations about his memories of Ireland, England and European war stories. But the central question framing the article was: "why would he not be interviewed?" Subsequently, this made me wish that oral historians would say

more about how some potential interviewees refused interview consent with them and why. And so, the interview with my father never happened. This is despite my attempts and that of many others, before and after the article was published. For example, a BBC documentary producer requested an interview with him after they read the article. My father refused again but the article and the BBC's request were sources of affirmation for him. This man of integrity was shaped by tendencies to self-denigrate himself that have never ceased. Writing the article also began my fascination with creating ways to interpret how both hermeneutic and anti-hermeneutic forces

produce conscious (and unconscious) senses of self and identity. When narrators reveal glimpses of these anxiety-laden dynamics during "inter-views" it is potentially profound for them and us. Moreover, this article began my efforts to conceptualise and teach non-referential approaches to trauma and its afterwardsness. And I am still grappling with how to understand the life-and-death memories of speaking others. Finally, the paradoxes of life-and-death dynamics continue in my work and personal life. As I write these reflections on 18 April 2019, it is also my father's 95th birthday. But he has reached this birthday while seriously ill. He stopped talking a

week ago and his death is imminent. Throughout his life he spoke of the D-Day beach-heads of Normandy and his love for South African beaches. Predictably he has requested that his ashes must be spread on a local beach.

**Sean Field, University of Cape Town, South Africa**

I nominated Sean Field's article for its candour and unexpectedness. Readers were invited into his relationship with his father, which is openly and astutely delineated. Its focus on family history shone a light on the oral history that takes place in conversations outside the typical interview. It also provided a case study that encourages

oral historians to ruminate about when and why potential interviewees reject our academic calls upon their memories. It is a beautifully written account of his father's life, full of revelations that reveal the role of emotion and trauma in the stories told by Field senior to family members and why he refused to sit down for the formal interview that his academic son craved. I particularly admire the article for its courage and for its demonstration that a focus on one interview (or non-interview) can be amazingly revealing in the hands of a skilled practitioner.

**Sean O'Connell, Queen's University Belfast and member of editorial collective of Oral History**

**Abstract:** John Field's Second World War stories and my failed attempts to set-up an interview with him are the central focus. These father-son negotiations elicited unheard war stories and insights about the inter-subjective framing of oral histories outside the typical interview format. I outline his life story and events related to his physical and emotional war injuries to explain why he was unable to consent to an interview. The paper honours a man who portrays himself as a 'grunt', despite surviving at the front-line of many historic military battles. I argue that there is intellectual value to oral histories conveyed across generations within the same family and that the subjective framing of an *inter-view* involves both participants recognizing *and* misrecognizing each other *and* what the dialogue itself means.

**Key words:** War stories, father/son relationships, misrecognition, inter-views

**SF:** Dad, did you actually kill somebody in the war?

**JF:** I don't know, I really don't know.

**SF:** What do you mean, you don't know?

**JF:** I shot at shadows. You're shooting at shadows. You know. Maybe but I shot at shadows. I never killed anybody up-front.<sup>1</sup>

John Field is my father and at the time of writing still lives at the age of 89. His life story straddles the Atlantic Ocean from North to South. In the vocabulary of the

Second World War and D-Day, the beach around Arromanches and Le Hamel on the Normandy coastline of France is known as Gold Beach. Six thousand miles away on the South African coastline there is Blouberg Beach with its spectacular view of the iconic Table Mountain of Cape Town. These beaches are connected in three ways. First, they form beach-heads onto the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>2</sup> Second, they are both sites of summer-time battles involving a British naval fleet and infantry soldiers.<sup>3</sup> Third, these beaches are places of memory for my father. He was a Private in the 1st Royal Hampshires Regiment that was among the first British troops to land on Gold Beach on the morning of D-Day, 6 June 1944. At the other end of the

Atlantic, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, our family spent summer weekends and holidays on Blouberg Beach. These happy episodes were upset by arguments between my father and mother and his frequent walk-about disappearances up the beach. As a child I sat on the wet sand, building castles, and saw the image of a lone male figure marching up Blouberg Beach in a northerly direction. This image shimmers and then disappears in the summer-light of my memory but always points towards his troubled childhood and war experiences in Europe.

From about the age of five, in 1966, I began listening to my father talk about his family life in Dublin and Birmingham and Second World War memories. Absorbing his war stories and childhood experiences of growing-up in apartheid Cape Town led me to become an oral historian. Then, after two decades of interviewing others in South Africa, I decided that I was ready to interview him.<sup>4</sup> Between 2004 and 2008 I repeatedly asked him for an interview. All these efforts failed. This was very frustrating given that he repeatedly tells his war stories. The reasons he provided for not wanting to be interviewed by anyone, not only by me, were conveyed as compelling stories that convinced me to write about his war stories and the interview he refused to provide. While he consented to my writing this article, I hesitated for several years.<sup>5</sup> The decisive motivation came from Alessandro Portelli in 2012, who said I should do it because, 'You are now the oral memoir'.<sup>6</sup>

I still faced a methodological dilemma: how do I write an oral history article with no interview? The solution to this dilemma was partly resolved by conducting several interview sessions with my older brother, Ronald. In addition, the oral historian, Carohn Cornell, interviewed me about my memories of what my father told me since childhood. These interviews, together with several phone discussions with my father during the writing process form the empirical basis of this article.<sup>7</sup> My thinking in this paper constantly weaves across an inside-outside boundary: on the one hand, what my father said and I remember outside an interview-frame and on the other hand how my brother and I make sense of my father's war stories within interviews. The key reason, why he will not be interviewed is because of a war injury and subsequent events that occurred in October and November 1944. In my father's words, 'this is where the mystery begins'.<sup>8</sup> His memories of this specific period are tainted with shame and he avoids it. But that he eventually speaks through this shame is profound for both of us, and has brought us emotionally closer in this final stage of his life.

During the writing of this article the landmark autobiographical accounts by the historians Ronald Fraser and Carolyn Steedman have appeared in my mind.<sup>9</sup> My approach is different but is similarly framed by a self-reflexivity sensitised by psychoanalytic thinking. I also consider the peculiar ways that oral histories are expressed outside formal interviews. But inter-subjective dialogues - in this case a father-son relationship - remain formative of what is said, how it is said and what is not said. I have three motives. There is the intellectual motive to show that while these conversations are outside the typical interview format they still involve an *inter-view* - of seeing and not seeing

each other that has wider significance for oral historians.<sup>10</sup> There is a personal motive to make sense of the emotional shadows my father's war stories have cast over me. Finally my altruistic motive is to honour a man who denigrates himself and his war-time contribution as: 'I was just a grunt' or 'I was buckshee'. Yet his 'shooting at shadows' was at the front-line of some of the most deadly and famous military battles.

### A life story overview

John Patrick Field was born on 18 April 1924, in Dublin, Ireland. He was the second youngest of a family of nine children. This Catholic family lived in the suburb of Donnybrook, and his mother Mary (*nee* Lambe), was portrayed as a strict disciplinarian who frequently dispensed harsh physical and verbal punishment on her children. My father also remembers British soldiers and Catholics 'hitting each other with golf clubs' on the streets of Dublin.<sup>12</sup> The Great Depression was the socio-economic context and his parents and younger children migrated to Birmingham in the early-1930s. His father, also John, opened a repair shop for radios and other appliances. My father remembers constant beatings from his mother and left school in 1939 to work in the BSA motor cycle factory in Birmingham. But his troubles in school were linked to a condition that was then neither recognised nor treated. He was severely dyslexic. This condition evoked much frustration and vulnerability throughout his life. He reads adequately but can barely write. So at the age of 16 in 1940, after Dunkirk, he enlisted, even though the legal limit for recruits was 18 years.

He was initially placed in the Dorsetshire Regiment but on 4 December 1941 he was transferred to the Royal Hampshires.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the period from enlisting through to D-Day he was involved in training exercises across England but he did not experience combat until D-Day. His experiences of the landings are discussed in the next section. After D-Day, the Hampshires and other regiments of the British Second Army fought a series of battles for the French towns of Hottot, Villiers Bocage and Saint Pierre, where progress was slow and casualties were very high.<sup>14</sup> They faced an elite German division, the Panzer Lehr, in this period. In August 1944, German resistance crumbled and the Allies then made rapid progress. The Hampshires were the first British infantry to enter Belgium, with the Guards Armoured Division arriving in Brussels on 3 September and they were the first infantry to cross the Belgian-Holland Border around the Escaut Canal.<sup>15</sup> In late September 1944 they were part of Operation Market Garden and the battles to reach the final bridge at Arnhem. But Arnhem was the infamous 'bridge too far' and Operation Market Garden failed to reach its goal of opening the road into Germany to end the war by Christmas. In the wake of this failure, in early October 1944, a German Panzer counter-attack was launched with the aim of re-taking the bridge at Nijmegen and the road north of the town, in an area called, 'The Island'. It is there that my father was injured by shrapnel and sandblast to the face.<sup>16</sup>

In December 1944, he was transferred to the 5th Highland Light Infantry (HLI). With the HLI he was part of the final push into Germany and was involved in the Battle for





John Field, Birmingham, 1948.

Bremen before Germany capitulated in early May 1945. With the end of the war, thousands were demobbed but my father significantly chose to remain in the army in a shattered post-War Germany until late 1947. He then returned to his family in Birmingham but this was spoilt by the re-ignition of family conflicts. After more than seven years in the army, and only a few visits to his family during this period, he left them forever in March 1948.

As children, we would ask him: 'Daddy, why did you come to South Africa?' And he would say, 'No jobs in England then but there was work in Canada, Australia and South Africa. I did not want Canada because I was tired of cold winters. So I tossed a coin for either Australia or South Africa and it came-up South Africa'. But this story was only half-true. When we were adults, he revealed that he and a friend had bought one-way tickets to travel from Southampton to Sydney. But during the stop-over in Cape Town, my father enjoyed it and decided to stay. My father's arrival in Cape Town was on 7 April 1948, only one month before the infamous apartheid elections in South Africa, when General Smuts (one of my father's heroes) was defeated by the Nationalist Party. My father settled in South Africa to strive for his dreams and has never physically left the African continent.

My lapsed Catholic father married my Protestant Afrikaner mother, Hermie in 1950. And my sister Yvonne (born 1951), brother Ronald (born 1953), and I (born 1961) constitute a cross-religious and cross-nationality home, pockmarked with endless conflicts. But for all the unhappiness and failed dreams, my parents did get many things right. Significantly, they held the family together despite the affect(s) of many years of being in a loveless-marriage. Yet his frequent dark moods and emotionally detached ways evoked much anxiety and misery for my mother, and suggested that mentally he was elsewhere. I often imagined him trudging through the villages of a war-ravaged Europe in his mind as if a part of him remained there. Initially he did not speak about the war but in the mid-1960s he began to verbalise war stories to family and friends. Many tired of his stories but his sons were the eager listeners, hungry to hear more, and with his war stories we ingested entangled meanings and burdens.<sup>17</sup>

### 'To dig deep': Telling war stories to his sons

The 1st Hampshire Regiment were part of 231 Brigade and was in the vanguard of the assault force landing on Gold Beach. They had the honour of being the first British infantry to land...From the period the 6th June to 17th November 1944, the battalion had casualties of approximately 1,280 men, and as a battalions strength was between 500 to 600 men. It was effectively wiped out twice.<sup>18</sup>

My first reading of these on-line pages happened with my father sitting next to me. The above passage, especially the statistic staggered me. I asked him, 'How did you survive, when so many others died?' To which he replied, 'you have to dig deep, he who digs the deepest, survives the longest.' I now think that this is how he has approached most of his life. At the risk of imposing a gendered silence over the women in my family, my focus is on men, violence and the war stories my father told my brother and me.<sup>19</sup> My father is the principal character but there are off-stage echoes from his Jewish grandfather (displaced by pogroms in Kiev at the turn of the 19th century) and his father (an infantry soldier in the First World War).<sup>20</sup> It is difficult to know with precision how these cross-generational histories of violence have shaped my family on both ends of the Atlantic. I imagine my father is the trans-national hinge, and his feelings of fear, hurt, rage and shame have reverberated from prior generations through him and still continue toward my generation and our children. These emotionally charged generational ties are also shaped by his tenacity for survival.

Amongst the many war stories my brother and I heard, D-Day appears as a cataclysmic event. At the age of 20, he was part of the largest ever naval and military landing to occur. Named Operation Overlord it was shrouded in secrecy in order to deceive the Nazi High Command into believing the landings would be at Calais, which they believed until the morning of D-Day. The Gold Beach fleet anchored seven miles off-shore at 5.30 am and by 6.00 am troops disembarked into amphibious landing craft.<sup>21</sup>

We were waiting for the right weather. And then it happens. You're in this small boat, choppy seas, feeling sick. That sound coming over your head. You smell vomit. ... and I remember those terrifying sounds, the shriek, the sounds of shells going over our heads and I see the beaches and heard the bangs, paah, paah, paah, as the shells hit the beach-heads...<sup>22</sup>

These sounds, smells and sights while approaching Gold Beach were his first experience of war, while simultaneously aware that many would die when they reached the beach. Yet his first sight of death was surprising. He was still in the landing craft, standing in the second or third row from the front when:

...we reach the beach the corporal orders the front open. We have heavy kits on. The first row jumped out and disappeared under the waves, gone. The front is pulled back-up, move forward and then we landed properly. We ran onto the beach, it was bewildering.<sup>23</sup>

In this beach charge, the Hampshires swung right along the coast, as they were, '... made responsible for the clearance of no less than four miles of the much vaunted "Western Wall" of Europe.'<sup>24</sup> My father was in D company, which successfully took a gun position at Cabane, and then they circled back on the town of Arromanches. By 9.00 pm that day the 1st Hampshires, together with the 1st Dorsetshires and 2nd Devonshires, had achieved their D-Day goals of securing Arromanches and Le Hamel. As was expected casualties were high on all of the D-Day beaches, but the heaviest price was endured on the neighbouring beachhead of Omaha by the Americans. For the Royal Hampshires from approximately 600 men, 182 died that day, including their commanding and second-in-command officers.<sup>25</sup> However, far worse was to follow for the Hampshires and other battalions of the British Second Army. The two months after D-Day involved a slow war of attrition through the hedges of Normandy Bocage.

We heard several of my father's stories about this period in France but they are difficult to precisely locate in place and time. For example, he noted various memory fragments of moving through fields and seeing 'dead cattle and horses'. While he mentioned people dying around him he doesn't dwell on this and rarely describes details. But death is loudly echoed, in his repeated reference to 'new faces, new faces next to you all the way' as killed or injured soldiers were constantly being replaced. On several occasions he used the cliché but evocative, 'we were cannon-fodder'. The following story is told through my brother:

...the bullets are flying, he rushes into a trench or fox-hole, and the guy next him is cracking-up. And he has his rosary and is praying, 'Mary, Mary...' and fiddling with the beads. And he tells this guy to effing shut-up... and the next second they must move and this guy stands-up and his head is blown-off and slumps back into the ditch next him. He says, 'There is no God in this world'. This is what he told me with a few drinks in him. And he said, 'The bloody idiots praying to God.



John Field, Cape Town city centre, early 1950s.

But on the other side, the Germans are praying to the same God'.<sup>26</sup>

This story links back to his dislike of religion and especially Catholicism yet for most of our childhood he repeatedly talked about religion. The struggle for life in the midst of much death was shaped by fears evoked by war-time sights, smells and sounds, again and again. The phrase, 'terrifying sounds' is repeated across different stories as he described a German counter-attack in a forest, somewhere in Northern France or Belgium:

Fighting in a forest and the rounds and the splinters, as tracer rounds go flying and the sound of ricocheting off trees....I don't know where the German fire is coming from. Terrifying sounds, from different directions. Dig deep, make yourself a hole, keep your head down...<sup>27</sup>

This persistent fear was physically and emotionally dealt with by 'digging deep' to make a hole in the ground, or I think within himself. While he told many humorous war stories, filled with Irish blarney, neither joy nor happiness was ever expressed. Consequently, in my early adolescence, with the expectation of hearing at least one happy story, I asked him:



John Field, Cape Town suburb, early 1950s.

**SF:** Dad, where were you on VE day?

**JF:** I had my face down in mud, along the side of an autobahn, outside Bremen. [pause] We lost many men after that.

My child-like hope that hostilities had ended and celebrations began on VE day was dashed. Mopping-up operations continued for weeks after formal surrender. In maintaining post-war martial law he participated in firing squads which he hated because it involved 'shooting starving youngsters' [involved in theft, rape and other crimes] who were surviving in the ruins of post-war Germany.<sup>28</sup> Before turning to the central question, I need to re-tell the following stories.

