

Communities of Memory



Oral History Association of Australia



Journal No. 34, 2012

Oral History Association of Australia Journal

No. 34, 2012

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ISSN: 0158 7366

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OHAAS Journal

The OHAAS Journal is published annually. Its content reflects the diversity and vitality of oral history practice in Australia, and includes contributions from overseas.

The Editor of the Journal welcomes offers of material for possible publication in the 2013 issue, No 35. See Call for Papers at the end of this journal or the OHAAS website: www.ohaa.org.au. Suitable items include papers for peer review, unrefereed articles (such as project and conference reports) and book reviews. Please see the website for further information for contributors.

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Editor's notes

I am happy to say that I feel very much more organised for this my second time as Editor of our wonderful Journal. This has been made easier by the National Committee's decision to discontinue the inclusion of State Branch reports and the national financial report in order to minimise printing costs, which represent the Association's largest annual item of expenditure. I will endeavour to cut costs wherever possible.

The gap left by Mary Ann Jebb's resignation as Review Editor was also cause for disorder, despite Helen Stagg's kind offer to fill the role and Francis Good's assistance. This is mainly because it left people wishing to have books reviewed confused as to whom they should approach. As a result, I now have a good appreciation of the role Mary Ann played and I would like to thank her for her past efforts in ensuring that book reviews were well-managed. In the absence of a specified Review Editor, enquiries for reviews have come to me this time and it has seemed easier to handle them myself for this edition. I feel sure you will enjoy reading them; they have come from some of our most experienced critics.

Congratulations are extended to award winners Frank Heimans, Diana Ritch and Joyce Cribb, whose dedications are presented towards the end of the Journal.

The articles received for this edition have yet again been of a very high standard. Christin Quirk admirably broaches the touchy and touching topic of single mothers forced to relinquish their children in an era of moral righteousness that caused much pain and grief. A theme of loss is further explored in Megg Kelham's soul-searching piece on suicide. I applaud her openness and bravery in sharing this beautifully written paper with us. On a lighter note, award-winning fiction writer (and Chair of our Editorial Board), Ariella van Luyn, provides a fascinating insight into the processes of transforming oral histories into fiction, a genre that has resonance with some past oral historical applications, but that is otherwise relatively newly recognised.

Other themes are tantalisingly varied. Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, for example, examine the rural Greek café in early twentieth century Australia. This brings back fond memories from my childhood in outer urban Sydney, where the Greek café was also the trendy and glamorous hub in an otherwise boring social landscape for young

people. While Effy and Leonard point to the lack of local acceptance of the Greek proprietors, my personal experience is one of my father sharing horticultural techniques with Greek and Italian market gardening neighbours which resulted in the development of cross-cultural bonds, so hopefully it was not all negative experiences for post-war European immigrants.

In contrast, Judy McKinty and Margaret Tomkins delve into the stories of people who were residents in the Blind Babies' Nursery at the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind under the care of the first Matron, Sister Elizabeth Lindsey. Heather Campbell and Lorraine Stevens, on the other hand, enter the realm of interviewing children from the Lance Holt School in Fremantle, WA – it would seem with very pleasant and rewarding results. Michele Langfield's article addresses the social and cultural complexities involved in the maintenance of the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre in Melbourne, while Susan Marsden's interviews with historians provides an overview of a project that explores diverse aspects of writing history.

Gwenda Baker and Joanne Garngulpuy open a window into life on Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island) in the Northern Territory during the times of the missionaries – the positives and negatives and implications for the present and the future. It is encouraging how profoundly this project imbued the local people with pride and hope. Madeleine Regan and June Edwards provide an interesting insight into the creation of OHAA South Australia's web gateway in response to the 175th anniversary of the European settlement of the State, highlighting the value of the consideration of similar such projects.

National President Jill Adams gives us a report on the very successful October 2011 conference in Melbourne. The 2013 conference is to be held in Adelaide in September at the University of South Australia. I am excited to be involved with next year's conference organisation and look forward to a wonderful event. The conference themes are extensive, as can be seen from the Call for Papers published in this Journal, so I look forward to some very interesting papers, both for presentation at the conference and for publication in the 2013 and 2014 Journals.

