

Review

Reviewed Work(s): DOING ORAL HISTORY: A PRACTICAL GUIDE (THIRD EDITION) by Donald A Ritchie

Review by: Fiona Cosson

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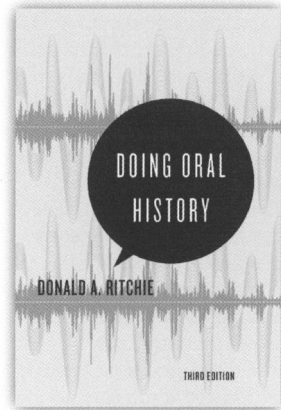
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Reinson's book are seemingly allowed to speak for themselves. In the introduction, the researcher has very successfully and delicately managed to describe her role. The preface opens with an academically classic characterisation of the theme – at the end of the Second World War, the forest becomes a place of military resistance to an occupying power, to the local population – a haven. The male and female roles in forest life are outlined. The reader is introduced to the book's heroines.

At the conclusion of her introduction, Reinson's voice becomes dominant, telling how the life story interviews are transformed into written texts and explaining what the author's personal ties are with the experience carried by the forest daughters. She emphasises that the emotions in voice, silent pauses, tears and laughter remain outside the text. A family of the author's relatives whose twelve children's fates 'at home, in forests, prisons, filtration camps, Gulag, deportations, exile' comprise a summary of post-war experience lived by the Latvian population (and simultaneously form an indirect belonging of the author to the forest) help to create confidence and cross the precautionary barrier in dialogues with the heroines of the book. Further on, the reader can become immersed in the stories, where the diversity imparted by the intensity of memories, the flow of speech and expressions is well-preserved. All the uneven aspects and the twists of spoken language have been turned into a flowing and easy-to-read narrative told by each person.

Worthy of particular attention is the study by historian Inese Dreimane, published as the afterword. She very scrupulously gathers all known information about the women who participated in the post-war resistance movement and places it within a network of more extensive inter-relations and in historical context.

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**DOING ORAL HISTORY:
A PRACTICAL GUIDE
(THIRD EDITION)**

Donald A Ritchie
Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2014, 368pp, £49.49/£24.49,
hardback/paperback/eBook.
Donald Ritchie's *Doing Oral History* has been a staple of oral history bibliographies for twenty years now. The book has long-held the privileged and unrivalled position as *the* oral history handbook, appealing to novices and experienced oral historians alike. So why bother with a new edition? It's been a decade since the second edition of *Doing Oral History* was published and a decade is a long time in the oral history world, not least for advances in technologies of recording, organising and listening to oral histories. In this light, it might seem Ritchie's work on a 'complete guide' for oral history might be futile, but by steering his readers through key aspects of the oral history process, pointing them towards best practice and handing out nuggets of advice picked up over his long career in oral history, Ritchie's third edition of *Doing Oral History* has assured its position as an indispensable handbook for everyone doing oral history.

The third edition of *Doing Oral History* looks less like a handbook than previous editions, presenting itself now more as a sizeable paperback book. The structure of the book, with sections on setting up an oral history project,

conducting interviews, using oral history in research and writing, and video oral history replicates the second edition of the book, organising the book in a sensible way, driven by the process and stages of oral history work. Its question-and-answer style makes dipping in and out of the 272 pages (plus notes and bibliography) manageable; readers can go straight to sections they need, or take a leisurely journey through the many stages of doing oral history.

That Ritchie covers so many angles of oral history practice, with authority, encouragement and explanation, is probably why *Doing Oral History* has been so popular for such a long time. However, not all sections will be relevant to all readers. Some oral historians will, for example, never touch video oral history; others will be less concerned with publishing. Regardless, the sense that this book covers so many aspects of oral history practice makes the reader feel reassured that Ritchie has thought about these ways of using oral history should the reader change their approach in the future.

Ritchie is a master of using examples of oral history practice to back up his approaches, preferences and opinions of oral history practice. He employs dozens upon dozens of examples of projects, authors, interviewers and interviewees to illustrate the successes and challenges of aspects of oral history work. His summary of the Boston Tapes is particularly useful. A little frustratingly, but understandably for a handbook, the references to many of these examples are right at the back of the book (as opposed to footnote or end of chapter notes), so you may find yourself digging through the pages of references if you wish to seek out further information on Ritchie's examples.