### Shameful Stories

My intention is neither to embarrass my father nor other members of the British Army, but he has carried a burden of shame while holding these stories silently within. He told my brother the following story about two decades ago. While entering a French village, he was:

Crouching in a road-side gully, and it's night time, flares, rifle fire ... and someone in their platoon catches a stray bullet. The Sergeant-Major screams, 'Stretcher-

bearer, stretcher-bearer' ... then out of the darkness, two stretcher-bearers come carrying a person. The Sergeant-Major stops them, thinking they are coming for his guy. But there's an injured German soldier on the stretcher. 'What's this?' the Sergeant-Major asks. 'We were told to take him back', the stretcher-bearer replies. The Sergeant-Major knew this would take too long for his man, they argue, the Sergeant-Major screams at them to stop. Took out a hand-machine gun and, 'Phrttttt', he shot the German across the chest. The stretcher-bearers stood there shocked. The Sergeant-Major grabs the edge of the stretcher, and tips the body off. And as he did that, Dad was shivering in fear in the gully, and a flare goes off and he saw the three holes through the stretcher... Nobody said anything it was straight forward murder. It was their injured buddy and no-one questioned the Sergeant-Major. That story stuck in my mind...<sup>29</sup>

My father's concern about disclosing this story was legitimate in the post-war period. But now, 69 years later, that is not the case and stories such as these cannot be left to fester in silence. Even victors break the rules of war, and historians have a responsibility to portray nuanced portraits of all protagonists. Another story with uncomfortable resonances, he recalls that somewhere in Germany, while serving with the HLI:

...he was on evening pass, coming back to camp, it's dark and...he hears a whimpering sound, like crying. He looks under a shed, and he sees a soldier with a woman, and the woman is crying. The soldier is trying his utmost to force himself on her. He grabs the guy by the leg and pulls him out, and there is an altercation, and while this happens, she grabs her stuff and runs. The guy says, 'I'm just trying to have some fun', and Dad said, 'Doesn't sound like she was having any fun'. A few days later, they are getting ready to leave the town, in an open square area, and a little boy comes up to him, tugging on his leg. Three or four years old, he gives Dad an apple. He watched the little boy run to the corner, where a woman stands. He remembers her features from the previous night.<sup>30</sup>

Nothing was officially reported but his memory remained. While most of my father's war stories were told to my brother and me, it is striking that the above two stories he only told to my brother. I wonder to what extent it is because my brother is older and these stories involve ambivalent feelings. While my father's actions in this story are noble he usually did not present himself as a hero.<sup>31</sup> The war stories he told us over many decades were neither framed in heroic terms nor as anti-war statements. Rather, the over-riding logic or narrative genre was repeatedly that war is terrible, there are no heroes but this necessary job must be done. While there was an implicit sense of patriotic duty in his war stories, patriotism was neither stressed nor verbalised directly.<sup>32</sup> Rather, his emphasis was on infantry soldiers getting the messy jobs such as clearing-out operations to secure war-torn villages. These involved bashing on



doors, screaming for civilians to leave their houses to search for German soldiers, who might be hiding inside. He remembered taking over a family house and slumping onto a bed. In exhaustion he looked around and saw the family photos and his muddy boots on the bedspread and felt awful as he realised that this was someone's home.

My brother and I heard many of his stories during or after social occasions. For example, after attending an Armistice Day supper organised by the MOTHS (Memorial Order of Tin Hats) on 11 November 2003 in Cape Town, my father returned late to sleep-over at my home and asked me to join him for a whiskey. He began to narrate familiar war stories but then unexpectedly the following dialogue developed:

**JF:** I was having tea with my family in Birmingham, in the sitting room. My older brother, Sonny came into the room, from behind me, and like he would do when we were kids, he flicked the teaspoon against the back of my neck. I collapsed on the floor. I passed out. I nearly fell in the fireplace. My family thought I was sick. [This probably occurred in early 1948, after he had been demobbed.]

**SF:** But why did it happen?

**JF:** I don't know?

**SF:** Don't you have an idea why it happened?

**JF:** Oh maybe it was [pause] about the time I was captured.

**SF:** You were captured? You never told me about that before.

**JF:** A friend and I were eating, sitting near a farmhouse, two Germans came out of the trees, and they lined us up against the wall. They put their rifles against the back of our heads. Shouting at us... 'Tommy! Tommy!' and then 'click', 'click', they pulled their triggers. The bastards laughed and walked away, they were deserters. I felt the barrel at the base of my head. [pause]

**SF:** And that is the link to the teaspoon?

**JF:** I don't know just more stories.

My father has constantly denied that the war had a negative psychological effect on him, and yet in the above exchange, he shows an awareness of its impact. In my view these two inter-linked stories: the expectation-of-death experience and the black-out triggered by the teaspoon is evidence of a post-traumatic reaction. There was no thinking involved between feeling the sensation of the teaspoon on his neck and passing out. His unconscious mistook the teaspoon for the barrel of a rifle and probably assumed the event was re-occurring. We can only imagine what level of fear, perhaps sheer terror of imminent death, created such a dramatic psychic response. My father was traumatised but

# SUPREME HEADQUARTERS ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY FORCE



Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.

But this is the year 1944! Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!

I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory!

Good Luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

*Dwight D. Eisenhower*

Eisenhower letter to troops, prior to D-Day.

the specific features of this legacy cannot be understood by only looking at wartime events.<sup>33</sup> His prior family life is central to understanding how he approached and survived the war and its aftermath. Shortly after the above exchange, I began trying to set-up an interview with him.

## Why he would not be interviewed

What is an interview? For most researchers, for an interview to be constituted the interviewer and interviewee need to agree on the date, time and venue, language to be used, mode of recording, confidentiality issues and future use of the information to be conveyed. But oral history does not come into existence when the researcher arrives on the scene to set up an interview. Oral histories and traditions as a lived practice of remembrance and narration have always existed independent of our interventions as a profession. What then is the value of oral histories not recorded within the formal interview or fieldwork setting? More specifically, what is the intellectual value of oral histories conveyed across generations within the same family?

The dialogic relationship between interviewer and interviewee has preoccupied the thinking of oral historians for generations. Pioneering works by Passerini, Portelli and





John Field, Cape Town city centre, early 1950s.

many others have analysed the inter-subjective dimensions of oral history.<sup>34</sup> Similarly Thomson argues that the inter-subjectivity of eliciting stories does not make it less historically valuable but marks a shift towards post-positivism within oral historiography.<sup>35</sup> Yow also argues that taking inter-subjectivity seriously by reflecting on the emotional investments of both participants will guide us towards more intellectually useful and objective conclusions.<sup>36</sup>

In light of these shifts in oral historiography, I am arguing that the conversations between my father, brother and me, while not typical interviews are inter-subjectively framed as inter-views that can be analysed as valid research information.<sup>37</sup> The term 'interview' places literal emphasis on the visual exchange. Oral historians have paid attention to observing body language and other visual cues, and have striven to recognise interviewees' sense of themselves and their identities. But I am proposing an additional analytical focus on the *inter-view* as dialogue where both participants are *potentially* recognising *and* misrecognising each other *and* what the dialogue itself means to them.

In the failed negotiations with my father in 2004 I asked, 'Why are you refusing to be interviewed?' After avoiding this question he eventually replied, 'You won't believe me, what happened.' I emphasised that I would believe and value any stories he expressed. It is then that he told me this story, revealing that his concern about being disbelieved originated from elsewhere:

I was on leave, the Birmingham family house was still there [it was bombed twice during air raids] and my

family seemed okay. One evening I showed Ma the newspaper, the page with a map of the war on the continent, and the front-line between Allied and German forces. 'Look Mum, see how the Allies are pushing through France?' I pointed to the front-line and said, 'That's where I am'. She looked puzzled and said, 'Oh no son that's not where you are, you're a cook, somewhere at the back'. I was stunned, couldn't say anything, walked away.

My father's narration of this specific story was sandwiched between his mother's disbelief and his son's request. Since telling me this story I have come to realise that his mother's disbelief and her fearful inability to acknowledge the front-line location of her infantry soldier son wounded his sense of masculinity. He attaches positive meanings to his army and wartime experiences. While I have no doubt that being vulnerable in my presence is a concern for him the above story suggests that the more significant anxiety is re-experiencing a hurtful disbelief of his front-line war stories and his sense of masculine self.

He has also expressed anxiety that what he conveys within a recorded interview might be disbelieved by broader audiences beyond his immediate family. Digging deep into the metaphorical trench is emotionally safer than doing an interview. In fact, he once hinted that an interview would be like 'putting his head out in the open'. In a similar vein, masculinity studies note that, 'An interview situation is both an opportunity for signifying masculinity and a peculiar type of encounter in which masculinity is threatened'.<sup>38</sup> My father knows there is potential for positive recognition but his fear of public exposure evoking prior hurts wins this inner-debate.

These fears are linked to his self-assessment as a man who has constantly failed or disappointed others?<sup>39</sup> He did not succeed in school due to his chronic dyslexia, and he was constantly unhappy in his work life (he was a foreman in the local city council for over 30 years). Moreover, he once bluntly told me, 'I failed as a father'. Yet his parenting track-record is more complex. Both my brother and I agree that this moody, often depressed, emotionally detached father would come alive and appear stronger when he told us his war stories. It is ironic that for all the horrors he witnessed during the war, his military service was a time when he felt potent and worthwhile. But his meaningful wartime memories are blemished by a moment that still bothers him.

On many occasions, he mentioned that he was in a detention barracks in Northern France during the war. In fact, throughout my childhood it was common knowledge that, 'Dad never eats cheese because he was in detention during the war'. The primary diet in detention consisted of dry pieces of bread and cheese. When asked why he was in detention he always dodged the question. Yet a few years ago, he revealed the answer to my brother. In the battle for 'The Island', north of Nijmegen, in early October 1944, the following occurred:

The story goes he got a piece of shrapnel in his face, and this piece of metal stayed in his face, and that became septic, and his face swelled up. Taken to hospi-

tal ... The doctor then said we have to move, and told him and others to get onto the back of a truck. Someone asked, 'Where are we going? We are going in the wrong direction to the front.' A friend said, 'This is bullshit, I am going'. So they jump off, Dad calls it, 'going on the trot' ... later the MPs caught him. He was court-martialled and put in detention ... He then gets released, his lieutenant represented him at the court-martial, argued that from the medical records, the medication given to him on the morning of going absent, morphine and more, meant his state of mind could not have been correct.<sup>40</sup>

He was officially exonerated but he remains ashamed about 'going on the trot'. During my 2012 phone-calls he avoided this episode and in response to gentle questions about where and when he was injured, at one point, he defensively asked me, 'Are you trying to shame me?'<sup>41</sup> I replied in the negative, and told him about how much he deserves to be recognised for what he achieved. I gently encouraged him to speak about the above events, and suddenly he did. He confirmed that he had been absent without leave for a few days but 'I did not know what I was doing'. He was officially 'absent without leave' but the word 'desertion', he emphasised was never used. His embarrassment about 'going on the trot', together with the fear of being disbelieved again constitutes a toxic cocktail of emotions he would rather avoid by not granting an interview. Yet in this poignant phone conversation he did speak through the silencing impact of his shame about this episode and accepted my appreciation and expressions of pride in him. I also wonder whether it felt safer for him to reveal this episode to me on the phone, with over 500 miles between us, than within the typical one-on-one interview setting in the same room.

The negotiations over the interview that never happened involved a contorted set of personal and professional dynamics for me. On the one hand, as an ethical oral historian, I reminded myself that all potential interviewees have the right to refuse to be interviewed. On the other hand the son, the furious child in me, would not relent in trying to connect with him. In our final tense discussion about his refusal to grant an interview, in 2008, I resorted to pleading with him to see the recorded interview as a gift, an inheritance to me and my children. This plea was to no avail. However, his inability to grant the interview repeatedly re-evoked my childhood anger at having grown up with an emotionally detached father. This led to an inappropriate blurring of personal and professional motives and was my central blunder. After years in psychoanalytic psychotherapy I have accepted that the emotionally present father that I needed was beyond his personality and family up-bringing. In psychoanalytic terms he suffers from a lack of positive self-mirroring, especially in relation to his formative childhood years with his abusive mother.<sup>42</sup> But for all his vulnerabilities he loved his wife and children in South Africa, albeit in an undemonstrative way, and to his credit he never beat any of us and he never deserted us.<sup>43</sup>

Through writing this article another inter-subjective dimension became clearer. There was a mutual misrecog-



Sean and John Field, Blouberg Beach, late 1970s.

nition between us. On the one hand, for several years, my anger towards him blinded me from seeing how courageous and honourable he was during and after the war. On the other hand, his misrecognition was to over-value my image as an academic, while simultaneously not understanding the meaning of what I do as an oral historian. I wonder also whether he fears losing respect in the eyes of his academic son. This is probably linked to the fact that he imagines a research interview will involve being judged by an academic world, which he frames in elitist Oxbridge terms. His view remains even though I have suggested keeping recorded interviews outside the public domain during his life-time. No matter how many times I sensitively explain oral history research to him he still constructs the oral history interview as a space where his vulnerabilities will be exposed. It is as if released publicly the emotional currency of his war stories will undergo a war-like devaluation. For a man who thinks he has not achieved much in his life that imagined prospect is emotionally unbearable. His self-denigrating comments reveal that his most significant misrecognition is of himself as a man. These comments are a way of shielding himself from further disappointments inflicted by others. Ironically by surviving the horrors of war he experienced degrees of self-validation, and from the 1960s to the present his listening sons have affirmed this profound period in his life.

## Conclusion

I hope this article will leave readers with a respectful view of an ambiguously vulnerable and resilient man of integrity. It is probably the case that the wartime contribution of infantry soldiers like Private John Field to defeating Nazi Germany is immeasurable. He might say that he was only 'shooting at shadows' but in his determined will to survive he helped the front-line to keep moving forward. Even so,

the shadows of his past family, still resident in Dublin and Birmingham, worry him and every time I have visited England over the past two decades he asked me, 'Did you see them, what did they say about me?' I have no doubt that his European family are another public audience that inhibits him from granting a formal interview to his son.

Finally, I have described an unusual professional and personal process which has intellectually taught me that it is not only the mistakes of memory that are meaningful in oral history dialogues. In negotiating the various differences between listener and storyteller, we inevitably conjure mistaken or unclear views. By interpreting both accurate and inaccurate *inter-views* of each other we can further illuminate the inter-subjectivity of oral history dialogues. These different views are created and have meaning precisely because hearing and seeing the storyteller remain central impulses to the oral history enterprise.

### Post-script

A few weeks after submitting this paper to *Oral History*, on 27 December 2012, a hot summer's day in Cape Town, I had a face-to-face discussion with my father. As he can no longer read, I read the paper to him. While unstated, I sensed that he felt affirmed and was moved by several passages. He raised no objections to publication and corrected some of my factual mistakes. Then, as with prior encounters, he voluntarily re-told many old stories and revealed crucial new information about two nights.

The first night involves his detention by British military police in Northern France in November 1944. Surprisingly, this only involved one night but for weeks thereafter he was held at a remand centre, prior to his court martial hearing. While describing the night he was manacled by military police and pushed into a cell, he pointed to his forearms and said, 'Look you can still see the white scars on my arms'. In winter these scars are not visible but on his brown sun-tanned skin, the scars left by hand-cuffs attached to a leather belt, appear as stark white lines, half-inch in width, one across each of his forearms. I had seen these marks before but never recognised them as scars. The sudden link between the story and the marks on his arms caught me off guard. Here was historical experience cut onto his body, leaving scars to remind him of that night. And while he told me again that the word 'desertion' was never mentioned, it is the unstated accusation that he was a 'deserter' and the shame that this evoked during war-time that he still carries. These feelings remain despite his immediate superiors Sergeant Miller and Lieutenant Dudmore of the Royal Hampshires, whom he named and praised, speaking in his defence at the court-martial. Their testimonies were instrumental in charges being dismissed.

The second night involves the return to his family home in Birmingham in 1947. I knew that this return was blighted

with family conflict but the underlying reasons for this conflict and leaving England had not been fully revealed. My father said,

I arrived home and knocked on the front door, my father put his head out of the top floor window, and shouted, 'Ma, the prodigal son has returned'. I heard my mother run down the stairs. She flung open the door and hit me with a back-hand across the face.

Shocked, I asked, 'But why?' He hesitated and said, 'They thought I was dead.' The last news his family had received was an army telex to say he was missing in action in October 1944. This does not excuse his mother's brutal reception but it is significant that for three years he had made no contact with his family. And in the period after the war ended, he had the means to contact them but chose not to. Moreover, in the troubled months between October 1947 and his departure for Cape Town in March 1948, she and he repeatedly clashed. For the first time ever, he expressed to me how much his mother, with Irish Republican sympathies, hated him for joining the British Army. Throughout those troubled months, she repeatedly said to him, 'Don't come here with your dirty British Army ways'. While their political differences ran deep, it is the symbolic meanings within a mother-son relationship that are more significant. Blinded by rage on that night she again failed her son by resorting to violence. The impact of her misrecognition of her son, the man, the soldier returning home, not only wounded him but made him feel worthless. The personal meaning of his repeated phrase, 'I was just buckshee', became much clearer. The primary source of his self-denigration was not the war but his family troubles, before, during and after the war.

There is more to learn about my father's life history. But a more focussed picture has been established and these two nights were watershed events. The first was a night of shame. The second was a night of betrayal. Both European nights seared scars on to his body and psyche for which he still seeks resolution by repeated telling of his war and family stories to listeners in South Africa.

Our conversations about 'the interview' began in 2004 with my bursts of rage at him. The oral history interview has still not happened but our conversations created a process through which I have regained respect for him. But something else eluded my awareness until recently. Two readers made the same remark about this paper in 2013: they saw that I loved my father. Their comment caught me off guard again. Since early childhood, for legitimate reasons, I have not been able to feel that emotion towards him. But at the age of 51 to feel love for my father again is a profound and unexpected conclusion to this episode in our lives.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Rob Morrell for extensive comments and several references. Thanks also to Alessandro Portelli, Carohn Cornell, Jane van der Riet, Tessa Ackerman, Ron Field, Lance van Sittert

and colleagues in the Historical Studies Department at the University of Cape Town for their support. Sincere thanks also to the editorial collective of *Oral History*.

## NOTES

**1.** Conversation between author and John Field occurred in the late 1980s. I conveyed this conversation during interviews conducted by Carohn Cornell, 20 November and 3 December 2008. All oral history quotations in this paper, are presented as accurately as possible, and are either drawn from my memory of conversations with my father or my father's stories as remembered by my brother, Ronald Field, and conveyed in interviews I conducted with him.

**2.** See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1991. He brilliantly argues that black identities should not be approached in essentialist terms but are shaped by trans-Atlantic movements and dialogues. In a similar but different fashion, I wonder is there a 'white Atlantic' of dialogues between Europe and Africa through colonial and post-colonial periods? But the idea of the white African remains contested because of the real or imagined connections to Europe and neo-colonial legacies in Africa. The 'white Atlantic' concept will not resolve these debates but trans-national histories and migration memories created by movements across by racial and national identities is a fruitful research terrain. For example tracing my European ancestry in this article has helped me grasp the ambivalence of identifying with diverse cultures on two continents while strengthening my sense of belonging in South Africa.