Best wishes,

Sue Anderson

Contents

Articles

- Telling tales of Australia's country Greek cafes: A project insight
Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis 3
- For the Children: memories, stories and well-being in an Indigenous community.
Gwenda Baker and Joanne Garngulkpuy 9
- Communities of memory? The Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre, Melbourne
Michele Langfield 20
- From the cradle to the grave: Sister Lindsey and the blind babies' nursery
Judy McKinty and Margaret Tomkins 27
- 'Double vision': recording the oral histories of historians
Susan Marsden 32
- 'Seth makes learning fun': the Fremantle City Library/Lance Holt School Oral History Project
Heather Campbell and Lorraine Stevens 39
- Papers (Refereed)**
- 'The other thing was...': the reciprocal interview relationship and the impact of 'unconnected' traumatic memories
Christin Quirk 47
- Creating and confronting community: Suicide stories in central Australia
Megg Kelham 54
- Jogging alongside or bumping off? Fiction and oral history in dialogue
Ariella van Luyn 62

Conference/Project Reports	
Developing a web gateway of oral history interviews for the SA 175th anniversary: An account of the project of the Oral History Association of Australia (SA/NT Branch) 2008 – 2011 <i>Madeleine Regan and June Edwards</i>	71
Conference report Melbourne October 2011: communities of memory <i>Jill Adams</i>	75
Book Reviews	76
Notes on Contributors	81
Life Memberships Joyce Cribb Diana Ritch	85
The Hazel de Berg Award Frank Heimans	87
Membership Information	88
Call for Papers	89

Telling tales of Australia's country Greek cafés: A project insight

Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis

Abstract

This project report provides tales of the country Greek café, offered by those who owned, ran and frequented this twentieth-century Australian phenomenon. Greek and non-Greek Australians reveal the positive and negative aspects of the institution in their lives and their rural communities, but perhaps more importantly, what emerges is that the Greek café was a dynamo generating change within Australian popular culture – part of a process of Americanisation, affecting Australian eating and social habits, commercial food-catering ideas, products, technology, cinema, architecture and popular music.

Tales to tell

Some 1,800 recorded oral history interviews conducted between 1982 and 2011¹ by the authors – in both Australia and overseas – have confirmed the status of the Greek café as the social hub of the Australian country town (particularly in the eastern States) from the early 1900s through to the late 1960s.² Moreover, while the interviews with those who owned, worked in, or frequented these cafés also provide insights into the racial and socio-cultural dislocations between British-Australians and Greek-Australians, a previously unacknowledged, yet highly significant element of the Greek café's impact upon rural communities is revealed: its role in the process of the Americanisation of Australian popular culture, affecting eating and social habits, commercial food-catering ideas, products, technology, and even cinema, architecture and music. For most interviewees, the popular socio-cultural landscape of rural Australian towns was shaped – in part – by Greek cafés with a distinct American flavouring. Moreover, Greek cafés were viewed as important components in the facilitation of a local sense of community (principally amongst British-Australians) within these towns.

Offering generally excellent quick service, long opening hours, competitive prices, a conscious catering to British-Australian preferred tastes and the provision of a much needed outlet for entertainment, casual get-

togethers, formal meetings and town gossip, Greek cafés became significant points for eating and meeting within country towns. Recalling country Greek cafés of the 1930s and 40s in the central-west of New South Wales, Mervyn Campbell states:

Many a time you would have gone hungry at night if it hadn't had been for a Greek café. You'd get into a country town [at night] after the hotel or dining room had closed and you'd have nowhere to get a meal. But there was always a Greek ready to serve you a mixed grill ... They'd be open in country towns at 7 o'clock in the morning and closing at midnight. A Greek would be open almost all the time. 'Meals at all hours' was the Greek slogan in the country ... They [the Greek café proprietors] gave terrific service, long hours ... You could have a feed and meet your mates or take your girl for a date ... They [Greek cafés] kept the country towns going day and night.³

Joseph Toms, who frequented Greek cafés in south-western New South Wales during the very late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, expands on their importance to country communities:

Nine out of ten cafés in the southern Riverina were Greek ... The most popular names of the cafés were The Spot, the Niagara, and sure, a few Parthenons ... The cafés then, catered for locals and the surrounding district ... They played a crucial role in the development of Australia as they provided a sense of community, [as] the social centre of the town was the Greek café.⁴

Thelma Pearson (nee Taylor) waitressed in country Greek cafés during the 1940s and recalls that 'Greeks were very, very good with food and cafés ... I really fitted in well with all the Greek families ... they [the Greek cafés] were the centre of social activity in country towns – a place to eat, talk, and belong ... If you wanted to catch-up on the latest news you'd go to the café. The Greeks knew everyone and they served everyone with a smile. They made you feel at home – everyone was part of a large extended family that was the local community'.⁵ Barbara (full name restricted), who waitressed in rural Greek cafés during the 1950s,



Niagara Café – ‘Australia’s Wonder Café’ Gundagai, NSW, c. 1940
 Jack (John) Castrission is standing behind the confectionery counter on the left.
 Photo courtesy J. Castrission, from the National Project Archives.