Donald Ritchie's credentials as an expert on the practice of oral history are unquestionable. He is a veteran of the oral history world, having served as president of the Oral History Association, editor of

The Oral History Handbook (2012), along with authoring several books on the history of US government. Ritchie's position as Historian of the United States Senate, a position he has held since 1976, shapes much of the content and approach of this book. Firstly, most of the examples Ritchie draws on to illustrate the diversity of oral history work are from the United States and Canada, though work in the UK and Europe is by no means ignored. Secondly, Ritchie's professional role as Historian for the US Senate has enabled him to experience, and therefore extoll, the many benefits of well-funded oral history research, such as transcription and multiple rounds of interviewing. Ritchie is clearly a fan of full transcription, and whilst many of us would not argue with the enormous benefits transcribed interviews bring to a project or research, for many people working on oral history research on limited time and budgets, transcription remains an expensive and time-consuming luxury. Indeed, many oral historians are considering how we can overcome the 'perils of the transcript' and return to audio after decades of studying simply the text of oral history.

From the start, Ritchie's definition that oral history is not only the recording of oral history interviews, but also archiving of oral history is refreshing, if not a little daunting for those who do not always have access to libraries and archives willing and able to take our oral history material. But Ritchie's clear stance that oral history is a form of historical evidence, the creation of a historical source and that oral historians have a duty to make this accessible to the future, reinforces the importance of our craft. Indeed, Ritchie's section on archiving is particularly strong, recognising the fruitful potential relationship between archives and oral history (a relationship that tends to be stronger in the USA), but also oral history as a means of engagement with wider public audiences.

Ritchie also covers the benefits of teaching oral history, which few oral historians need convincing of, along with a section on Institutional Review Boards, which those working in higher education may find useful. Ritchie's final section of the book, on presenting oral history as exhibitions, historic sites, radio and theatre, publications, audio-walks and websites provides new ideas for those looking to share and disseminate their oral history work. At the back of the book, Ritchie offers a handy bibliography, divided into useful categories, along with best practice guidelines and an international directory of oral history websites.

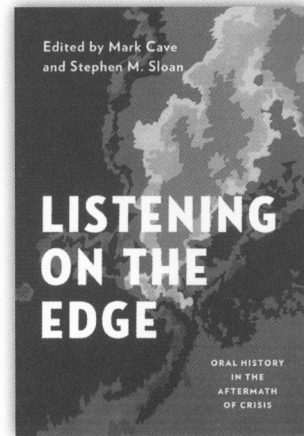
With such coverage, *Doing Oral History* has assured its place as *the* oral history handbook. This is in part because Ritchie's love and enthusiasm for the craft of oral history shines throughout the book, and he suggests genuinely useful ways of (re)thinking about our practice. Ritchie offers gems of advice that are useful to novices or experienced oral historians alike. These include setting a number of hours of interviewing for a project, rather than a number of interviews; processing interviews as you go along to avoid backlogs; and, perhaps the truest of words in saying: 'Rather than start by trying to put any particular theory into practice, a new oral historian would be better advised to adopt the more pragmatic approach of "putting practice into theory"' (p 13).

Ritchie's third edition of the book will ensure that its position as the go-to guide for oral history newcomers and oral history veterans remains unchanged.

Fiona Cosson

**LISTENING ON THE EDGE:
ORAL HISTORY IN THE
AFTERMATH OF CRISIS**

Mark Cave and Stephen M Sloan
(eds)
Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2014, 295pp, £19.99, paperback.
Listening on the Edge presents an
engaging and moving collection of



essays which raise important issues for oral historians. The essays provide examples of, and critical reflections on, an emerging trend towards conducting 'crisis oral history'. As Mark Cave points out in his introduction to the collection, oral historians have long been concerned with capturing the experience of crisis, but have tended to interview people some (often considerable) time after the event. By contrast, crisis oral history involves interviewing people 'soon after, or in the midst of, crisis' (p 1). *Listening on the Edge* explores the implications of crisis oral history for oral history practice and interview participants.

Key themes are explored across the collection: the relationship between time, memory and emotion; the purpose of oral history and the responsibilities of the oral historian in relation to the individual and to a broader public; the extent to which oral history practice resembles that of journalism or psychotherapy; and whether interviewing in the midst or immediate aftermath of crisis might be harmful or healing for narrators.

Each chapter in the collection comprises extended interview excerpts and a critical commentary by the interviewer on different crises, including the massacre in Srebrenica by Serbian troops, the shootings at Virginia Tech, the Cuban rafter crisis, the Rwandan genocide, 9/11, natural disasters, Mexican drug wars, and wars in