**3.** While Gold Beach, as part of D-Day, is well known few will remember the Battle of *Blaauwberg* on 8 January 1806, which was part of the Napoleonic Wars. A British fleet and regiment were sent to the Cape and defeated soldiers of the Batavian Republic (as French controlled Holland was then known) to take control of the Cape. Note that German mercenaries formed one-fifth of the soldiers defending the Cape. German soldiers were thus on the losing side in both these beach battles. 'Blouberg' is the contemporary spelling, whereas the Dutch spelling from the colonial period was, '*Blaauwberg*'. See, Tim Couzens, *The Battles of South Africa*, Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 2004.

**4.** For example, see my, *Oral History, Community and Displacement: Imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

**5.** Sadly he has become partially sighted and can no longer read. He currently lives in Uitenhage which is approximately 500 miles from Cape Town hence most of our recent communication is telephonic.

**6.** Verbal communication between

Alessandro Portelli and author, Cape Town, May 2012.

**7.** On the challenges of interviewing a family member, see Katherine Borland, 'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative History' in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, Sherma Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds, New York, Routledge, 1991, pp63-75.

**8.** Telephone communication between author and John Field, 13 August 2012.

**9.** Ronald Fraser, *In Search of a Past, the Manor House, Amnersfield, 1933-1945*, London: Verso, 1984 and Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Women, A Story of Two Lives*. London: Virago Press, 1986.

**10.** On misrecognition, see Alessandro Portelli's mistaken view that a narrator was a fascist because of a song he had sung, when in fact, he was a communist! *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories: form and meaning in oral history*, New York: SUNY Press, 1991. Moreover, the recognition and misrecognition by others of our sense of self is a recurring theme across different psychoanalytic traditions such as Jacques Lacan and Heinz Kohut. It is particularly Kohut's self-psychology tradition that developed Freud's ideas of 'narcissism' and the 'narcissistic wound' evoked by misrecognition or a lack of positive mirroring. For example, when the oral historian requests an interview it places the potential interviewee's self-image under the academic or public spotlight, and hence the common initial response is: 'why me, my story is not important'. But what is usually not stated but thought: 'will this researcher value my life story and see me for who I feel I am?' Over the past three decades both oral historians and self-psychology analysts have placed central emphasis on empathy and inter-subjectivity. For insightful links across oral history and Kohut's ideas, see Robert Reynolds, 'Trauma and the Relational Dynamics of Life History Interviewing', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol 43, no 1, 2012, pp 78-88.

**11.** A 'grunt' is army slang for an infantry private and 'buckshee' has Persian origins meaning free of charge but my father uses it deliberately to mean that he was worthless.

**12.** He still uses these Dublin memories as a motivation for why his children should not be involved with politics. It remains disappointing to him that I spent years being involved in anti-apartheid activism and that my brother is a trade unionist. That his sons both remain committed to various forms of political work is perplexing to him.

**13.** Thanks to Rachel Holmes, curator at the Royal Hampshire Museum, for information about my father and the Royal Hampshire's participation in the Second World War.

**14.** For a detailed account of D-Day and the crucial two month period thereafter, see Anthony Beevor, *D-Day, the Battle for Normandy*, London: Penguin Books, 2009.

**15.** Hottot was captured 18 July, Villiers Bocage on 4 August, and St Pierre on 12 August, 1944. See, David Scott Daniell, *The Royal Hampshire Regiment 1918-54*, vol 3, Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1955.

**16.** The 231 Infantry Brigade, including the Royal Hampshires, fought 'a static warfare to hold the road' and 'casualties in the battles on the Island in early October had been severe', accessed online at: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/231st\\_Infantry\\_Brigade](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/231st_Infantry_Brigade), 20 September 2012.

**17.** Cross-generational emotional legacies and trauma have had a disruptive impact on many relationships in my family. I can only briefly comment on these issues here. I will explore these issues further in a companion article, which will discuss a war photography book that entered our home in the mid-1960s. Both my brother and I compulsively looked at these images to imagine the visual landscape of my father's war stories.

**18.** Accessed online, [www.hampshireregiment.co.uk/historypages/history1.htm](http://www.hampshireregiment.co.uk/historypages/history1.htm), 13 August 2012.

**19.** I acknowledge my mother's burden in enduring my father's moods and for doing most of the parenting. She was acutely aware of the war's impact on my father. Most important is the devoted love she provided to us all. She died due to frontal-lobe dementia in 2001.

**20.** I am referring to my father's side of the family. My mother's side, (*nee* Carstens), has a lineage that stems from French Huguenot refugees inter-marrying with Dutch farmers. My mother grew-up on a small-holding farm, her family being displaced by drought and depression in the 1930s. In post-war South Africa she married my financially destitute father while her siblings became successful farmers in the rural hinterland of the Western Cape.

**21.** Daniell, *Hampshire Regiment*, pp 4-5.

**22.** Author interviewed by Carohn Cornell, 20 November 2008.

**23.** I heard the story of the front row of troops drowning on several occasions but his narration of running onto Gold Beach under fire is always truncated. Author interviewed by Carohn Cornell, 20 November 2008.

**24.** Daniell, *Hampshire Regiment*, pp 1-9.



25. Daniell, *Hampshire Regiment*, pp 1-9.

26. Ronald Field interviewed by author, 18 August 2012.

27. Author interviewed by Carohn Cornell, 20 November 2008.

28. This story does not contradict his 'shooting at shadows' phrase. It was British Army policy to give some members of the firing squad live ammunition and others blanks. They were not told what they were firing, creating uncertainty in their minds as to who fired the fatal shots.

29. Ronald Field interviewed by author, 11 August 2012.

30. Ronald Field interviewed by author, 18 August 2012.

31. I am aware of the masculine resonances in this commentary here and elsewhere in the paper but am not making masculinity my central focus. I note the vast masculinity studies literature such as pioneering work in South Africa by Robert Morrell, *Changing Men in Southern Africa*, Durban: University of Natal Press, 2001 and from other contexts, John Rutherford, *Men's Silences, Predicaments in Masculinity*, London: Routledge, 1992 and Bob Connell, *Masculinities*, Cambridge Polity Press, 1995.

32. For a fascinating discussion of patriotism, see Corinna M. Penniston, "All in it together" and "Backs to the Wall": Relating Patriotism and the People's War in the 21st century', *Oral History*, vol 40, no 2, 2012, pp 69-80.

33. Beyond this story of post-traumatic reaction I do not directly comment on my father's 'traumas'. See Alison Parr, 'Breaking the Silence: Traumatized War Veterans and Oral History', *Oral History*, vol 35, no 1, 2007, pp 61-70. She notes that the post-traumatic legacies of Second World War veterans is a 'concealed problem' and a '...possible reason is the silent coping strategies of that generation of soldiers, men who are culturally less likely than later generations to discuss the emotional effects of combat', p 62. For contributions to on-going debates over the use of the term 'trauma' and related emotions, see the 'Emotions' edition, *Oral History*, vol 38, no 2, 2010.

34. For example, see, Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: the Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987; Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia, Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

35. Alistair Thomson, 'Four paradigm transformations of oral history', *Oral History Review*, vol 34, no 1, 2007, pp 49-70.

36. Valerie Yow, "Do I like them too much?" Effects of the Oral History Interview on the interviewer and vice-versa', Rob Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, London: Routledge, 2006, pp 54-72.

37. On oral histories as 'conversational narratives', Ron Grele, *Envelopes of Sound*,

*the Art of Oral History*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991.

38. Michael Schwalbe and Michele Wolkomir, 'The masculine self as problem and resource in interview studies of men', *Men and Masculinities*, vol 4, 2001, p 91, pp 90-103.

39. See my, 'Disappointed Men: Masculine Myths and Hybrid Identities in Windermere' in, Field, 2012. While writing that article in 2001 about the life stories of two disappointed men it repeatedly evoked mental images of my own disappointed father.

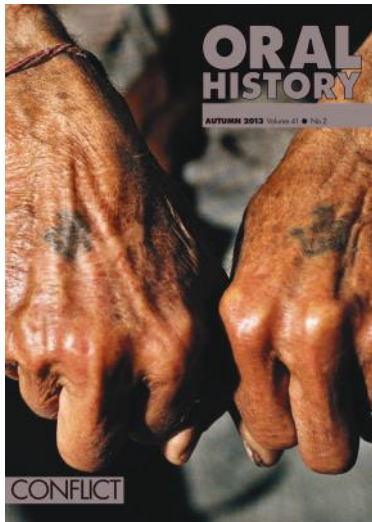
40. Ronald Field interviewed by author, 18 August 2012.

41. Shame is a re-occurring theme in men's studies, for example see, Victor Seidler, *Man Enough, Embodying Masculinities*, London: Sage, 1997.

42. His mother's physical beatings and verbal abuse of her children went beyond what was the norm in the 1920s and 1930s. In addition, to using the knife sharpening strap, my father speaks of his mother pouring a 'kettle of boiling water over his sister's back', and giving them 'a touch with a red hot poker' to keep them in line.

43. Ross Haenfler, 'Manhood in contradiction: The Two Faces of Straight Edge', *Men and Masculinities*, vol 7, no 1, 2004, p 82, pp 77-99.

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# Remembering partition: women, oral histories and the Partition of 1947

By Pippa Virdee

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This article was written in 2012 following many years of research on the Partition of Punjab in 1947. It was an immensely enriching (and, ultimately rewarding) piece because it allowed me to be self-reflexive and pushed me towards a different direction. It brought into focus the potential that oral history

has in shaping momentous events by opening up spaces for a more diverse range of marginalised voices to be heard. It led me to position women's voices at the core of my own work, then and since, especially women from Pakistani Punjab. In the last five years, the field of this method has become more manifest

and multi-hued with a range of themes coming through such as material cultures and memorialisation of Partition. Technology has played a key role in opening up new possibilities and providing a space for a people's history to emerge. These changes in the discourse were clearly visible in the

media's extensive coverage of seventy years of Partition. However, to what extent has oral history been subversive in creating counter-narratives in Partition Studies? To what extent has it disrupted the hegemonic nationalism-institutionalism of post-colonial states in South Asia by bringing to fore

alternative imaginings of the society are questions still unanswered for me.

### Pippa Virdee

As someone whose entry to oral history was very much through partition, this article was something of a landmark – the first time partition was ever studied in the

pages of *Oral History*. Virdee makes a compelling case for the importance of oral histories of partition, without ever falling into the trap of uncritical idolisation. She explores the nuances within the small but burgeoning field of partition oral history – identifying its

successes and its gaps, and situating her own important work within this context. She writes compellingly of her insider-outsider status during oral history fieldwork, which spoke to me very powerfully, and informed my own fieldwork. Virdee's article will remain important for

some time to come – highlighting how far we have come in constructing histories from below, but never forgetting how far we still have to go.

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***Oral History***

**Abstract:** This article explores key developments in the way Partition has been represented in the history of India and Pakistan. It more specifically examines how alternative silent voices have been become more visible in the past fifteen years in the historiography of Partition. This shift has been made possible with the use of oral testimonies to document accounts of ordinary people's experiences of this event in the history of India and Pakistan. The article then goes on to reflect on the author's experiences of working in South Asia and the use of oral history as a radical and empowering tool in understanding women's history in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Women's history, Partition, migration, Pakistan, India

The use of oral history has been a growing trend in Partition Studies since the 1990s. Popularised by the need to explore 'history from below' it has changed our understanding of Partition by shifting the focus from the 'great men' of history to one which encompasses a people's history. Oral history as a new methodological tool has been pivotal in enabling this shift. It has enhanced our understanding of the human trauma and turmoil ordinary citizens endured during those chaotic and frenzied days of the collapsing British Empire in India. Moreover, it has provided an opportunity to document the history of those people who, until recently, were silenced, marginalised and outside the official histories. To date much of this new research has been largely confined to India, and more specifically concerned with developments in the Punjab, but there have been some studies on other regions including Bengal, Delhi and Pakistan Punjab. Comparative work has also started to emerge, whereby locality based studies have used first-hand accounts to provide some much needed coverage to local voices.

The purpose of this article is to examine some of the developments that have taken place in partition historiography, especially since official records were opened up to the public; to focus on the impact of oral history, which has increasingly been used in the past fifteen years, transforming our understanding of the gendered dimension in Partition Studies and the transformative impact of this period on the lives of women. Finally, the article reflects on the experiences of working with oral history in South Asia and more specifically on my experiences of interviewing women in Pakistan.

### Historiography and Partition's representation

The starting point for Partition literature is the official histo-

ries produced in India and Pakistan. Such writings tended to celebrate the achievement of independence, to play down the dislocation surrounding Partition and/or to displace blame for the violence. The Indian nationalist approach was to understand Partition as the net result of years of divisive policies adopted by the colonial power. These undermined pre-existing cultural unities and social interaction, which cut across religious identity. For Pakistani writers, on the other hand, the creation of a separate homeland arose from the desire to safeguard community values away from the tyrannical Hindu majority rule. The ideologically incompatible discourses arising from the 'divide and rule' and 'two-nation theory' understandings of Partition that followed from independence have helped frame the post-independence relationship between India and Pakistan.

Much of the early historiography was concerned with the 'high politics' that accompanied the process of transferring power. This has partly been directed by the sources that were available; early accounts were dependent on key insiders providing autobiographical accounts of their experiences. There was however, a glaring omission of ordinary voices and how high politics affected those at the bottom of society. Literature and film to a limited extent filled that void. Fiction was perhaps the only way in which emotive, traumatic and religiously sensitive material could be depicted in countries that were divided on the basis of religion. Writers such as Intizar Hussain, Bhisham Sahni, Saadat Hasan Manto and Amrita Pritam were writing from their own personal experiences of dislocation and captured the human drama of Partition.

In the 'official' histories both India and Pakistan have produced documentation to displace blame for the violence of August 1947, which despite its biases is useful to the historian. One of the best-known attempts to document the



'Ghanta Ghar' or Clock Tower in Faisalabad forms the centre of the famous eight bazaars which are designed like the Union Jack and date back to 1903. Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2004.

violence is Khosla's account, which was first published in 1949.<sup>1</sup> Khosla, interestingly, uses eyewitness accounts to illustrate the violent and horrific nature of the disturbances. In Pakistan, there have been a number of government publications that understand the violence against Muslims in East Punjab in terms of a so-called 'Sikh Plan'.<sup>2</sup> Khan, meanwhile, provides an insightful piece, again illustrating this with first-hand accounts of Pakistani refugees and their experiences of being uprooted.<sup>3</sup> Though this publication, like that of Khosla, has many biases, the combined effect of the two publications at least provides some insight of localised and personal experiences of the frenzied months following Partition. It also provides a useful alternative to the other personal accounts of the time from the officials themselves.

For both India and Pakistan it was important to establish an independent national identity; re-imagining the past and creating a new national history allows this new identity to emerge and to reinforce and justify the nascent nation-state. Thus the dominance and glorification of the 'great men' such as, Jinnah, Gandhi, Nehru is palpable in the post-independent histories of India and Pakistan. Despite some important advances in Regional Studies<sup>4</sup> the emphasis has predominately been on why Partition happened, rather than on how it impacted and transformed the lives of ordinary citizens. The pervasive hold of the national leadership in

shaping perceptions of Partition, the relationship between the British, the Congress and the Muslim League, have all contributed to an obsession with what happened at the top echelons. Moreover, this imbalance is reflected in the history books,<sup>5</sup> which have for a long time neglected the heavy price paid by the citizens of the two new nations. This curriculum of hatred continues to feed religious bigotry on both sides of the border, placing Hindus and Muslims against each other.

By the early 1980s, a new historiographical school emerged and challenged existing assumptions; writers such as Ranajit Guha pioneered the study of Indian history 'from below'.<sup>6</sup> The Subaltern Studies School,<sup>7</sup> as they came to be known, sought to provide an alternative history from the populist nationalist struggle that was being depicted. By the early 1990s the impact of this approach started to permeate Partition Studies and resulted in a shift away from the 'great men of history' approach towards a 'history from below.' Regional Studies had already shifted the focus from national to regional politics, but social activists and feminist writers pushed the agenda into probing a hidden and traumatic past. A key catalyst for this was the chilling similarities between Partition violence and the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. Second, and more importantly, the Golden Jubilee of Independence encouraged a reassessment of partition. Marked with special publications, it presented an opportunity for introspection and reflective writing which was able to deal with the horrors and violence that accompanied independence. Fifty years on a new generation of writers was more willing to tackle and challenge taboo subjects such as violence, rape and the abduction of women. Interestingly, in Europe, this coincided with the ongoing debate about ethnic cleansing, genocide, and war crimes against women in Bosnia. In this case, 'feminist activists made a concerted effort to affect the statute establishing the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the rules of evidence under which rape and other crimes of sexual violence would be prosecuted...'<sup>8</sup> Thus there was now a wider discussion about the use of mass rape against women in conflicts; indeed Menon and Bhasin note the similarities with accounts of violence against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina with Partition violence.<sup>9</sup> In both these cases women are the upholders of community honour and are then tainted by the 'other' and forced to take on the burden of dishonouring the community. Scholars such as Menon, Bhasin,<sup>10</sup> Butalia<sup>11</sup> and Das<sup>12</sup> have led the way in opening up the discussion in India about communal violence and its relationship with women and in doing so have made significant contributions to this new history of Partition. Significantly, they have sought to give the victims of Partition a voice by utilising oral narrative as a means of communicating their histories.