firmly reinforces Thelma’s view: ‘Greek cafes were where you went, where you met friends ... The Greek café owners made you feel welcome – you grew up feeling wanted’.⁶ Joan Margaritis (nee Farquharson) waitressed in Greek cafés in rural Queensland during the early 1970s and considers that ‘you felt at home in a Greek café’, that ‘they were the focal point of the town – where people used to meet ... “I’ll meet you at the Greeks”’, was a popular saying in most country towns’.⁷ Peter (Beneto) Veneris’ family ran the Blue Bird Café in Lockhart in south-western New South Wales for almost 70 years. For Veneris, the café was ‘the heartthrob of the town’.⁸ James Bede Johnson remembers the Monterey Greek café in Coonamble in north-western New South Wales: ‘They opened up very early ... they were always here if you wanted a hot breakfast, lunch or dinner ... all the families would flock to the Monterey.’⁹ For Renee Leonard (nee Anastopoulo), whose family owned the Monterey in Coonamble, ‘the café was the “Mecca” of the town – it had personality, passion, glamour, food and people you knew to enjoy your meal with!’¹⁰ Peter Martin, who was a regular customer of country Greek cafés, emphasised the importance of the food-catering institution to regional Australia by recognising what has been lost through their demise:

The Greek café was part of the identity and social fabric of the community. Every time we lose a Greek café we lose part of the history, part of our memory, part of our sense of town and region. The

Greek café was a place where people could meet, speak freely and do business.¹¹

Greek cafés provided many within rural communities with ‘a sense of community’, not simply through their amenity as a central place to meet and eat at affordable prices, at almost any hour, but because they also offered a guaranteed escape from the tedium and worries of the everyday – the Greek café was a place to relax, or to be entertained, amidst the comfort of family, friends and neighbours, cocooned within an often exotic environment that offered the allure of, and tasty temptations from, another world across the Pacific: America.

The transmission of American influences to Australia by early Greek café proprietors should not be surprising. Quite a number had worked in the United States themselves as food caterers or were regularly corresponding with relatives and friends still working there in the industry. While America had been a major drawcard for Greek immigrants during the 1890s to the early 1920s, the early decades of the twentieth century witnessed a noticeable movement of Greek people from the United States to Australia – part of the global expansion of the Greek diaspora in the modern era¹². Ideas, experiences and skills picked up from America were then applied within the Australian food-catering context. Providing regular income, maintenance of the family unit, independence from union restrictions upon foreign labour, and requiring only limited formal education and knowledge of English, food-catering



California Café Nyngan, NSW, mid-late 1950s

Photo by Frank Hurley, courtesy J. Varvaressos, from the Greek-Australians: In Their Own Image National Project Archives.

enterprises such as cafés in Australia and diners in the United States, proved to be attractive sources of employment for Greeks.¹³

Australia's Greek cafés were selling a dream – essentially, an illusion that by experiencing elements of American popular culture, life was 'better and richer and fuller'.¹⁴ British-Australian communities enjoyed immersing themselves into the fantasy of 'modern American culture' that was transmitted via the Greek café. Sitting in booths, listening to the jukebox and admiring the café's Californian 'Streamline Moderne' Art Deco architecture, they could purchase a mixed grill with an 'American Beauty' fancy sundae or a 'Spider' soda drink, before entering the picture theatre next door to enjoy the latest Hollywood film. As Mary McDermott (nee Conway), who waitressed in Greek cafés during the 1960s points out: 'Greek cafés were a little bit of Hollywood glamour, a little bit of American life ... That's why they were called the Niagara, the Monterey, the California and the Golden Gate!'¹⁵ Con Zervos' family operated a Greek café in Cooma in southern New South Wales. He echoes McDermott's thoughts: 'These cafés [Greek run cafés] introduced little bits of America to Australia'.¹⁶ Kathy (Kiriaki) Orfanos (nee Mavromattes), whose family ran the New York Café in Nowra on the New South Wales south

coast from 1954 through to the mid-1970s, elaborates:

Greek cafés in Australia offered, with such plain Australian fare as steak and eggs, fresh new Americanisms like milkshakes, soft drinks and ice cream sodas. Glamorous and elegant, they were an island of exotica ... Typically they were richly decorated and named after distant, unattainable places which for most people came to life only at the picture theatres: 'The Niagara', 'The Parthenon', 'The California' or 'The New York'. The New York Café was simply beautiful ... It had an iron ceiling garlanded with roses. It had curved windows full of chocolates. It was the Greek Diaspora, America and Australia combined.¹⁷