### Women, oral history and Partition

The 'new history' of Partition that emerged initially from feminist writing encapsulates the shift from explaining the reasons for Partition towards a more nuanced understanding, which attempts to incorporate the impact Partition has had on the lives of ordinary people. What is distinctly





Fatima's residence was located on the top floor of this building.  
Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2007.

noticeable in the new history of Partition is that it is largely, though not exclusively, female writers and scholars who have embraced oral history. It is perhaps the sensitive nature of the subject and the attempt to capture life stories and the human dimension that lends itself more easily to the female gaze. More importantly it has been an active assertion by a new generation of writers to re-orientate our focus and understanding of Partition. The feminist embrace of oral history emerged from the neglect of women's voices in traditional sources; oral history has therefore provided an opportunity to integrate 'women into historical scholarship, even contesting the reigning definitions of social, economic and political importance that obscured women's lives.'<sup>13</sup> The centrality of gendered accounts in historical discourse is an important development in recognising and challenging dominant tendencies in the discipline. In this way the new developments have brought a welcome shift. Sheila Rowbotham's contention is that women's experiences in historical discourse were often 'hidden' and new methodologies, such as personal testimonies, allows us to challenge 'historical interpretations based upon the lives and documentation of men'.<sup>14</sup> Feminist interpretations that have focused on the plight of women and other marginalised groups, often on the periphery of Indian society, has enabled this reappraisal in Partition discourse. It has brought the experiences of women during this traumatic time to the fore and has begun to expose the harsh realities of sensitive and taboo subjects such as, abduction, rape and violence against women in a predominately patri-

archal society. Until recently these subjects remained hidden from public discourse. Although feminist discourse had been well developed in pre-partition India and then also in independent India and Pakistan, partition-related violence against women has remained in the shadows of nationalist and political discourse in Partition Studies.

As highlighted earlier, this shift in Partition historiography started in the 1980s with subaltern influences and began to emerge a decade later, first with Menon and Bhasin's article in *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1993 and then later *Borders and Boundaries* and Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, both of which were published in 1998. These significant pieces of work by feminist writers have done much to re-configure the debate surrounding the plight of women during partition. They have uncovered these 'hidden histories' and brought them into the public realm of discussion and debate while challenging the nation to deal with the murky and controversial past. In both of the monographs first-hand accounts by women were the key to revealing the human tragedy of partition-related violence and mass migration. More broadly these accounts have challenged the conventional histories, which marginalised women and other subaltern groups. Bacchetta goes further and suggests that these accounts 'reflect a different kind of subaltern writing that inadvertently challenges almost-established subaltern writing, which...continues to marginalise women'.<sup>15</sup>

There are two distinct features about this 'new history' of Partition. Firstly that it has a predominately Indian-centric approach and comparatively little has been written about women in Pakistan. Nighat Said Khan, a Lahore based activist, has conducted some interviews with women, largely in Sindh, but the interviews remain largely unpublished.<sup>16</sup> More recently I have attempted to bridge this significant gap in documenting the experiences of Partition and resettlement of women in Pakistan Punjab, especially in terms of how this is recorded in public and private spaces.<sup>17</sup> Second, the majority of the work so far has attempted to document the plight of Punjabis. Although, the region, it can be argued, suffered the worst of the atrocities, within wider Partition historiography the research is geographically limited. Zamindar's work however, does bring together through personal narratives, the story of families divided by Partition in Delhi and Karachi.<sup>18</sup> Recently there is work emerging on Bengal and also Yasmin Saikia has been exploring the impact of the 1972 war in Bangladesh on women.<sup>19</sup> But in addition to these accounts there remain many unexplored histories of lesser-known experiences of the upheaval caused by Partition and independence.

The use of oral history in the study of Partition has been embraced in recent scholarly work because it has allowed the researcher to delve deep into the human dimension, an attempt to understand through emotions the impact on everyday life.<sup>20</sup> This is often absent in the official records. As a methodological tool, oral history has complemented official documentary sources rather than compete with them. For example during my own research, I found that although the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons and the Liaison Agency were looking

into the abduction of women and children during 1947, the documents could not reveal anything about the women themselves. Further there is not much information about their personal circumstances, how the women responded once they had been 'recovered' and what happened to them afterwards. Oral testimonies in this case have been significant in filling that missing dimension and allow the historian to document not just the political history which examines the government's role in recovering abducted women but to explore the cultural, social and human repercussions of this history. They can complement the official source material, providing an altogether more comprehensive analysis. Moving away from the statistics of how women's lives were uprooted and how they rebuilt their lives; they enable us to document the aftermath and not just the event itself. Furthermore, the level of detail required in grass roots case studies is difficult to obtain if local records are not available, especially if they were destroyed, at times deliberately, as in 1947. The use of oral testimonies thus becomes an important source of information as well as allowing us to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of ordinary lives. Moreover, with women's voices that are often marginalised, oral history has become even more important as it has the ability to empower those unexpressed utterances, which would otherwise remain undocumented. At the same time this process has at least democratised the discourse which has until recently remained concerned with high politics.

However documenting, recording and recounting these stories also presents the researcher with ethical dilemmas. The subject matter in many cases concerns stories of trauma, forced migration, violence, rape and loss of one's homeland. These are emotive subjects that can evoke strong responses in some cases, while others find it hard to re-live that painful experience again. Although the people were speaking willingly there is still a sense of burden and responsibility on the interviewer to be aware of the impact the interview may have on the interviewee. This interaction and the interview process itself create a new historical document 'by the agency of *both* the interviewer and the interviewee' (emphasis in the original).<sup>21</sup> The interview process is therefore much more complex, one in which the interviewer has an agenda to document an untold story and the interviewee shares their particular experience or story. Bornat et al argue that, 'for the oral historians the interview is always more than the recorded and transcribed words, it is a process in which the narrator, the interviewee, is actively constructing and creating an account'.<sup>22</sup> There is also in many ways a power imbalance between the two agents; it is ultimately the interviewer who has the ability to interpret, recount and analyse the interview before narrating it and the interviewee has no power or control during this process. Some oral historians may share a transcript with the interviewee but this approach is not standard. However, the process of collecting these personal histories has enabled historians to broaden what history is about,<sup>23</sup> it has democratised history and enabled hidden voices to be incorporated into our wider understanding of society. There is then a dilemma about the use of these accounts and the radical potential of oral history to reclaim the history of ordi-

nary people. Sangster however forces us to question the impact of feminist discourse which 'hoped to use oral history to empower women by creating a revised history *for* women [emphasis in original]' and to what extent this is overstated. She questions whether we are 'exaggerating the radical potential of oral history, especially the likelihood of academic work changing popular attitudes?' And she asks 'are we ignoring the uncomfortable ethical issues involved in using living people as a source for our research?'<sup>24</sup> As an oral historian this is one of the challenges of working with living history. The radical nature of course comes from providing space for alternative histories to exist and challenge the status quo.

### Remembering Partition: a female gaze

In this section I reflect on some of the main themes that became important in collecting first-hand accounts in India and Pakistan; and themes which were particularly useful for understanding a gendered perspective of the Partition period and the impact on women's lives in Pakistan. Over the past ten years or so I have collected testimonies from around 100 or so men and women, and in more recent times I have chosen to focus on women, especially Muslim women, in an attempt to balance some of the recent research which has focused on the Indian Punjabi experience.

I first used oral testimonies for my doctoral research. It was an integral part of the methodology and complemented the 'history from below' approach that I wanted to adopt. It also followed logically from the historiography outlined earlier, as it was moving away from established modes of thought. The locality based approach I adopted also allowed local voices to emerge, so it presented an opportunity to narrate not just localised case studies but to tell this story through the people who inhabited these places. So cities such as Ludhiana and Lyallpur became important because of these migrants and the transformative impact the movement of people has had on these localities. Documents provided the factual details such as the level of population displacement, government responses to the refugee crisis, and housing reconstruction, but oral accounts provided a glimpse into the lived experiences, the impact of displacement, how they adapted and ultimately how these cities were transformed after August 1947.<sup>25</sup>

I have collected oral testimonies from a diverse range of people in India and Pakistan, rural and urban, men and women. For my doctoral work I focused on localities (Ludhiana and Lyallpur) but within these places I concentrated on areas which had experienced high levels of refugee resettlement. Once in those areas, it was not difficult to find people who had migrated, either in India or Pakistan. This also created a snowballing process that led to multiple interviews in a geographically tight space. Other interviews were conducted with a more targeted approach; this was particularly useful for conducting interviews with women involved in the rehabilitation of refugees in Pakistan. On the whole the interviewees have been given pseudonyms but in some cases, where the person's views are already in the public domain or their identity forms part of the narrative then the identity has been revealed.



Kamoke is a small city in Gujranwala district and is associated with violence and the abduction of women during Partition. I did a number of interviews here. Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2008.

Most of my interviews have been conducted in Punjabi and then translated and transcribed; translating directly from oral Punjabi to written English. This was a time-consuming process but an important one for me as a researcher because it allowed me to engage and interact with material intimately while reflecting on the interview itself. The ability to speak the local dialect is an absolute advantage, especially in a region where language is such an emotive and political subject. It also allows the interviewer to establish trust and rapport with the interviewee. Interviews conducted with a local translator while useful in providing access to people, does mean that some of the sub-text of the interview can be lost in translation. The ability to conduct the interview yourself, to respond to the visual and verbal expressions are crucial. Interestingly, Hamilton seeks to analyse the emotions in oral history interviews.<sup>26</sup> Conducting interviews in Pakistan was initially quite challenging for me. My East African/Indian/British background allowed me to adopt a neutral position but even then certain words or phrases would locate me as 'Indian'. This was problematic because I was then no longer viewed as a neutral and objective researcher and instead belonged to the 'other'. Conversely it is worth highlighting that belonging to a particular region also at times allowed me to bond with some of the interviewees more easily, especially when we spoke the same dialect, which would immediately establish rapport and congeniality. There was then a sense of kinship in the interview. Interestingly, the concerns over my background were mainly expressed by men I interviewed rather than women. This perhaps reinforces how generally men

are more politicised (and in this case adopting a nationalist stance) than women. But my gender, however, was crucial in allowing me access to women, especially in Pakistan where society is more conservative and gendered segregation more common.

The majority of the interviewees were recounting events and memories from the 1940s and so their ability to accurately reconstruct these events may be questionable. There are obvious concerns over memory and the ability to recall these events but this is further complicated by nationalist fervour in a politically charged environment. In addition there are the inevitable allegations that people may change or exaggerate their experiences for the benefit of the interviewer. I was more concerned about the ethical questions of whether we should subject people to recollect something as traumatic as the communal carnage, abduction of women, and the forced migration that took place following independence in August 1947. For many this period is still too traumatic to talk about. Indeed some of the people interviewed were emotionally upset by the whole experience and in some of the interviews the truth was concealed from me because it was too sensitive to talk about. I only discovered this through informal conversations with other members of the family who later informed me that certain things had been hidden from me. For example on one occasion I was informed that the interviewee was involved in violence and looting and in another case the interviewee kept silent about the abduction and rape of a niece. This subject is still very sensitive and people, regardless of their religious background, do not open up about it easily. Some-





Wagah-Attari border crossing. Picture taken from the Pakistan side. Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2005.

times stories are recounted by using the example of a friend or distant relative, thus creating some distance between the experience and associated dishonouring. In an interview with Tahira Mazhar Ali we discussed how the recovery of women was marred with difficulties, in large part due to the stigma and shame associated with being forcibly abducted and raped. She was actively working at the time to improve the condition of women and was familiar with the plight of women who were abandoned or then forcibly recovered by the government.<sup>27</sup> The following extract from this interview also shows the disjuncture between government initiatives of recovering abducted women and the realities in then locating these women back to their 'rightful' homes:

I was working with Mridula [Sarabhai],<sup>28</sup> particularly after Jawaharlal [Nehru] asked for the return of the abducted Hindu women. I got myself immersed in the task of recovering those women. Mridula asked me to ask those women to come back to their homes. But many of those women did not want to face the family because of shame and sheer embarrassment they felt. Quite a few were accorded acceptability and some were happy and well settled in the households they were living. Such women, therefore, did not want to go back.<sup>29</sup>

When I started my research on women's experience of partition and resettlement in Pakistan Punjab I was very conscious of the class dimension and I was keen to incorporate women from less educated, working-class and rural areas rather than focusing on more accessible, educated and

urban voices. Indeed it has been harder to access women in rural areas and in Pakistan particularly the process has often involved an intermediary to arrange interviews. Local knowledge is necessary in order to enable the cluster process; thus multiple interviews have been done in a few villages such as Kamoke especially where I knew of disturbances during 1947. It was evident that working class women responded differently to the interviews and how they saw themselves which affected their responses during the interview. As Gluck notes, the middle class are 'more accustomed to reflecting about life, and also to articulating ideas. As a result the interview is more "orderly"; thoughts are more often completed...' while less educated women tend not to be reflective about themselves or to view their lives as important.<sup>30</sup> My experience was that it was much harder to get working class or illiterate women to value their own voice. It was difficult for some to articulate their opinions, often they devalued their views. For those who were writers or activists, the process of sharing their opinions was normal and easy. In an interview with Abida, she reflected on her own life growing up, 'I was an astute child and aware of things around me. I had a dream that when I would visit Lahore, first of all I would get rid of this *purdah* [veil]'. She also notes how 'Partition benefited my kind of women who did not want *purdah*,' she stopped wearing hers when she went to America on a scholarship.<sup>31</sup>

However, it was apparent that some women, especially in rural areas, were simply restricted to the confines of the '*char diwari*' or the four walls of their house and unable to articulate any opinions of their own.<sup>32</sup> It was not so much that they had nothing to say but rather the belief that they





Overlooking Kamoke train station. Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2008.

have little of worth to share. Interestingly, Portelli discusses how as researchers we can also 'flatten the emotional content of speech down to the presumed equanimity and objectivity of the written document'. This, it is suggested, is especially the case with working class voices that 'may be poor in vocabulary but are generally richer in the range of tone, volume, and intonation, as compared to middleclass speakers...'<sup>33</sup> This then presents further complexities when transcribing and selecting material to be used. Farkhanda Lodi, a writer, expressed her sadness at the suffering that women are subjected to, suggesting that women are forced to remain weak due their social and cultural conditioning. In her interview she reflected on the plight of women in Pakistan:

As you see our respectable culture does not allow us to speak about such things. That is why she never discusses this issue [referring to abduction]... She is weak, helpless and vulnerable. She has been forced to remain weak. It is the training; she gets this from her parents, culture and the social environment that develop in her a pitiable pathetic soul. Our system and society do not allow her to progress. So she is in pain, for me her life is a constant misery... Our women were illiterate and uneducated. Muslims did not use to allow them to go out. So they used to live indoor. In UP [United Provinces] the women from well-off families used to go out in palanquins; they were not allowed to go out without taking a *mehram* [a close male family member].<sup>34</sup>

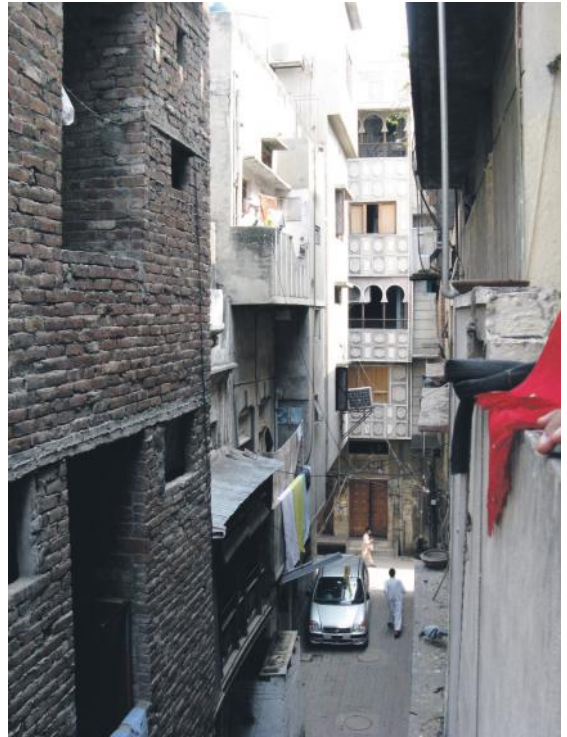
The issue of social conditioning was vividly highlighted during one of the interviews that I did in Lahore. Fatima<sup>35</sup> was from a relatively deprived background living in a densely populated building. She had migrated from nearby Wagah border and I was introduced to her by a mutual acquaintance. The interview took place at her home in an informal but confined space. Our mutual friend had informed Fatima that I wished to interview her about her experiences of Partition but once the interview started she was reluctant to open up to me. The reasons were two-fold: her brother was present at the interview and she felt her brother's views were more important than hers. When I asked Fatima about how she found out about the disturbances, her brother mumbled in the background, 'well now I don't have permission to talk otherwise I could have explained everything.' I respond by saying that I just wanted to record women's experience and wanted them to explain things in their own way. Fatima responds, 'what can I say, I don't recall anything.' By doing so, she validated her own brother's agency and marginalised her own voice. Similarly in another interview I asked Reshma Bibi how she came from India, her response was, 'I cannot remember at all. You should ask any man who could tell it to you properly'.<sup>36</sup> Sangster has also highlighted that women often remember the past in different ways to men, often 'they downplay their own activities, emphasising the role of other family members in their recollections.'<sup>37</sup> In Butalia's experience, 'women almost never spoke about themselves, indeed they denied they had anything 'worthwhile' to say, a stance that was often corroborated by their men...or they simply

weren't there to speak.'<sup>38</sup> While, Menon and Bhasin suggest that there is 'gendered telling' of the narrative, so that men recount the story in a 'heroic mode'<sup>39</sup> which in many ways resembles the dominant nationalist discourse. Consequently, Fatima's brother goes on to explain what happened and what prompted them to leave. His explanation includes political analysis for the disturbances, which were most likely informed retrospectively and through informal discussions. Throughout the interview Fatima's brother remained present, sometimes remaining silent and sometimes contributing to the interview. He tried to take over, not it seems because he did not want his sister to talk to me but because he thought he had more knowledge and therefore a discussion with him would be more beneficial to my research. Looking at it from his point of view he was trying to assist me with my research by providing an informed opinion, much more than his sister could, but by default he was silencing his sister's views. The interview highlighted the complexities of speaking with women, especially with those who are illiterate or from rural areas. Paradoxically it is often the women themselves who have been conditioned to feel they have little of value to contribute and are therefore reluctant to share their views.

But given the opportunity, they are also willing to open up and let the interviewer come into the '*char diwari*' and into their personal space, narrating their stories as experienced and visualised by them. In their own way the period leading up to Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan was also creating opportunities for Muslim women's emancipation. Education for girls during the 1940s was still largely exclusive, middle class families were beginning to encourage education for girls but amongst the lower classes it was still not considered appropriate and girls remained outside formal education.<sup>40</sup> Although education provided many women with more political awareness, it is important to note that formal education was not the only route. In the case of Salma Begum, who was from an affluent background, her lack of formal education did not detract from her overall awareness of the politics surrounding the Muslim League and the demands for a separate state. Her family was well connected and politically active and while she was not discouraged from studying, she herself made a decision not to study because of her own lack of interest. Yet in my conversation with her it was clear that she took an interest in politics via her family's network:

My father then joined the Khilafat Movement and he was advocating *sooti* [homespun cotton] against imported cloth. The government offered him a good job through my paternal uncle but he was too involved with the movement's activities...During the German war, they asked the British that they will fight only on one condition that they will have to give them independence. One of my nephews went to the war as a Major. So many people from Punjab were killed in that war.<sup>41</sup>

In an interview with Nusrat, the absence of women's contributions in politics is highlighted, something that she believes remains largely silenced. She also touches on how her own desires were thwarted by the reluctance of her father:



View from a house in Lahore where I conducted an interview.  
Photo: Pippa Virdee, 2008.

There was another political activist called Fatima Begum. Her father started publishing the first Urdu newspaper *Paisa Akhbar*<sup>42</sup> from Lahore. She did a lot of work for the movement of Pakistan. But no one knows her name, even no one mentioned her although there are many speeches and I always used to listen with the hope that someone will mention Baji Fatima's name that she served the nation very well. But to my disappointment, no one speaks about her. The reason was that she never cared to promote herself in public. She was a silent worker and always liked to be behind the scene. A renowned lawyer and writer Abdul Qadir arranged political meetings at his place and Baji Fatima took us to attend a couple of those meetings. I was a student then.

[Her daughter encourages her to share her own story] Tell her how *nana jaan* [grandfather] disliked women's participation in the politics. He was of the view that it was not appropriate for girls to step into the thorny bush of politics, it is not respectable field for women:

[Nusrat] Yes, my father never liked me to get involved in politics. He strictly forbade us to take part in political activities and used to say that I do not want my girls shouting on the roads and then being arrested by police. He never liked me to participate, therefore I refrained from politics, and I left it because I felt it useless if I was not free to say anything.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand Fatima Sughra, despite experiencing similar concerns within her own family, managed to trespass that space and venture into the newly created public arena. In 1947 she was a young girl from a conservative background but was inspired by the changing political landscape around her. She highlighted the fact that people in her locality, in the walled city of Lahore, had reservations and objections in sending girls to protests organised by the Muslim League. They even prompted her father to stop her involvement but she disregarded this and continued. She recalls her experiences of participating in the protests organised by the women's wing of the Muslim League, which was fighting for a separate homeland at the time and how much her initial response was spontaneous but inspired and encouraged by the events taking place around her:

I think it was in February or March 1947, daily processions were arranged and we took processions to the Radio station, Mall Road, Jail Road, High Court and the Civil Secretariat. I remember the day I took off the Union Jack and replaced it by hoisting a Muslim League flag [made out of her green scarf]. Many Muslim women, [who had never left their house before] came out from their houses and took over the streets of the city. This was all happening because the Begums [elite female Muslim League leadership] went door to door and convinced the Muslim women to come out from their homes for the protests. I don't know what sort of passion was inside me at time; I just jumped over the Secretariat Gate [to replace the Union Jack]. I had no interest in politics. I just went to join the processions for enjoyment. I thought that the Muslim League represented the Muslims and *Quaid-i-Azam* was their leader and struggling for the creation of a Muslim country.<sup>44</sup>

Sughra's account gives an insight into how even non-elite women were not completely passive and hidden. And although Sughra's single act of hoisting a makeshift Muslim Flag is replayed heroically each year the narrative rarely makes it into the general history books of Pakistan, sadly, if anything, it remains a footnote in history.

## Conclusion

The value of oral history for a historian is that it provides an opportunity to link the official with the personal. It provides the human dimension, which is often missing in the dominant political histories. Through living people, oral history allows us to connect the present with the past: a preoccupation for the historian. Yet there is also something quite democratic and encouraging about using this form of methodology because there are no restrictions on access in the same way as we are restricted in our access to the archives, especially those records which are deemed to be highly 'sensitive' and held back. The problem with the archives is multi-fold, the lack of proper awareness regarding documents is one and secondly the State and Provincial archives are poorly equipped and lack the necessary resources. However, there is also the issue that post-1947 nationalistic history has politicised public records and thus there is an overly sensitive response regarding these records. Both nation-states have been keen to project them-

selves in the best possible light and so there is a certain amount of protectionism concerning this period especially one which might question the state's response. Personal narratives therefore allow us to venture into private female spaces and document histories which would otherwise remain hidden.

Although there is much elitism in orthodox history, which gives primacy to empirical sources over oral accounts, ultimately both have a value and contribute to our understanding of the past and how we represent it. Both methodological approaches are important in how we construct and interpret the past, albeit they do this in different ways. The orthodox historical approach, which relies on empirical evidence, helps us to contextualise the past and presents the reader with the bigger picture. Relying on documentary and recorded sources from the period does however place importance on the 'great men' and the decisions they made at the time. In the case of Pakistan this was especially important at the time of independence; the need to build and bring together a new nation required history to take a linear approach, converging ideas, myths, and histories, in order to create a new nation-state. The 'great men' embodied this, however, sixty years on and the state is still fragile and any diversion from the orthodox approach is potentially threatening. Moreover, within this history, the role and place of women has been completely marginalised. Piecing together the impact of partition on women from documentary sources is possible but only to a limited extent, thus the role of oral history can play an important role in constructing an alternative history. It allows us to challenge ideological readings of the past, which have been shaped by the neglect and/or destruction of a non-linear past. By empowering women to speak, it presents us with an opportunity to piece together a social cultural history of hidden lives, often confined to private spaces but nonetheless, lives which are important in shaping the newly created nation of Pakistan. In a recent article in *Oral History*, Gluck asked whether feminist oral history had lost its 'radical/subversive' edge?<sup>45</sup> As these personal narratives from Pakistan demonstrate, there is still some progress to be made but they do provide the historian an insight into other alternative narratives, which is essential if old histories are to be challenged and reappraised. These accounts also allow us to explore the subtleties and the complex histories of women's lives during this difficult period. It further challenges the preoccupation with victimised accounts of women during Partition and instead suggests that in reality women played multiple roles. Fatima Sughra's account shows us how a young middle class girl, encouraged by the elite female leadership, becomes a symbol of the Muslim separatist movement. The separatist movement and subsequently Partition also provided an opportunity for many women to become more mobilised politically and thereby visible in public spaces. The accounts presented here do highlight the marginality of women's histories, which to some extent has been internalised by many women themselves, but more importantly they also highlight women's own agency in circumventing and creating space for themselves regardless of these obstacles. It is these alternative spaces created by women which are important in moving forward any discussion on displacement and upheaval caused by Partition.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## NOTES

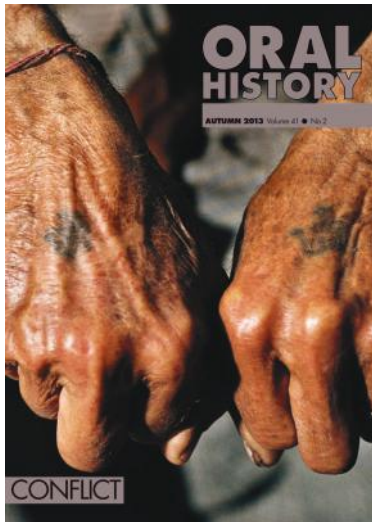
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6. Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies 1 Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982.
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# 'It did not traumatise me at all': childhood 'trauma' in French oral narratives of wartime bombing

by Lindsey Dodd

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Writing this article enabled me to explore in detail some of the complexities around traumatic experience, the remembering and narrating of traumatic experience, collective understandings of trauma, and the ways in which the label 'trauma' might be used or rejected by

individuals. It provided a first step towards my current work, which takes the emotions of (oral) history as its object, thinking about the generative flows of affectivity running through and across tangled memorial ecologies. It was the first major article I wrote after finishing

my PhD, and it was a real pleasure to publish in *Oral History* to an audience I knew would be interested. The finished piece looks great too – the setting and text and image made a powerful impact. In a twist of administrative fate, the publication date of this piece

prevented it being entered either into the REF (Research Excellence Framework: the nation-wide research census) in 2014 or the upcoming one in 2021. So I'm particularly pleased it has featured in this anniversary issue!  
**Lindsey Dodd**

**Abstract:** In oral histories of the Allied bombing of France during the Second World War, 'trauma' is a word rarely used. Here, I examine the seeming absence of trauma in interviews I recorded with people who lived through the bombing as children. I note that this absence is only apparent, and that close analysis of their words reveals 'trauma signals' explicitly and implicitly in the narrative and its structure. Bombing is an objectively traumatising event, but traumatising depends too on a subjective response which, I suggest, is psychological as well as socially constructed. I conclude by proposing several reasons why trauma is not expressed directly in these narratives, which include French memorial culture in the post-war era, the elision of victimhood and trauma, and interviewees' subsequent life trajectories as soldiers.

**Keywords:** children, trauma, war, bombing, narrative

Civilian casualties as a result of the Allied bombing campaigns targeting French factories, ports, military installations and transportation networks are hard to assess. A recent estimate puts the death toll at around 60,000, although the number of people affected – by injury, bereavement, homelessness, evacuation, shock or disruption – is evidently far higher.<sup>1</sup> France took over a fifth of the Allies' European bombing effort, second only to Germany in the tonnage dropped, but these events are still little known outside the most dramatically destroyed cities such as Le Havre. Indeed, the Allied bombing of France has been called 'the last "black hole" in French collective memory of the Second World War'.<sup>2</sup>

My interest lies in children's experiences of air war in France. In 2009 I interviewed 36 French men and women who were bombed between 1940 and 1944 by the Allies. I classed 'child' as a person under the age of sixteen at the time of bombing. My research focused on three French towns, the naval port of Brest, the industrial Parisian suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt, home of the large Renault plant, and the northern city of Lille and its industrial suburbs of Lomme, Fives and Hellemmes. Each place was bombed as part of different campaigns, at different moments of the war, and with different consequences. When I interviewed people about being bombed, I expected to hear many speak of trauma; they did not. Only two – the youngest two women I interviewed, born in 1938 and 1939 – spontaneously reported traumatising. Some others rejected the idea outright. Michel Thomas explained: 'Well, I tell you very frankly, I am convinced that it did not traumatise me *at all*.'<sup>3</sup> I was surprised at this forcefulness, and interested to note that perhaps bombing does not traumatise children. But perhaps it is not that simple.

Some recent psychological research debates the longevity of symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that children may experience following exposure to war, suggesting that, bar the worst cases, symptoms may be fleeting.<sup>4</sup> Barenbaum et al conclude that the potential for traumatising depends on 'individual interpretations of the traumatic experience and the context in which it occurs'.<sup>5</sup> Individual interpretations are key; yet they are, of course, shaped by the social context of war and its memory. This article will demonstrate that traumatic symptoms are visible across many of the oral narratives of the Allied bombing of France that I collected. It will also suggest that 'trauma' extends beyond the psychological realm: it is a term laden with social meaning. While there is certainly an 'increasing public familiarity' with the language of trauma, the term

(and thus its symptoms or treatment) may be rejected for social reasons.<sup>6</sup>

I am not suggesting that in France and Europe there is a generation of traumatised older people who are blind to past damage they repress, but I wish to point out that millions of stories of wartime childhoods remain untold – some traumatic some not – all of which help nations better understand present relationships with past events. Oral histories enable us to access individual interpretations of the past, and shed light on the collective memories which shape and define us. I begin by providing some broad definitions of trauma, link trauma to bombing, and reflect on the use of 'trauma' outside of psychological research. I then go on to analyse my oral narratives for evidence of trauma, and conclude by suggesting a few reasons why French people might reject the idea of trauma.

### Trauma and its uses

We must first understand what trauma is in order to see how it functions in narratives of bombing. The US psychiatric diagnostic category of PTSD is not the only way of measuring traumatic experience,<sup>7</sup> but its underlying principles are helpful. Trauma is a duality: an objective stressor, and a subjective response, manifested through particular symptoms.<sup>8</sup> The stressor is an event, or series of events, that involves 'actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity' or that of another person. An air raid in close proximity fits these criteria. A traumatised response shows 'intense fear, helplessness, or horror'.<sup>9</sup> Given the inadequacy of bomb shelter provision in France, the surprise quality of many raids and the inevitability of destruction, the possibility of escape was minimal; children were further restricted by dependence on their parents for protection. Symptoms of PTSD fall into three categories: intrusion, avoidance or constriction, and hyperarousal. The first includes nightmares, flashbacks, revisualisation, morbid rumination and feelings of guilt; the second, numbness, detachment and hopelessness and reluctance to talk of events; the third includes difficulty concentrating, exaggerated startled responses and disproportionate anxiety.<sup>10</sup> These symptoms are present in narratives I recorded, but narrators rarely dwelt on them.

Trauma has a number of symptoms specific to children, which change according to the developmental stage.<sup>11</sup> In children under five traumatic events may provoke anxious attachment behaviour, and a loss of recently learnt behaviours. Between the ages of about five or seven to about twelve, children start to identify with physical pain in others, and are more likely to have psychosomatic responses. Eth



Searching the rubble after the RAF air raid targeting the Renault factories at Boulogne-Billancourt, 3 March 1942.

and Pynoos remark upon the 'devastating consequences on personality of trauma' during the adolescent years, where feelings of rage, shame and betrayal can lead to self-destructive behaviour.<sup>12</sup> Terr's work on childhood trauma has shown that it colours subsequent life processes, even if events are largely forgotten.<sup>13</sup> My research suggested that the greatest potential for fear responses was in the younger age range; events provoked less grave responses in adolescents, who were less helpless when threatened.

Despite the mass of research into the civilian experience of air war in Europe, few enquiries deal directly with the effects of bombing on children, compared with those of evacuation. Indeed, sometimes one is at a loss to know what the children are being evacuated *from*. British research in the 1940s found that younger children were more vulnerable, parental presence mitigated traumatic impact, evacuation created a 'deeper and more persisting damage', but that bombing followed by evacuation gave rise to the worst symptoms.<sup>14</sup> A recent historical and psychological study on the firebombing of Hamburg has shown little evidence of enduring trauma in those who were children.<sup>15</sup> But we cannot conclude that bombing did, and does, not affect children. For example, Thabet *et al* found that bombing in Gaza significantly increased behavioural and emotional problems of pre-school children.<sup>16</sup>

Why was the impact of bombing not studied in France? In nations occupied by, entangled with and/or collaborating with the Nazis, as emaciated POWs, resistance fighters,

deported workers and persecuted groups returned home, concerns arose about reawakening wartime divisions in countries desperate to reconstruct. In France, *all* such returnees were labelled 'deportees'; systems of support were developed for those suffering from 'deportation pathology', a concept resting on a 'fabricated universality' of experience.<sup>17</sup> What they had in common, however, was their wartime distance from French territory; little or no recognition was given to psychologically troubled civilians who had remained in France. Across Europe, every day wartime anxieties were subsumed into the immense practical problems of peacetime.<sup>18</sup> No treatment existed for symptoms of traumatic violence suffered on French territory; bombing was buried under the moral and psychological reconstruction of a nation.

Thus the historical circumstances of war and reconstruction restricted the expression of traumatic experience amongst parts of the French population. To understand such trauma we must first understand history: trauma does not exist in a vacuum. Yet the use of trauma as a concept in the humanities has been widely criticised. Susanne Vees-Gulani noted that 'many scholars both grossly exaggerate and, at the same time, limit [its] applicability'.<sup>19</sup> Humanities researchers, she writes – historians sometimes, but often literary scholars – misguidedly shift emphasis from individual to society, from event to representation, and elide the categories of trauma and victimhood. These criticisms are elaborated below, followed by a discussion of narrative that





Possessions salvaged from the wreckage after the raid on Boulogne-Billancourt of 3 March 1942.

suggests how oral history can help us understand the socially constructed part of traumatic experience.

As Barenbaum *et al* stated, individual responses to trauma depend on the context of the traumatic event and its interpretation. Yet some scholars minimise both individual and event. Caruth writes of 'our catastrophic era', Felman and Laub of 'post-traumatic culture'; in this collectivisation of trauma the individual is negated.<sup>20</sup> Caruth believes that trauma spreads to contaminate entire societies. Yet 'collective' trauma mistakes an individual phenomenon for a shared one. It is too simplistic to state that experience is 'never simply one's own';<sup>21</sup> certainly, the external context of an event is shared, as may be subsequent public remembering. But social discourse about trauma is not, in itself, trauma. Individual experience and response are 'one's own'; this is the very meaning of subjectivity. The negation of the individual is thus problematic. First, losing sight of the individual trivialises experience and shifts importance to the interpreter not the sufferer.<sup>22</sup> And second, collectivising trauma is exclusive: it establishes a set of structures for remembering which exclude individuals whose experiences fall outside the grid. This displacement away from the individual accounts for the Allied bombing as a black hole in French collective memory: it is vivid in personal and local memories, but dominant national narratives of resistance and collaboration have squeezed it from public discourse.