Those elements of American popular culture that were transmitted through Greek cafés to Australia mesmerised country communities. Maria Cominos (nee Tamvaki), who ran Comino's Bros. Central Café & American Bar at Longreach in central-western Queensland with her husband Cecil (Sotirios Nicholas) and his cousins during the 1930s and 1940s, recalls the amazement on customers' faces as 'cold soda water bubbled and hissed [from the soda fountain pump] into tall glasses with flavouring and ice'. The soda fountain together with American-style candies, milk



Busy Bee Café Kingaroy, Qld, 1929

Photo courtesy H. and E. Masselos, from the *Greek-Australians: In Their Own Image* National Project Archives.

chocolates and ice cream, ‘attracted people from miles around, because they were new, they were American, they were affordable, and only we [the Greek cafés] had them’.¹⁸ The term ‘American Bar’ was utilised by numerous early twentieth century Greek-run food catering establishments in Australia to declare that their business operated a front-service soda fountain – a refreshment-beverage technology imported from the United States (initially from the Liquid Carbonic Company or the Bastian-Blessing Company, both in Chicago, Illinois). ‘American-style’ hard-sugar candies, milk chocolate and ice cream first began to appear in those Greek cafés whose operators had acquired knowledge of their manufacturing processes whilst in the United States.¹⁹ According to Jack (John) Castrission, whose family operated the Niagara Café at Gundagai in south-western New South Wales for almost 65 years, the café’s American ice cream sundaes with titles such as ‘American Beauty’, ‘Monterey Special’, ‘Yankee Doodle Dandy’ and ‘Mexican Banana Split’, ‘brought customers in on a regular basis, many often wanting to try a new one’.²⁰ After 1932 the popularity of milkshakes dramatically increased (and the milk bar was created) with the importation of the electric Hamilton Beach milkshake maker (manufactured in Racine, Wisconsin, in the United States).²¹ As Peter Prineas, who worked in numerous rural Greek cafés before purchasing his own in 1939 – the 40 Lounge Café at Horsham in western Victoria – points out,

‘the locals couldn’t wait to enjoy and experience a milkshake because it was the latest food technology and taste sensation from the United States’.²²

In addition to the enthusiastic public embrace of new technology and products, cinema, architecture and music also played important roles in cementing the Greek café’s role as a communal focal point of shared local experiences within rural townships. Again, the seduction of Americanisation is clearly evident. Their association with picture theatres reinforced the social and food-catering significance of Greek cafés. Quite a number of Greek café proprietors within Australia actually acquired local picture theatres, running both simultaneously, and reaping the business benefits of the synergy. This situation duplicated the working relationship between popular food-catering establishments and cinema entertainment in the United States – a conscious link between food and fantasy.²³ As Margaret Harrison (nee Clancy) who waitressed at the Blue Bird Café in Lockhart during the 1930s, points out: ‘The pictures were once a week and the shop was packed! Young men would take their girlfriend to the pictures, or whole families would go. Then they’d go to the café. It was a night on the town for nearly all the locals.’²⁴ For Peter Comino, who was a partner in the Niagara Café in Singleton (north-west of Newcastle in New South Wales), ‘when the picture theatre next door was operating we were at battle stations behind

the counter ... speed was of the essence ... the café was simply bursting with people wanting to be served!'.²⁵ Paul (Petros) Calokerinos who managed the York Café in Manilla (northern New South Wales) during the 1950s, remembers: 'Saturdays were our busiest times. Everyone would come to town and go to the pictures and then the café. Our trade from when the Palace picture show was operating was amazing, simply amazing!'²⁶ Some Greek cafés were placed within local cinemas to further capitalise on the relationship. Julie Papadonakis (nee Canaris), whose family ran the Star Café in Darwin during the late 1930s, recalls:

After the war [World War II], we [the Star Café] went into the Star Picture Theatre in Smith Street ... It was where the Mall is today ... We had ice creams ... we also sold milkshakes, lemon and orange squash, scorched almonds, Cherry Ripes, boxed chocolates, cigarettes and tobacco ... Our main aim was to serve as many customers as possible during interval.²⁷

Steve (Stavros) Margaritis, who worked at The Balonne Café in St George in southern-central Queensland during the 1950s and 1960s, well articulates the link between cinemas and Greek cafés in regard to a sense of community and the beguiling nature of Americanisation: 'After the pictures, about 100 or 150

happy and excited people would come into the café. It was like a big family here in St George. The pictures promised them Hollywood. The café continued the illusion.'²⁸