Furthermore, Barenbaum *et al* concluded that the inter-

pretation of trauma matters, but not without its context. Yet in some scholarly (literary) understandings of trauma, the event at the heart of traumatic experience has been obscured. Attention is placed on the representation of past events rather than events themselves, or, more precisely, on the inability to represent experience adequately. Trauma becomes a 'discourse of the unrepresentable'<sup>23</sup> and Caruth's influential work has promoted the idea of the 'inaccessibility of trauma'. The idea that any narrative reflects lived experience is rejected as naïve.<sup>24</sup> Yet this restrictive conceptualisation rests on a single type of narrative, and perhaps a single type of trauma. It refuses to recognise the range of subjective responses to trauma expressed in myriad ways (that even the objective but flexible PTSD diagnostic tool recognises). Events are at the core of traumatic experience, yet there are more or less traumatising events, and more or less traumatised responses. In the oral narratives analysed here, clear connections with past events are made, but it is understood that speech, language and dialogue cannot replicate the past: a narrator is not a 'black box' recorder.<sup>25</sup> Traumatising events are described in words, sometimes adequate, sometimes inadequate, but also articulated non-verbally through gesture, expression, and so on. Narrators depict chains of events, clouds of circumstance, moods, pressures and intrusive influences in their interpretations of past events. Instead of conceptualising trauma as unrepresentable, it seems more fruitful to understand the ways humans can share experience.



Vees-Gulani further criticises the moral judgements attached to psychological concepts in humanities trauma studies, usually by equating a traumatised person with a victim who is awarded a high moral authority.<sup>26</sup> This idea has arisen, perhaps, because of the concentration of research by scholars into Holocaust and abuse narratives, and extends beyond the academy.<sup>27</sup> Clearly sometimes the two overlap, but perpetrators may also be traumatised. We see this elision of trauma and victimhood in post-war France. Returning 'deportees' might have been traumatised; they were also the victims of unfair policies and of hardships in concentration camps: the recognised trauma belongs to a recognised victim. But for civilians on French territory, trauma went unrecognised. The Allied bombs were aimed at targets not people; those potentially traumatised had not been victimised. Additionally, French civilians who did not participate in resistance activities (including the vast majority of children) have been ascribed a low moral authority: they waited, they stood by, some even profited. When trauma is so strongly linked to victimhood it is perhaps unsurprising that those who reject victimhood also reject trauma.

Nonetheless, some of that trauma is evident in my interviews.<sup>28</sup> I should point out that oral history is not therapy. At its most basic, it is history told through memories, although there may be a therapeutic benefit in talking through past events in a non-threatening setting. Of course, there is no goal to heal an interviewee, nor is any treatment offered.<sup>29</sup> Yet turning traumatic memories into narrative memories can be a step towards coming to terms with the past, or turning a passive sufferer into an active agent shaping her or his life into a coherent story.<sup>30</sup> In the open setting of my interviews, why did people not speak of trauma? Hunt and McHale note that people 'may choose to recall or not recall particular aspects of their past'.<sup>31</sup> Yet sometimes there is no choice, and sometimes recall is not at stake: the issue is with retelling. The traumatic event is recalled but retold obliquely. As Layman's taxonomy of reticence in interviews suggests, sometimes a memory may be avoided because it is painful to discuss. But reticence may also occur if the topic appears not to be one the person had agreed to be interviewed about, if the person is uncomfortable talking about themselves in an unfamiliar way, or if it clashes with public versions of the past.<sup>32</sup> I respect the coherence of narratives told to me which reject the concept of trauma, but I wish to understand *why* it is rejected, why people do not consider themselves traumatised by objectively traumatising events, and why, indeed, they may not have been traumatised by them.

### Trauma in narratives of bombing

I now turn to an analysis of traumatic experience in the oral narratives of the people I interviewed in 2009, first dealing with instances where trauma is explicit in the content of the narrative in descriptions, actions and responses to remembering. Then I will look at trauma which is implicit in the narrative structure, looking at recurrent images and foreshadowing. I will show that intrusion, hyperarousal and constriction are all present.

Few of those I interviewed lost emotional control while they were talking to me; breaking down is one of the 'signals

of trauma' that psychologist Gadi BenEzer reports as indicating its presence in life story narratives.<sup>33</sup> However, two male interviewees struggled to control tears, both when describing their interaction with their mothers during an air raid. Both were bombed at La Délivrance near Lille in April 1944. Pierre Haigueré stopped and drew breath as he recalled the moment he was sharply chastised for crying, a moment when his mother's reassurance faltered, tainted by her own fear. For Michel Jean-Bart the struggle for control came as he recounted his mother's words: 'Children, this one's for us. Don't be scared.'<sup>34</sup> Despite this emotion, both men – like many of the interviewees – were able to give the vivid, sensory descriptions which Jane Robinett associates with traumatic events: as though time stands still, and all details are recorded in a flash.<sup>35</sup> Yet for Bernard Bauwens, whose youth group had to clear up bombsites, the trauma of clearing up torn and smashed body parts was impossible to articulate: language broke down, a common feature of the narration of traumatic events:

They picked it up with spades, the bits. They put it in – , what, in bins. You didn't have plastic bins in those days, they were steel bins. And we took the – , and they were there, and the rue Paul Bert was there, and we were there with a truck. And we put the – , they brought the things to us there, and we put it in. We put it in, but before, we had to put it in the coffins. The coffins were there inside. We put the – , with spades.<sup>36</sup>

His repetitive, stalling hesitancy echoes the 'series of hyphenated clauses, which, in turn, are further encumbered by qualifying clauses' that Robinett sees as characteristic of trauma narratives. There is a block here, a constriction which corresponds to avoidance symptoms. After a pause at the end of his struggle, Bernard spat out the word 'barbaque!' – a slang term for meat. The constriction shifted, but with effort. For Pierre, Michel and Bernard, these are 'images of ultimate horror': the worst moments, which stand in for a range of feelings.<sup>37</sup>

The narratives also provide evidence of 'intrusive images'.<sup>38</sup> For example, Bernard Bauwens confided that 'there were plenty of nights afterwards when I used to see it... I think of it still. Yes. I think of it still'. Others responded to triggers. Michel Jean-Bart said that well into adulthood he feared thunderstorms as 'it brought back the windows shattering'. Bernard Lemaire told me that 'a low flying plane, that scares the living daylight out of me'. For Thérèse Leclercq, such planes remained a reminder of 'waking in fear in the middle of the night'; even planes in war films upset her, evoking difficult childhood memories: 'the noise, it's the planes, the air raids, this fear, this terror.' In the three towns I studied, the eerie noise of municipal sirens being tested still inspires anxiety among older people. Serge said: 'The siren, it's terrifying. It's still instinctive, looking around, where can I hide?'<sup>39</sup> Intrusion was also evident in the intense visualisation that took place when highly charged moments were recounted. Sonia Agache twice evoked this visualisation, describing first helping her teacher from the bomb shelter – 'You could say that I can still see her, can you imagine, after such a long time? A lady,

not very tall, greying hair' – and later her father's relieved arrival on the scene 'when I saw him, I burst into tears – , it was, you could say that I can see him now! In his striped trousers....'<sup>40</sup> This suggests the reliving of experience – here, the relief of survival after a frightening ordeal.

Evidence of trauma is also clear when narrators described their actions at the time. Thérèse Leclercq's responses in the aftermath of air raids suggest patterns of behaviour indicative of trauma. She noted that when the siren sounded, she would run to houses which had already been bombed, thinking that if they had been destroyed, the bombers would not bother with them again. Her understanding of safety and stability was upset; she lived in a state of hyperarousal after having been bombed once and remarked that 'I became, as soon as the siren sounded, hysterical. My mother had to hold on to me'. Josette Dutilleul also displayed hyperarousal:

I had very, very good hearing. I still do. So I would hear the planes – perhaps from far too! – I would hear the planes when they were really, really, really far away, and as soon as I heard them, I'd go down to the cellar. I'd dress – because the night before, I'd get my clothes all ready on the chair, you see, in order... I was the first dressed.<sup>41</sup>

She lived on the alert, and felt responsible. In each case, trauma is suggested. The person may not have experienced more than one symptom and those symptoms may not have lasted a long time. But they are present nonetheless, even when the narrator does not speak directly of having been traumatised.

Finally, trauma is explicit in Edith Denhez's narrative of bereavement.<sup>42</sup> Edith was one of hundreds of thousands bereaved by the Allied bombing. Her brother Jacques, twelve years old at the time, was killed in Cambrai in 1944. Edith was eight, her sister ten, and her youngest brother six. When I asked her to recount what had happened to her brother, she began with a diversion, and then restarted:

What was the question again? Yes, the air raids, when they started – yes, that was it. My mother had gone out...

Her story began with her mother leaving to fetch food. She had earlier stated: 'My brother might still be here if it weren't for all the problems with the rations.' Her mother's departure was reiterated four times as she led into the story. She recounted that her brother had wanted to attend a tea-party in the town centre, but had been forbidden by their mother, but 'she got on her bike, and then Jacques, he sneaked out'. The sequence of events is important. As she approached the end of the story she mused:

And I ask myself even today, and I ask myself often, it's a question I ask myself all the time: did he leave while my mother was still at home, and we hid it from her? It's a question I ask myself all the time, I don't know if my sister asks herself, because I feel really very guilty, and that's not right, to feel guilty because Jacques went out when he shouldn't have done. But I wish I knew [...]

] He wasn't allowed to go out, and I should have said to Mum 'Jacques has gone out!' If she was still there. But I don't remember now.

Despite her earlier insistence on her mother's departure, Edith can now no longer place events in sequence. BenEzer suggests that trauma may emerge through 'hidden events', revealing distressing emotions of guilt and shame.<sup>43</sup> Edith's inability to know what really happened has left her with a profound lack of certainty. She dwells on the possibility that she may be to blame for Jacques' death. The family also had their house and all their possessions destroyed, and Edith's mother became depressed. This sequence of events shaped the rest of Edith's life. She was good humoured when discussing the past, however. She did not lose her self-control, and joked about her family's Zola-esque misfortunes. Such distancing matter-of-factness corresponds with one of BenEzer's 'signals of trauma'.

Sometimes, however, trauma is less explicit and evident only in structural features of the story. It can be discerned, for example in recursive structures, again a form of intrusion. For example, Marguerite Fagard<sup>44</sup> returned again and again to an image of her parents gazing in a stupor at the ruins of their home and factory: 'My parents, they'd lost everything. They were there, sitting on the pavement, and there was nothing left'; later, 'I tell you, he was there on the kerb, he didn't know what to do'; and again, 'And they were both there sitting on the pavement, opposite'. The pavement is a site of obsessive return in her story. Not only did her parents sit on it dejectedly, but it is the place where they could all have met their death: 'there were some people on the pavement, everywhere really, the poor people.' She repeated five times the idea that 'it could have been us, killed there on the pavement'. Similarly, Robert Bellevue spoke in minute detail about his decision-making process concerning whether or not to join three friends at the cinema.<sup>45</sup> Had he accompanied his friends, he would have died with them in the rubble of a collapsed building, he explained. Instead, his youth group later stood guard of honour around the victims' coffins while distressed relatives identified their bodies, and later he bore a friend's coffin to the communal grave. His insistent return to his decision-making suggests morbid rumination. As with Marguerite's account, trauma lies as much in events as in possibilities: the 'shared possibility' of death extends far beyond those who met such a fate.<sup>46</sup>

Sometimes trauma is buried deeper in the structure of the narrative. Andréa Cousteaux's interview contains two anecdotes, neither of which would interest a historian interested in pure facts: the first is a comical tall tale, the second a tragic bit of hearsay.<sup>47</sup> But both surface in her recollections. The first foreshadows the second, in which horrific images and shared possibility are embedded. Initially, with plenty of laughs, she recounted the tale of a bomb falling on a nearby cemetery, and an old tomb blasted from its resting place:

Well, the corpse that was in that tomb, they found him on roof of the house across the road! [Laughing] It was an old corpse, [acting the part] 'Urrrrr, urrrrrr!' And as



Funeral ceremony at Boulogne-Billancourt Town Hall, at which youth groups stood guard of honour, March 1942.

the roof had been damaged, there were some roofers, some workmen who went up to fix it, and they found the corpse with its arms outstretched in a cross! [...] Oh yes! There were things like that, yes.

The improbable story was later echoed by a more plausible one, narrated in flatter, sorrowful tones. She told me that her mother had recounted the story of a young woman she knew who, doing her laundry alongside Andréa's mother at the washhouse when the air-raid siren sounded, went off to fetch her little boy, asleep next door:

And she left, the poor thing. She just had time to take the little one in her arms, and the bomb fell on the house. They found her body stuck up, squashed like that [acting the part, arms outstretched in a cross] onto the house across the road. The little one, they never found him. He was smashed to pieces [...] People said, you know, that they saw a dog running away with bits of meat [...] Well, her body stayed there, it was just the skeleton, that stayed there until they found enough paint to redo it. [...] Oh yes, there were terrible cases, terrible.

The fate of the baby haunts Andréa. The story is of lives cut short and undignified deaths: the old corpse had his life and burial, but not the mother and child. Robinett noticed that the foreshadowing of traumatic events was a feature of

written narratives of war trauma;<sup>48</sup> here, the story suggests an initial constriction in recounting trauma, and the strong intrusion of horror.

One traumatic symptom is not enough to diagnose PTSD. It is not my intention, however, to demonstrate post hoc that individuals were suffering from PTSD. What is clear, though, is that bombing gave rise to traumatic symptoms: it is an objectively traumatic event, although the traumatising of individuals is subjective and contingent. The stories demonstrate that traumatic experience is accessible to listeners willing to listen; it can be communicated, and it is worth telling. In Edith's case, for example, many years of silence until I interviewed her created a 'toxic story'. She had begun to 'doubt the reality of actual events'.<sup>49</sup> For all who suffered bombing as children, the symptoms of trauma may fade. Yet these narratives confirm that it is not 'possible to emotionally sever "bad" events or periods from people's lives':<sup>50</sup> people can still live functional lives, but memories endure.

### Trauma as a social construction

The traumatic memory of bombing lives on in the stories of the people I interviewed – and millions of others – but is rarely articulated as trauma. I will suggest five reasons why that may be; my list is not exhaustive. Trauma is more than an event or a set of symptoms: it is a social construction, and thus owning it depends on social and cultural contexts. First I will comment on two narrative arcs that

compete in the French history of war: the arc of redemption and the arc of culpability. I will then discuss interviewees' rejection of their own victimhood, and the importance of being listened to. Finally, I will show that trauma from World War II may be swallowed by subsequent violent events.

Many people I interviewed linked the Allied bombing of France to the country's liberation in 1944. Partly, of course, this is because eighty per cent of air raids and seventy per cent of civilian deaths from bombing occurred that year. But the link has explanatory power. Josette Dutilleul said 'we know it was to liberate us', and Yvette Chapalain commented that 'we were conscious that this needed to happen to liberate us from the Germans'.<sup>51</sup> Both women attributed firm purpose to the bombing, placing it into a bigger narrative arc of France's redemption (which includes resistance). When liberation arrived, the erstwhile bombers were welcomed, Josette explained, 'with open arms!' Yvette continued:

Afterwards, the end of the war, I made friends my own age, we danced, we sang in the stones, the rubble, the debris. We had our whole lives ahead of us, we were full of hope.

Dancing on the rubble of bomb-torn Brest symbolically stamped out the past. But both women had earlier recounted troubling experiences linked to bombing: why did they not mention trauma? Dominick LaCapra writes of the 'fetishistic narrative that excludes or marginalises trauma' in a story that 'presents values and wishes as viably realised'.<sup>52</sup> Here, traumatic memory is displaced by a more useful story of redemption: we sinned, we were punished, we were saved. The reconstruction of public memory occurred in many European countries. Writing of Italy, Pezzino comments that 'multiple' memories 'were made to merge [...] into a "public memory" so as to lay the foundation for a new collective identity'.<sup>53</sup> Within this psychological reconstruction, the dominant version that linked bombing to liberation silenced, reshaped and excluded less triumphant voices, including those of the traumatised.

Yet the story is more complex: the same events are also shaped into a culpable narrative of collaboration that has grown to dominate versions of the French wartime past. Wolf proposes that the French obsession with guilt has prevented a genuine 'confrontation' with the past and replaced it with an 'incessant renunciation of Vichy'.<sup>54</sup> However, in my interviews, Vichy barely featured while French participation in the Holocaust crept into stories of bombing; people subordinated their own experiences of wartime violence to those they saw as more traumatising for others. Serge Aubrée, Claude Thomas, Michel Thomas and Bernard Lemaire all emphasised that deportation of Jews from France was the most terrible part of the war. Others mentioned finding out about the extermination camps after the war, redefining the meaning of their own lived experience: the 'worst' they had suffered as 'not as bad' as this. Thus the French civilian experience of war slid down the hierarchy of suffering as the shame of collaboration grew

more public. Layman noted that when personal memory clashed with public memory, narrators could become reluctant to articulate certain experiences. Bombing was 'a bit like our punishment', said Max Potter; if France was guilty enough to be punished by bombs, what right had survivors to speak of trauma?<sup>55</sup> Neither the narrative of redemption nor that of culpability permits space to speak of civilian war trauma.

By extension, both narratives contribute to a rejection of victimhood among civilian survivors of the Allied bombing. As previously noted, trauma has frequently been equated with victimhood, a legal, political and moral category. Many interviewees denied that they were victimised by the Allied bombing. Jean Caniot said that 'patriots' knew that 'the goal wasn't to martyrise the population', and Henri Girardon told me that the Allies bombed Brest's arsenal on Saturdays because workers had the day off.<sup>56</sup> Morally, given that they were not persecuted, people felt unentitled to claim victimhood. Wolf wrote that non-Jewish groups in France have used the Holocaust as a metaphor for their own victimisation: the opposite seems true here. The Holocaust was rejected as consonant with personal experience; there was recognition that acts of terrible persecution were more destructive, that suffering is relative, and victimhood not universal. Claiming one's own victimhood could thus be a 'dangerous breach of social and political orthodoxies'.<sup>57</sup> This is part of the legacy of competing 'hierarchies of suffering'<sup>58</sup> in postwar France, as resistance fighters, 'racial' deportees, prisoners of war and deported labourers jostled for position; bombed children and teenagers had little agency through which to assert claims for recognition.<sup>59</sup> Layman calls reticence a strategy of control over one's narrative; control here consists of *not* naming oneself a victim, or labelling oneself as traumatised. Trauma can exist, unnamed and unwanted, in complex processes of self-evaluation and disclosure.

Trauma needs a space in which it can be spoken of: it needs a listener. But the Allied bombing has until very recently had little place in the French public domain. Without 'suitable narrative codes or other forms of representation, as well as publics prepared to believe and witness'<sup>60</sup> trauma may remain unspoken. The many associations of bombed-out people (*sinistrés*), active in the post-war period to campaign for material compensation, did not seek other forms (cultural, symbolic etc) of recognition. Lagrou notes that popular recognition of wartime suffering now hinges upon those persecuted for who they were (Jews, gypsies, homosexuals); in the immediate aftermath of war it hinged upon those who were mistreated for what they did (resistance fighters, political prisoners, POWs); yet nowhere is there space for those who suffered neither for who they were nor what they did. Some small, local memorials to those who died in the bombing do exist. On the Délivrance housing estate near Lille, 500 people were killed in one raid, but the discrete plaque notes only that they were 'victims of war', not of bombing. 'In the mechanisms of social memory', Lagrou writes, 'the dead have no role to play';<sup>61</sup> they cannot ask to be remembered. The silence around bombing is socially determined, and has not invited the public articulation of memories, traumatic or otherwise.



3-3. 1942. Rue Francis Garnier. 2.



Firefighters combat the flames in Boulogne-Billancourt, March 1942.

Later life trajectories affect memories of childhood; here I will just consider one peculiarity of this generation. The Indochina War (1946-1954) and the Franco-Algerian War (1954-1962) meant that soon after liberation, war reappeared as part of French national life. Those born in 1936 were eight at liberation, and began military service in 1954; the Algerian War later forced 70,000 men who had completed their military service back into the army. The Second World War and the wars of decolonisation are often seen as belonging to different generations: McCormack declared that the 1990s witnessed the end of 'obsession' with World War Two; President Mitterand's death in 1996 saw his Vichy generation give way to that of Chirac, himself stationed in Algeria between 1956 and 1960. Yet Chirac's generation were the war children of 1939-45. Benjamin Stora has criticised such 'cloistered memories': the delineations that appear to separate 1939-45 from 1954-62, leaving the Algerian war as 'largely undigested' in French memory.<sup>63</sup>

When I interviewed veterans about their experiences of being bombed as children, several rejected them outright as traumatic, using their own military service as evidence for 'worse'. Such experiences were undoubtedly enormously difficult. Lucien Agache<sup>64</sup> said he was 'more affected later by the Algerian war', while Michel Jean-Bart said that Algeria 'was more terrible. Because there [during 1944] we heard the planes, while there [Algeria] we had them behind us, over us, we didn't know where, when or how'. Paul

Termote told me: 'we had that war there [1939-1945], and then afterwards, we had the Algerian War. Well, that, that was something else!'<sup>65</sup> Each man compared the two wars, without inviting more questions. Referencing Algeria drew a line under my questions which probed their own childhood responses. Layman notes that men's talk tends to avoid self-disclosure; these men avoided it both when speaking of childhood and of fighting in 'dirty' wars.<sup>66</sup> The Algerian war has a 'traumatic legacy' in France, again among sections of the population whose memories compete; ex-servicemen have had some success in getting their own war traumas recognised, but there is an underlying discomfort about acts of war now subject to the greatest public disapproval.<sup>67</sup> Henri Girardon, a professional soldier, linked his own non-traumatised wartime childhood with other childhoods in war-torn countries he knew:

What we saw in Algeria, in Indochina, you see, it's — . In Indochina, of course, they always show that picture of that poor little girl burnt by napalm. It's true. But there wasn't only that. Children continue to play...

Henri's own jolly wartime childhood softens his thoughts of what he may have inflicted on children elsewhere. The burnt girl was anomalous; he hoped other children coped with the violence of war as well as he had. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Berger states, Freud proposes that

each national catastrophe invokes and transforms memories of other catastrophes, so that history becomes a complex entanglement of crimes inflicted and suffered, with each catastrophe understood – that is misunderstood – in the context of repressed memories of previous ones.<sup>68</sup>

By treating the Second World War and the wars of decolonisation separately, we lose the connections between them, particularly in the form of war children turned into soldiers. When veterans were asked about bombing in childhood, memories of another war – constricted but present – crept out.

## Conclusion

Sean Field rightly states that 'all traumatic experiences are painful. But not all painful experiences are traumatic'.<sup>69</sup> It would be wrong to suggest that all those bombed as children in France or elsewhere developed PTSD which they have hidden or repressed. Bombing is objectively traumatising, but whether trauma develops is subjective, depending on many variables, including feelings of security, emotional reassurance, rationalisation of fear, the possibility of self-preservation, compared to near misses, horrific scenes,

bereavements, and so on. Yet within these oral history narratives, we see glimpses of traumatic memory, even if not articulated as such. Oral history tells of events through memory, but memory is both socially constructed and personal, mirroring the personal and social nature of trauma.

Memory and history are uncomfortable bedfellows in France. While Pierre Nora's *Realms of Memory*<sup>70</sup> is accepted as a seminal work in memory studies, Wood points out that it has created a dominant idea of performative, national memory which is 'qualitatively different to a memory that is merely lived and experienced'.<sup>71</sup> Small-scale personal memories of bombing – merely lived and experienced – have until recently found little place in official histories in France. Thus the historical circumstances of war, reconstruction and commemoration have restricted the expression of potentially traumatic experience within parts of the population. The powerful filters of resistance and collaboration, through which all history of 'the dark years' must pass, were activated from 1944. In stark contrast to other nations, the land of liberty, equality and fraternity has, until recently, dismissed individual testimony as 'partial and partisan';<sup>72</sup> for that reason, childhood memories of war and bombing – and with them traumas – have gone unheard, many passing to the grave unresolved.

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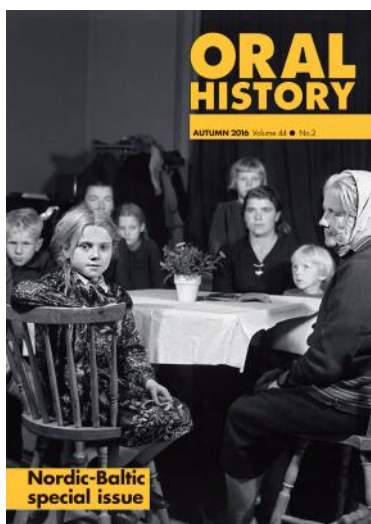
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# The interplay of memory and matter: narratives of former Finnish Karelian child evacuees

by Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen and Ulla Savolainen

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Our article on childhood memories of forced displacement utilized our interdisciplinary backgrounds, bridging cultural geography and narrative analysis of both oral interviews and life stories writings. By developing the idea of intra-action in the analysis of wartime memories, we explored how objects and

embodied recollections carry and produce social meanings and memories and how they are reflected in oral and written narration. We observed that through socio-material relations and narrative practices, former child evacuees created new understanding of belonging in the midst of war and its

aftermath. This kind of stickiness of memory with objects and ways of telling formed the major outcome of our article.  
**Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen and Ulla Savolainen**

I nominated this article because it had a great deal of resonance for me, dealing, as it does, with children in conflict

and particularly with children's mobility in conflict. At the time I read it I was also working on child evacuees. However, more than the subject matter itself I was interested in the approaches the authors took drawing on affects, emotions and materialities; the interdisciplinarity is



crucial here as the researchers draw on the theoretical approaches used in qualitative human geography, itself more rooted in ideas from cultural studies and critical theory than straight History ever is. For that reason, their ideas are particularly stimulating. Their disciplinary background

introduces a new analytical depth to this work and is a shift away from the positivistic uses of oral history material which endure in more historical or other social science-type writing (for even though we may all be post-positivist now in our approaches to memory, we are not in

our approaches to history!). The article has certainly influenced my own work and has encouraged me to read more by these authors. I am inspired, for example, by the way in which memory was shown to be attached to objects, which were themselves imbued

with affects – in this case the basket which two brothers had been told to carry for their mother while they were evacuated and which served to bind them together. This kind of 'sticky' object – 'sticky' with feeling, 'sticky' with memory – will be making an appearance in my own new work.'

**Lindsey Dodd**

**Abstract:** After the Second World War, Finland had to cede territories to the Soviet Union and Finnish people from those areas were evacuated. In this article we analyse the narrated memories of former Karelian child evacuees. We focus on the sites of memory and the materiality of memory practices as they are reflected in these narratives. We examine how narrated memories, both written and oral, are formed in the interplay of embodied recollections of the childhood evacuation, with the intra-action of matter such as sources and mementos, and immaterial things such as affects and emotions. We conclude that things and matter are agential in six ways in narrated memories.

**Key words:** memory practices; sites of memory; oral and written narratives; childhood evacuation; materiality and memory

## Introduction

Between 1939 and 1944, Finland fought two wars against the Soviet Union, which both led to the cession of parts of the Finnish Karelian region. After the Winter War (1939–1940) the first mass evacuation of Karelian people took place. During the Continuation War in 1941, Finland gained back the ceded areas in Karelia and the majority of the evacuees returned to their homes. The Second World War in Finland ended in 1944 and for the second time areas were ceded to the Soviet Union. This time the displacement occurred for good and 430,000 evacuees had to leave their homes. The border was closed in the autumn of 1944; a large part of the ceded area remained inaccessible to outsiders until the late 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup>

We focus on the narrated memories of former child evacuees and ask how these are formed in the interplay of the social, the spatial and the material. Understanding different intra-agencies that things and matter have as part of the narration of place memories requires a multi-disciplinary methodological framework and diverse empirical materials. The methodological framework here builds upon theories of oral history, cultural memory studies, folkloristic narrative research, human geography and relational materialism. Drawing on the works of Alessandro Portelli, Elizabeth Tonkin and Molly Andrews, among others, we consider oral history sources as narratives.<sup>2</sup> As Portelli points out, 'the analysis of oral history materials must avail itself of some of the general cate-

gories developed by narrative theory in literature and folklore'.<sup>3</sup> In addition to oral materials, we extend this notion to written materials.

Following Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, we aim to interrelate viewpoints of oral history research with cultural memory studies.<sup>4</sup> In addition, we suggest that memories are considerably more than just social entities that are interconnected with broader social and cultural memory. Narrated memories, both written and oral, are not only formed as products of dialogue between human subjects or as part of a dialogue between 'texts' as oral historians maintain,<sup>5</sup> but also in the intra-actions of body and matter. In order to clarify this, we focus on the role of things and matter in the construction of narrated memories. Furthermore, we analyse the engagement between narrated memories, matter and bodily affects and suggest that investigation of the discursive-material nature of memories is a key to deeper understanding of the affectual dynamics of remembering, telling and writing.

The research materials analysed here consist of both written reminiscences and oral history interviews of former Karelian evacuated children. The narrators were at the time between seventy and eighty years of age. The written memories analysed by Ulla Savolainen are responses to the thematic collection of childhood evacuation journeys organised by the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in Helsinki and the Finnish Karelian League in 2004, sixty years after the evacuations.<sup>6</sup> The collection contains 182 accounts, alto-

gether 1,906 pages.<sup>7</sup> In Finland, different campaigns and competitions for collecting autobiographies, memoirs and testimonies on a given theme are a popular way of gathering research material and documenting experiences of past events.

The interviews were conducted by Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen in two regions of Finland, and a total of thirty-one former Karelian child evacuees were interviewed in 2005–2006. The narrative interviews were based on a few open-ended questions about childhood recollections before, during and after the war, and descriptions of the Karelian home, friends, school and other activities. The interviews were recorded and lasted between forty and 120 minutes.<sup>8</sup>

### **Sites of memory: connecting body, narrative and spatial experience**

Sites of memory, a concept originally developed by Pierre Nora, has been largely applied, but also criticised, in the field of cultural memory studies.<sup>9</sup> In this article, sites of memory as socio-spatial constellations are understood in two ways. First, sites of memory are understood as meaning-carrying linkages between tangible reference points and memory. As widely observed in folklore studies, anthropology and narrative research, memories and narratives of the past require points of reference, sites of memory of a sort. These can be particular named places, but also objects or documents, dates or crystallised and often-repeated stories, or even mindscapes.<sup>10</sup> The significance of these tangible marks, these sites of memory, is dependent on their presence both in the past and the present. They represent and remind of the past and above all testify to the existence of the past in the present.<sup>11</sup> Sites of memory support and sustain memories and narratives, but correspondingly their relevance as sites of memory is conditional on the narratives and memories related to them.<sup>12</sup>

Second, our conceptualisation of sites of memory makes use of the geographical understanding of place as a process of constructing and helping people to make sense of the world.<sup>13</sup> Geographical literature highlights how personal and shared memory practices are embedded, yet they move in and through a range of spaces, bodies in motion, emotional attachments, social movements and wider transcultural networks.<sup>14</sup> Thus, memory practices and narratives are never only 'located' in physical space, but are on the move through personal and shared emotions, memories and affects.<sup>15</sup> This means that neither memories nor sites of memory can be understood as fixed entities.

Oral and written narratives of memories materialise in relation to multiple sites of memory. Sites of memory have a particular appearance in the temporal structure of narrated memories. They cause a breakage in the syntagmatic chronology of the narrative when the narrator deviates from the plot and associates memories with others related to different events and times. These associations between memories from different times are based on paradigmatic logic, which means that even though they belong to different times and events, they are still related

to the same particular site of memory and thus share a connection.<sup>16</sup> Written memories are more likely to combine events along syntagmatic chronology, while oral narratives tend to select events based on paradigmatic similarity.<sup>17</sup> In addition, psychological research on memory has discovered that things and matter often serve as psychological triggers for memories and thus function as narrative tools in paradigmatic organisation. This is quite often witnessed with traumatic memories, in particular.<sup>18</sup> For example, scents, smells, taste and kinesthetic imageries can create associations between different times and places.

According to Karin Hultman and Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, 'multiple forces are at work in the construction of the world where discourse is only one such force'.<sup>19</sup> Leaning on this idea of relational materialism, we propose that narrated memories are only one part of memory work and commemoration practices. Memories are always more-than-social and involve more-than-human encounters. However, we do not suggest that these material agential formations would have social or political capabilities as such and by themselves. In the field of oral history, this is a crucial notion in two ways. First, narrated memories should not be understood as strictly discursive ways of knowing. Second, we emphasise that writing and telling are always material-discursive practices, and understanding the full potentiality and affectual capability that lie in things and matter is still often under-researched in oral history tradition. This is even more apparent in the study of childhood memories.

As Pauliina Rautio and Joseph Winston argue, children often sustain openness to their material environment and thus relate to it in creative rather than fixed ways.<sup>20</sup> This means that children especially take into account the more-than-human elements in their daily environment through doing and being. Consequently, our research does not only ask what things or matter are, but also how they are in memory narratives. We acknowledge that sources and mementos, for example, are commonly used in narratives, but their affectual potentiality requires a closer analysis. In our empirical analysis, we trace sites of memory and the ways through which material-discursive understanding of childhood events and the evacuation experience in general are narrated, the kinds of roles matter assumes in narrated memories and the points and moments of human-matter interaction. By adding these views to the analysis of narrated memories, it is possible to understand how the narrated memories and matter interact.

### **Materialisation of memories in written narratives**

In the written narratives of Karelian child evacuees, sources and mementos function as sites of memory. Source is a general term for the documents and literature which the writers use in order to construct their narratives about the childhood evacuation. Sources and mementos represent and evoke past events and places. Sources, defined loosely, can be personal such as old photographs or letters, or they can be similar to the sources used by professional historians such as references to literature

about war history. Sources are frequently used in written accounts to give detailed information about dates and place names. Mementos are the concrete objects which the writers refer to in their accounts.<sup>21</sup> Sources and mementos serve manifold and sometimes similar functions in the practices of memory and in written and oral narrating, and as such reflect sites of memory in operation.