Architecture and music further manifested the illusion and firmly helped to secure the rural Greek café's position as a major social centre of town life. Greek café proprietors recognised that the architectural aesthetic they desired for their business had to both entice people in and reflect part of what could be offered once inside. The aesthetic that grew in dominance again provided the allure of America. During the 1940s, Electra Sofianos' (nee Sarikas) husband was a partner in the Monterey Café in Barraba, located in the New England region of New South Wales. She confidently recognised that the architecture of the café was "American style" in layout and design' and that it was the 'jewel of the town'.²⁹ Other Greek café proprietors, as well as café patrons, also recognised the American influence of the style, referring to it as 'the Hollywood style' or 'the ship style from America'.³⁰ American Art Deco designs, or more specifically, California's 'Streamline Moderne' – which favoured the curvilinear in contrast to the generally angular interest of European Art Deco – became the iconic architectural signature of Australia's Greek cafés (and indeed picture theatres) for the greater part of the twentieth century.³¹ Jack



Star Café Darwin, NT, 1948

Julie Papadonakis (nee Carnaris) is standing on the right.

Photo courtesy Papadonakis family, from the *Greek-Australians: In Their Own Image* National Project Archives.



Design Plan for Victoria Café Newcastle, NSW, 1930s

One of Stephen C. Varvaressos' 60 major renovations or initial constructions that evidenced the incorporation of architectural elements from American Art Deco – more specifically, California's 'Streamline Moderne'.

Design plan courtesy J. Varvaressos, from the *Greek-Australians: In Their Own Image* National Project Archives.

Castrission, points out that in 1938 his family's Niagara Café at Gundagai was refitted to 'the latest Hollywood style'. It became "'Australia's Wonder Café", all coloured glass and shiny metal surfaces, large reflective mirrors, polished marble, wooden booths, neon lights out front, and it had a domed ceiling design filled with stars and the night sky ... It [the café] was like an oasis in the desert. It was a pleasure palace, and the locals loved it!³² One major Greek shop fitter of the 1930s, Stephen C. Varvaressos, seems to have based his Art Deco Greek café designs directly on Greek-American Art Deco cafés. He fitted out over 60, including his own in Shepparton in northern-central Victoria. His son, John Varvaressos, recalls that his father had told him that Greek café owners wanted 'American-style' cafés as 'it made their customers feel special – a little piece of modern America that was part of their town'.³³

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, jukeboxes were appearing in a growing number of rural Greek cafés as part of their entertainment component – the trend had initially been stimulated during World War II by American servicemen on leave looking for familiar entertainment. Con Nikakis proudly points out in regard to his family's café in Victoria: 'Dad put a jukebox in the café – all 'Swing music' [popular in the United States in the late 1930s and early 1940s] – in response to the US servicemen on leave'.³⁴ Indeed, US military personnel were attracted to country Greek cafés because of their American elements – the cafés were 'a home away from home'. American and British popular

music were heard in rural Australia's Greek cafés, well before the music's broad acceptance on Australian radio. Peter Stratos' (Hadjiefstrateou) family had cafés in both Geraldton and Perth in Western Australia. He remembers how the local community quickly accepted the jukebox as part of the attraction of cafés:

We had a juke box in the early days, around 1955. People [Greek café proprietors] would lease them. Ours was called a 'Musicola'. Locals wanted to be entertained by their favorite tune while downing an American thickshake or sundae treat. The music added to their sense of shared pleasure and only the café had one. Customers would stick around for hours. The local community was well and truly hooked!³⁵

Irene Pantazis' (nee Kanaris) family ran the Rendezvous Café in Darwin during the 1950s and 1960s: 'We got the jukebox in the shop around 1958 or 59. Bill Haley was the craze at that time ... the locals, particularly the young people, went wild. The Rendezvous became the centre of town life'.³⁶ Robert Buchan remembers that 'it used to cost sixpence per play to listen to a jukebox record in the 1950s and 60s ... and we'd all go to the Greek café to listen and have a feed whenever we could ... we only had a wind-up gramophone at home'.³⁷ Ray Barry claims that when a jukebox was placed into the Denman Café (upper Hunter Valley in New South Wales) by its Greek proprietor, Harry Logus, in the early 1950s, 'it was always being played – American



Tina Loukissas, Niagara Café Gundagai, NSW, 2002

Photo by Effy Alexakis, from the *Greek-Australians: In Their Own Image* National Project Archives.

rock music like Bill Haley ... and on a Saturday night, there was standing room only!³⁸ By the late 1950s, the rock'n'roll generation had confidently emerged in Australia.

The tastes, sights, sounds and glamour of America, as expressed through the Greek café, became a metaphor for modernity in regional Australian communities. However, whilst the customers of country Greek cafés enjoyed immersing themselves in such fantasy, for many Greek café proprietors, their families and their Greek employees, selling an American dream came at a personal cost. Many Greek interviewees have generally perceived themselves to be 'in' Australia, but not 'of' it. Although they provided rural communities with 'a sense of community', for the most part, Greek café families were a socially and racially marginalised group – a fringe community, existing along the outer social perimeter of the host society.

Some Greeks, such as Jim Gavrilis – who ran the Elite Café in West Kempsey on the New South Wales north coast from 1948 until 1983 – did feel accepted into the broader Australian community:

I was very friendly with the larrikins in Kempsey – larrikins, but good fellows ... they were all locals ... I found these people very friendly ... I joined the swimming club ... I was accepted and I was pleased about it ... Some friends were Masons ... [so] I joined the Masonic Lodge ... I'm a life member of the swimming club. I was the chief timekeeper for 27 years! ... At times we [Greeks

and British-Australians] would all get on a bus and go to the beach for the day ... we met some lovely people ... In those days, we made some beautiful friends.³⁹

But, such statements by Greek interviewees who operated or worked in Greek cafés, are by far in the minority. Kathy Orfanos well articulates her family's socio-cultural relationship to the broader local community:

Our café was certainly central. It was the heart of the town – a place to meet. But we [my family] were really never part of it [town life] ... we were peripheral to the whole thing ... Our café was visible [as a central feature of town life], but we, as a family, were not.⁴⁰

During the 1930s and 40s, for Archie Kalokerinos of the Paragon Café, in Glen Innes, New South Wales, racist attitudes were also implied: 'Looking back, Dad was never once invited inside the home of an Australian [British-Australian], although he belonged to the Masonic Lodge and the bowling club'.⁴¹ Peter Veneris experienced the physical sting of racism:

I was called a dago when I went to school. I didn't know what it meant, so I would fight and fight. We were proud of being Greek, but not of being called dagoes. When we got the café it changed from dagoes to greasy dagoes – greasy spoon dagoes.⁴²

Name-calling resulted in a young Coula Salagaras (nee Papayianis) – whose family ran the Central Café in



Peter (Beneto) and Jack (Ioannis) Veneris, Blue Bird Café Lockhart, NSW, 2002
 Photo by Effy Alexakis, from the *Greek-Australians: In Their Own Image* National Project Archives.

Peterborough located on the southern edge of South Australia's Flinder's Ranges – feeling, desperately isolated and unwanted:

We lived very hard – people don't understand how hard it was going through the Depression and being Greek. We were the only Greeks there [in Peterborough]. I went to school there. All the Aussies called me "Dago, dago, dago!" ... I cried every day. Yes, every day. I wanted to go back to Greece – to go back to where I fitted in.⁴³

John Harris (Harkiolakis) worked in Greek cafés in both Victoria and Tasmania during the 1930s through to the 1960s:

Those days racism was pretty bad because you could not speak your language in the streets. You had to speak English, otherwise you'd have a rough time. I didn't like it ... I also had to change my name ... But my dream was to one day buy a café business of my own. So by working in the cafés owned by other Greeks, I knew what would, or would not, be tolerated. The Greeks were certainly an underclass.⁴⁴

Victor Cominos' family had cafés in Emerald in central Queensland. For Cominos, Emerald 'was a

train [railway] Labor town and racism was rife ... the workers called themselves comrades ... In the 1950s I endured a lot of racism. My greatest friends were the local Aboriginal families and the Chinese people up the road ... The locals [British-Australians of Emerald] persecuted all of us.⁴⁵

Anthony (Antonios) Flaskas who arrived in Australia in 1913 and worked in New South Wales and Victorian Greek cafés, highlighted – quite forcefully and emotionally – the heart of the problem:

You see, it was very, very strict White Australia – the White Australia policy ... You see, we were fighting them days. Really, we were fighting for our existence ... we were fighting for our life. That's how hard it was ... Third class citizens was us really – third class, not second class, third class!⁴⁶

In 1935, Melbourne geographer, J. S. Lyng, described the Greeks as 'the least most popular foreigners in Australia'.⁴⁷ James Ploudias, who arrived in Australia in 1928, found that 'Australians [British-Australians] wouldn't give us jobs, we had to rely on the Greek café'.⁴⁸ More recently, one cultural commentator has suggested that 'the fact that the culture which they [Greek-Australians] chose to import and transmit to Australia [via the Greek café] was "modern American"

rather than “traditional Greek” says much about the fascination and safety of American culture for Greek-Australians in the age of White Australia’.⁴⁹ Early Greek-Australian food caterers recognised the potential of offering the latest in popular American food catering – in addition to maintaining the core of established Australian food-catering tastes – as a means of possibly securing commercial appeal and buffering racial antagonism. As Dimitrios Trambas points out:

When you come from another country you see opportunities here [in Australia] that those born here can’t ... because you have to prove yourself ... because you are under scrutiny as the locals don’t necessarily want you and they think you’re inferior ... you have to selectively use your experiences from other places to try and succeed both in business and in trying to fit in – you have to see what works and what doesn’t.⁵⁰

Although some early Greek food caterers did attempt to introduce Greek dishes, particularly sweet pastries, these failed to be accepted by the Australian palate, possibly assisted in part by an underlying cultural attitude that it was inferior to food items of British or American origin.⁵¹

Responding to questions regarding racism, interviewees of British-Australian background generally provided an attitude similar to that expressed by Ray Barry: ‘Everyone said “dago” – “Let’s go have a feed at the dago café”. Yes, they were different in race and culture. Yes, there were some scuffles ... I saw one of the biggest fights there [in the Denman Greek café] ... But it was just what everybody said [calling Greeks “dagoes”]. No racism in it.’⁵²

The racial and socio-cultural fractures and contradictions within rural Australian communities between British-Australians and Greek-Australians are clearly evidenced amongst the Greek café project’s interviewees. Also highlighted is that Greek cafés were a central place to meet, eat and be socially entertained within Australia’s rural townships, and that they assisted in generating – principally amongst British-Australians – a local sense of community. They offered, through much of their food-catering technology and products, architectural furnishings, and association with cinema and popular music, the glamour and allure of America. By assisting in shaping the socio-cultural landscape of country towns for the greater part of the twentieth century, Greek cafés were part of a process of Americanisation within Australian popular culture. These ‘telling tales’ of an Australia rapidly vanishing, but still with us in the storehouse of recalled lived experience, have much more to reveal. Like Tina Loukissas, whose parents purchased the Niagara Café in Gundagai from Jack Castrission in 1983, we simply have to continue listening and evaluating:

A lot of people come in and say that this [the café] is like *Happy Days* [1970s TV show set in 1950s America] – that it’s like walking back down memory lane. You get a lot of older people saying, ‘I was here [in the café] 50 years ago or 30 years ago’ ... There was a jukebox in here ... Apparently the Niagara was the place to be – to be at, and to be seen ... The café’s been here since 1902 and I guess that the American influence has always dominated.⁵³

DECLARATION:

All photographs are from the from the *Greek-Australians: In Their Own Image* National Project Archives, Macquarie University, Sydney. They have been legally released by their donors for use through the Archive.

Leonard Janiszewski

Effy Alexakis

(Endnotes)

- 1 The audio recordings, and/or transcriptions of the interviews are part of the ‘In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians’ National Project Archives, Macquarie University, Sydney (hereafter referred to as ‘In Their Own Image’ Archives). Audio recordings are held in either analogue or digital formats. Interviews were conducted in either English or Greek. The ‘In their Own Image’ Archives encompass oral, visual and literary material and are acknowledged as one of the most substantial research collections on Greek-Australians in the country.
- 2 The Greek café was essentially an evolutionary amalgam of the oyster saloon or ‘parlor’ (American spelling was usually used) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the ‘American-style’ soda/sundae ‘parlor’ which had appeared by the 1910s, and the ‘American-style’ milk bar which had emerged by the early 1930s. For convenience, this report applies the term ‘Greek café’ as one inclusive of the enterprise’s earlier manifestations. For background to the Greek café’s development see: Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, ‘Selling an American dream: Australia’s Greek café’, in Stephen Gregory (ed.), *Shop Till You Drop: Essays on Consuming and Dying in Australia*, Southern Highlands Publishers, Sydney, 2008, pp. 37-45; Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, ‘California dreaming: the “Greek café” and its role in the Americanisation of Australian eating and social habits’, *Modern Greek Studies (Australia & New Zealand)*, vol. 11-12, 2003/2004, pp. 178-186; Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, “‘That bastard Ulysses’: an insight into the early Greek presence, 1810s–1940’, in Shirley Fitzgerald and Garry Wotherspoon (eds), *Minorities: Cultural Diversity in Sydney*, State Library of NSW Press, Sydney, 1995, pp. 20-24; Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, *In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1998, pp. 106-109.
- 3 Mervyn Campbell, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 22 September 1987, tape and transcript held by the ‘In Their Own Image’ Archives (Ref: Campbell, M.).