The first function of sources is to give the narrative more credibility. When an exact time, place or name is given in the source, it serves to convince and provide evidence of a 'true' experience.<sup>22</sup> Second, the utilisation of sources aims at showing the collective nature of past events, memories and narrating. Exact dates, named places and events suggest the relatedness of subjective experiences, locating them inside shared histories and fixing them to known geographical locations.<sup>23</sup> Journey routes and the sites of homes are often specified in the narratives of the Karelian evacuees, and events relating to particular locations are concurrently aimed at situating precise moments in time.<sup>24</sup> Named places, events and exact dates are nodes of meaning that attract other memories and narratives. They have gathering power and the potential to act as collective points of reference in the narrative and in memory.<sup>25</sup> Third, sources function as tools for organising memory and narration. They provide writers with a point of reference or a basic structure, to which they can attach their own memories and build a narrative about the past. Eini, born in 1930, uses several kinds of sources, including books and letters, in the construction of the narrative of her evacuation journey:

The family, which this narrative is about, lived before the wars in the Konnitsa village of Pyhäjärvi in the county of Viipuri. According to the church register, approximately 8,000 people lived in the villages of Pyhäjärvi, of which 127 families and 661 people lived in Konnitsa. Konnitsa was the second largest village of the parish. The parents and grandparents of the narrator lived in Kunnianiemi 2, which was one of the oldest residential areas. The book, *Pyhäjärvi of Viipuri County. Periods in Kannas* (1950), written by Impi Wiikka, MA, uses for example Inkeri Koivusalo's study, written in the University of Turku in 1929: *The Area of Lake Pyhä – Lake Kiima in the Parish of Pyhäjärvi V. 1. Cultural Geographical Report* (manuscript).<sup>26</sup>

When using history books as sources, Eini's point of view and the content of her story are impersonal and distant.<sup>27</sup> For example, she refers to herself in the third person as the 'narrator'. In this case, the sources provide her with information she does not otherwise have. Hence, the sources enable her to recount the broader context of the evacuation journey. In addition, Eini uses the sources to form an interpretive framework for her writing. References to the sources guide the reader to interpret the narrative as a fact-oriented narrative of history. This example shows that sources do not only add content to the writing, but they partly define the communicative

function of the writing and the message that the writing conveys.<sup>28</sup> They relate to the writer's intentions and goals of presenting the past in a particular manner and in the selected framework. Thus, Eini constructs her writing like a historian by using source materials.<sup>29</sup>

In the following example, the same writer utilises her father's letters to construct her narrative about the evacuations. Eini had corresponded with her father, who had to work in a different part of Finland because of the war. Her father's letters form the basic structure of the narrative, and her personal observations are often comments on the letters rather than her personal memories, which, she confesses, are poor. The letters give her knowledge of the family's whereabouts during the evacuations and explanations for their constant movement. Most importantly, the letters clearly represent a site of memory. They are tangible objects supporting and sustaining memories and narratives, but their significance as sites of memory is dependent on the memories attached to them, and that significance relates to the present moment too:<sup>30</sup>

Most of these wartime letters our father sent to Keuruu still exist. I have been handing them over to the county archives of Mikkeli since the mid-1990s, where they have been indexed and received. I realise that from a young age I have tried to record the memories of my own life as well as those of my family during the war. So I can tell you here that in 1945, when my father and I had to separate from the rest of the family because of school, I went to a bookshop and bought a small notebook. On its cover, it says: 'MY FRIENDS'. Arts – Helsinki. Tilgmann PLC [name of the publisher of the 'My friends' notebook].<sup>31</sup>

The example shows firstly that the father's letters function as rhetorical tools supporting the writer's authority and agency as someone who can and does tell us about the past. Secondly, it very clearly indicates how the father's letters have a role in explaining features of Eini's personality, especially related to reminiscing and history telling. She underlines how she already understood that she was living in historical times, making her experiences during wartime important enough to document. This example provides a central clue as to how matter and narrative interact. The evacuation narrative, together with the sources that the writer uses, builds a meta-narrative, a story about telling a story about her personal past. In addition, the interaction between the narrative and the source materials creates a continuum between the writer's self in the past and in the present. In this case, the different sources represent the family members who were physically away at the time the account describes. As inter-linking agents, the narrative and the sources embody distant family members in memory by including them into Eini's narrative about the evacuation. The writing does not only contain her personal experiences, but through this linkage of matter and memory, it also becomes a narrative of family bonds and togetherness.

Mementos are metonymical objects, which means that they are parts of a greater whole. For the Karelian evac-





On the evacuation journey. Photo: SA-Kuva/Finnish Wartime Photograph Archive.



uees, mementos represent and constitute Karelia, their home and the evacuation journey. For another writer, Anna, born in 1929, a lilac cutting represents both her home in Karelia and the moment of leaving that home as her evacuation journey begins:

On the verge of tears, I looked [...] at my blossoming garden once more, maybe for the last time. Lilacs had just blossomed and I had taken one fragrant cutting with me as a memento of my home. I had that cutting, dried and pressed, as a memento for many decades, until it disappeared in the course of time.<sup>32</sup>

This excerpt is an example of how a memento operates as a site of memory, in which the intersection of two different logics of narration – syntagmatic chaining and paradigmatic grouping – unfolds. When the writer proceeds to a certain point in the syntagmatic plot of the evacuation narrative, the point at which the lilac cutting – the memento – appears, she paradigmatically associates that with later times. These later times belong to the same narrative about Anna's evacuation journey because they relate to the very same memento, the lilac. The material object, the memento, continues its agency because of the interplay between the narrative and matter, even though the actual lilac cutting no longer has any material presence. This demonstrates the affectual capacity that matter carries, even at the time the material object itself has become immaterial.

Former Karelian evacuees also create and discover places through mementos when they visit the sites of their former homes decades after the wars. It is very common for evacuees to bring back home, for instance, items such as sand, stones or plant roots and cuttings from Karelia to remind them of their old home. Intriguingly, the transportation of these objects is not only one-way traffic, as Karelian evacuees may also bring objects from Finland to Karelia. A woman writer called Raisa, born in 1927, writes:

I had with me two pairs of my mother's shoes, which I left there. Imagine how happy I was. I said Mother does not need her shoes anymore but they are stepping around there in our home garden, even though she never got back there herself.<sup>33</sup>

This extract clearly illustrates how matter (two pairs of shoes) and the narrative have mutual performative agencies. First, the shoes are used as a way to convince the reader that the writer's mother, who had already passed away, had once walked on Karelian home soil. Then, the shoes acquire a different agential feature: they return to a particular place. This way, Raisa feels that part of her mother returns to this place, even though that was never possible during her lifetime. Further, the two pairs of shoes continue their agential performative role when Raisa claims that the shoes are stepping around the garden. The narrative and the shoes act as mutually agential. This process has a personal meaning as it reasserts the family's connection with the place of home in the lost Karelia, but

it is also political. The affectual link between the narration and the shoes aims symbolically at reconquering the site of home and memory.

### Affects, emotions and bodily memories in oral narratives

The evacuation journey, places of refuge, the return to Karelia, the second evacuation and adjustment to a new home form the basic syntagmatic structure for the oral interviews. The narrators' descriptions of the home, landscape and village or town where they lived during their childhood in Karelia were usually very vivid. Frequently, the details of the lived places, including non-human features such as farm animals or plants, were put in place through the cartographic mindscape of the childhood environment. These multiple familial sites of memory form the most intimate socio-spatial spheres of belonging – what Edward S Casey's terms 'thick places'.<sup>34</sup> In the interviews, these were the sites that were said to be missed the most during the evacuation and even after decades of permanent settlement within the current borders of Finland. Thus, these sites carry the embodied sense of place, familiarity and the particular unity of self and place, in other words being in the world. Aino, who was four years old at the beginning of the Winter War, spoke of her memories of Karelia in this way:

*Anna-Kaisa: When you think of your home in Karelia, what comes to your mind first?*

*Aino: I think it's related to buildings... and, well, landscape too, because the cellar was a bit further away, on the other side of the road. And then there was this little hill and a beautiful birch forest. When I was a child, I often walked in that small forest and there were wild strawberries there in the spring and I also collected those small birch leaves... Oh, but it can't have been [spring] because you wouldn't have had strawberries yet... Anyhow, I used to take those leaves and with my thumb, squashed the strawberries onto them and imagined they were my strawberry pies. Things like that have somehow stayed in my mind. And so the garden and our house, those are in my memories... and the sheep in the pen.<sup>35</sup>*

The quotation illustrates how the daily environment and places of play have become embodied through walking, wondering, touching, seeing, sensing and being. This embodied knowledge of place is a crucial element in all the narrations of the former Karelian child evacuees. As this example demonstrates, Aino, now an elderly person, simultaneously reflects on her memory of childhood strawberry picking and her present understanding of when the strawberries actually grow, realising that her situating of the memory in time is not accurate. Through her bodily experience she clearly recalls how the event happened; yet the temporal confusion does not alter the significance of the experience. This is the way through which bodily senses and tactile memories support the narrativisation and discursive production of sites of

memory, even though absolute time, historical facts or other contextual features might not do so. Embodied knowledge disentangles from the restrictions of factual reality and the narration transforms the mindscape as a site of memory.

On the other hand, the actual evacuation journey and temporary residences were often described in a very different, more vague, tone. This social and spatial ambiguity should not be seen as an ontological condition of particular places, but it was born out of the often chaotic journeying, and the experience of forced displacement and the traumatic events of war. In addition, the narrators frequently described how during the evacuation they often found it difficult to feel a sense of belonging, which sometimes continued for years after their permanent resettlement. So it is not only, as Cameron Duff argues, that such 'thin places offer nothing to hold the self in place', but that in these situations the self is actively protected by engaging in practices of not belonging.<sup>36</sup> This clearly indicates that spatial being is formed in the interconnections of affectivity, body and material practices. The choice of not belonging is an affectual emotive-spatial practice because it invokes action potential to respond to the multiple and contradictory feelings arising from the evacuation.<sup>37</sup> In what follows, we discuss how this kind of action potential of the body, together with several memory practices, are at the core of making, discovering and narrating the sites of memory.

In oral narratives, matter and things are used in a similar manner to written narratives: to witness, support, frame and present something that was not present at the time. Below, we introduce two more ways in which things and matter have agential features in many narrated memories: affectual capability and emotional surprise. First, we discuss the agential and affectual capabilities of matter. The following extract illustrates how a laundry basket creates affectual ties between two young Karelian brothers fleeing the war in 1939:

So she [mother] had packed a kind of laundry basket and filled it with... whatever it was. We children didn't know what it was then. Then she had wrapped a thick sheet around it and zigzagged a laundry rope around it. And then our mother told us: 'You boys take care of this basket, no matter what happens. Remember that you carry this basket! I will take care of your little sister and my handbag, and you will not take your hands off the basket in any event.' Then, at night we left to get to the Korpioja train station. I dragged the basket along with my brother. We took it with us to an army truck even though it was a bit tough because there were so many people. When we got to the station, everything was totally dark. Then there were some men with torches because lighting a fire was forbidden [due to the threat of air bombings]. They showed us the way. Then one of these station men saw my brother and me dragging this basket. The man told us: 'That thing won't fit into the cattle van'. He took the basket and threw it down the hill. Well... but we had promised our mother that we would take it, take care of it... After the

man had walked away, we rushed down the hill and dragged the basket back onto the platform. Then there was this rather big lady at the door of the van who very kindly helped us to lift the basket into the train. So, that's how we got it with us.<sup>38</sup>

The laundry basket acts as a more-than-human encounter in this narrated memory. Tapio (who was nine years old at the beginning of the Winter War) and his brother took care of the basket because they were loyal to their mother. Loyalty is the conscious effect that makes the boys carry the basket, rush after it when it is thrown off the platform and try to wrestle it back to the evacuation train. There are also other agential features. In the narrative, the basket is a paradigmatic feature that bridges the fragments of the memory of the evacuation. Through the bodily work that was required to carry the basket, Tapio organises the past, lived experience. In a way, the he is thinking *with* the basket.<sup>39</sup> This type of material-discursive imagery is frequently used in oral narratives.

The human-matter agential power becomes even more obvious a bit later in the narrative when the basket reappears. This time the basket keeps the boys together when they suddenly find themselves momentarily separated from their mother. When the evacuation situation turns chaotic because of an air raid alert, the basket still needs to be taken care of. As one boy cannot carry it alone, the basket actively ties the boys together, forming the brothers-basket agential unit. Thus, the laundry basket is not a passive element. The basket becomes a connecting feature, a comforting object that requires bodily work. It is an affectual element in the event and in the narration of that event. Tapio continued:

But then suddenly the sirens started to wail... Through loudspeakers, they shouted that everybody has to take cover. I remember myself with that laundry basket, and I didn't know where our mother had gone, because we couldn't see anything in the darkness. We'd seen a bridge a bit further on and so my brother and I decided to go there. So we dragged the laundry basket along with us and went under the bridge to hide. And only when the danger was over did we go looking for our mother.<sup>40</sup>

The extract above does not mention fear, but confusion. It illustrates how the laundry basket and the brother were with Tapio at that moment of time, and this way the confusion was resolved. Hiding under the bridge and taking the basket there became the vital task for the brothers. The narrative recollection of this moment is based on the material performativity that enables Tapio and the researcher to discursively visit those vivid events of the evacuation.

The final defining feature that things and matter have in narrated memories is their quality of emotional surprise. In the following example, Oiva, who was fourteen years old at the time of the second evacuation in 1944, was travelling with his father. Among the very detailed descriptions of the actual journey to their place

of refuge, he mentions several times how they lacked food and felt hungry. In the interview, there is an intense emotional episode starting with Oiva explaining how he had tried to convince the staff at the train station to make a phone call to their next stop and inform them that the evacuees needed something to eat. At this point he tells us how rude the adults were for not listening to him. He then continues describing the evacuation journey, but all of the events he takes up relate to hunger. Oiva explains how they were eventually given some pea soup and bread: 'We had to walk about ten minutes from the station and then there was this basement where they had made soup and bread, but had no butter though. It tasted so good.'

Even though the narrative about the evacuation journey seems to be grounded on the syntagmatic chaining of being on the move from A to B, the following episode illustrates that actually hunger and its emotional burden operate as a trigger and are used as a tool for the paradigmatic grouping of the narrative. This becomes painfully evident during a few minutes of the interview:

[Oiva and his father had met a former soldier and let him ride in the horse cart with them].

*Oiva:* My father was looking at the bag and asked: 'What have you got in that bag?' 'Some food, why do you ask?', the other man replied. My father said that we hadn't got any food, that everything was gone. At that point the man threw his bag to us and said: 'I've got some bread and butter here'. He had this enormous round loaf of bread. [Shows with his hands and imitates putting butter on the bread.] This is how he took half of the bread and put butter on it. It was the best... I've ever had... [he begins to cry; a twenty second silence in the recording].

*Anna-Kaisa:* So these are still very strong, these memories?

*Oiva:* Yes, I can't help myself... I can't do anything about this... I can't handle it [he speaks and cries].

*Anna-Kaisa:* And you shouldn't have to. These emotional memories are the kind of things that quite often stay in your life and affect it very much.

*Oiva:* Yes, so it is. So many things and recollections have returned to my mind [still crying]. I haven't got rid of them like... and sometimes these things come from somewhere. This kind of journey, we have come this far, we have come here. That really hurts me so so much and that's why I'm not able to laugh at it. That's something this journey has done to me... [he speaks very quietly].<sup>41</sup>

It was not the actual travelling or being on the move that distressed Oiva the most, but the constant hunger that he had felt as a young boy. The intensity of the emotional experience was still surprising to him. These kinds of emotional episodes affect the flow of oral narratives and quite often redirect the discursive practice. In this manner,

things, matter and emotions are entangled with the discursive and create space for surprising elements and unexpected explanations for using particular analogies that appear repeatedly in the narration. The illustration above is an excellent example of bodily and situational memories that cannot be actively recalled, but surface involuntary.<sup>42</sup> These kinds of intrusive and inexplicable memories of forced displacement have affected some child evacuees' later life and orientation to other meaningful places, sites and events.<sup>43</sup> Thus, it is even more important to understand the narratives of childhood evacuation in two ways: as having both discursive-material and affectually embodied implications for subjective and collective embodied practices.

### Conclusions: alliance of memory and matter

In this article we have analysed the written and oral narratives of former Karelian evacuated children. In the field of oral history and narrative research, there has been a great deal of interest in the interactive nature of narrated memories. This means that the narratives are products of a dialogue between the narrator and the interviewer (or audience of a sort), and that they always relate to other narratives and interpretations of history.<sup>44</sup> Here, we have expanded the above argument and illustrated that socio-spatial sense making, thinking about and reflecting on childhood memories of evacuation are not exclusively based on discursive understanding and knowledge production in social encounters between individuals.<sup>45</sup> We propose that narrated memories are always material-discursive. Discourses do not only affect matter, but matter also has an agential role in narrated memories.

We have shown how things and matter intra-act with the narratives of memory. In practice, this meant tracing the events and episodes in the narratives that utilised non-human, material and immaterial features in the construction of memories. We found that former Karelian child evacuees used matter in various ways in their narrativisation. Sometimes they referred to additional sources only as a way to prove the historical accuracy of some event. On other occasions, evacuees treated things and matter as human-like participants or engaged affectually with them. This notion is not only restricted to memory work related to childhood experiences. However, it may more frequently occur in such settings because the frame of childhood brings elements of playfulness into narrations, even in the case of now-adult narrators recounting their war and evacuation memories. Moreover, playfulness is one way to act back to the world and challenge the current state of things. Therefore, childhood memories are never separable from the particular moment in the present.

We have shown that there are six ways the material-discursive intra-actions appear in narrated memories. First, things and matter are used to witness how, when and in which way history happened, according to the narrator. Second, they provide an interactive frame that promotes both the creation of the narrative and the interpretation of the narrative as a certain kind of account of the past. Third, they represent something that was



missing when the event took place or later at the time of the telling or the writing. In this way they confirm the link between the past and the present. Fourth, they give structure to the narrative. Fifth, matter is mutually agential and performative in narrated memories; and sixth, matter carries affectual and emotional capabilities that may create surprises in narratives.

We suggest that by focusing on discursive-materialities and by adapting new methodologies in the research of

narrated memories, we attain deeper understanding of the affectual dynamics of remembering, telling and writing, and can create new openings in oral history research. It becomes possible analytically to demonstrate how narrated memories are in constant flux, and that narrators and the events need to be seen as simultaneously human and more-than-human encounters. As our article shows, this means that narrated memories create an interplay with matter and things.

Eating and resting on the evacuation journey. Photo: SA-Kuva/Finnish Wartime Photograph Archive.





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## NOTES

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6. The Finnish Literature Society Folklore Archives, *Children's Evacuation Journey collection (Lasten evakkomatkat)*, Helsinki. Archival codes: SKS – *Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura* (Finnish Literature Society); KRA – *Kansanrunousarkisto* (Folklore Archives); LEM – *Lasten evakkomatkat-keruu* (Children's Evacuation Journey collection), 2004.

7. These written accounts formed the primary research material of Ulla Savolainen's PhD thesis, 2015.

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