- 4 Joseph Toms, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 2 July 2002, tape and transcript held by 'In Their Own Image' Archives, (Ref: Toms, J.).
- 5 Thelma Pearson (nee Taylor), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 15 April 2003, transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives, (Ref: Pearson, T.).
- 6 Barbara V. (full name restricted), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 5 January 2002, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives, (Ref: V. Barbara).
- 7 Joan Margaritis (nee Farquharson), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 5 July 2006, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives, (Ref: Margaritis, J.).
- 8 Peter (Beneto) and Jack (Ioannis) Veneris, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 13 July 2001, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives, (Ref: Veneris, P. and J.).
- 9 James Bede Johnson, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 8 October 2002, transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives, (Ref: Johnson, J. B.).
- 10 Renee Leonard (nee Anastopoulo), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 8 October 2002, transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Leonard, R.).
- 11 Peter Martin, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 9 January 2002, transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Martin, R.).
- 12 See for example Dimitris Tziouvas (ed), *Greek Diaspora and Migration since 1700: Society, Politics and Culture*, Ashgate, UK, 2009.
- 13 Janiszewski and Alexakis, 'Selling an American dream', pp. 37-40; Janiszewski and Alexakis, *In Their Own Image*, p. 106.
- 14 James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*, 1st edition, Little, Brown & Company, USA, 1931, p. 214.
- 15 Mary McDermott (nee Conway), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 4 October 2002, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: McDermott, M.).
- 16 Con Zervos, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 16 April 2002, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Zervos, C.).
- 17 Kathy (Kiriaki) Orfanos (nee Mavromattes), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 8 December 2002, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Orfanos, K.).
- 18 Maria Cominos (nee Tamvaki), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 25 November 1987, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Cominos, M.).
- 19 Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 'Shakin' the world over: the Greek-Australian milk bar', in Marietta Rossetto, *et al.*, (eds.), *Greek Research in Australia: Proceedings of the Biennial International Conference of Greek Studies, Flinders University – 2009*, Department of Languages, Modern Greek, Flinders University, Adelaide, 2011, pp. 321-322. Janiszewski and Alexakis, 'Selling an American dream', pp. 37-40.
- 20 Jack (John) Castrission, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 28 September 1986, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Castrission, J.).
- 21 Influenced by the American drug-store soda 'parlor' the 'milk bar', was created in Sydney in 1932 by a Greek-Australian, Mick Adams (Joachim Tavlarides). Milkshakes had appeared much earlier, but the 'milk bar' and the electric milkshake maker popularised the refreshment beverage. Greek cafés quickly incorporated milkshakes as an essential component. See: Janiszewski and Alexakis, 'Shakin' the world over', pp. 320-329.
- 22 Peter Prineas, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 14 July 1989, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Prineas, P.).
- 23 Janiszewski and Alexakis: 'Selling an American dream', pp.47-48.
- 24 Margaret Harrison (nee Clancy), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 17 July 2002, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Harrison, M.).
- 25 Peter Comino, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 9 December 2001, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Comino, P.).
- 26 Paul (Petros) Calokerinos, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 7 January 2002, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Calokerinos, P.).
- 27 Julie Papadonakis (nee Canaris) and Flo Liveris (nee Canaris), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 18 November 2006, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Papadonakis, J. and Liveris, F.).
- 28 Steve (Stavros) Margaritis, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 5 July 2006, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Margaritis, S.).
- 29 Electra Sofianos (nee Sarikas), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 10 May 2002, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Sofianos, E.).
- 30 For example: Anna Cominakis (nee Sofis), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 10 May 2002 tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Cominakis, A.); Joseph Toms, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 2 July 2002, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Toms, J.); Jack (John) Castrission, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 28 September 1986, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Castrission, J.); Peter (Beneto) and Jack (Ioannis) Veneris, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 13 July 2001, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives, (Ref: Veneris, P. and J.).
- 31 Art Deco is a modernist aesthetic style that expressed the notions of 'machine, travel, speed'. Although associated with the 1930s, even in 1960s Australia, 'Neo Deco' building designs, including cafés, persisted. See Janiszewski and Alexakis, 'Selling an American dream', pp. 48-49.
- 32 Jack (John) Castrission, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 28 September 1986, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Castrission, J.).
- 33 John Varvaessos, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 18 April 2007, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Varvaessos, J.).
- 34 \Con Nikakis, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 30 December 2006, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Nikakis, C.).
- 35 Peter Stratos (Hadjiefstrateou), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 21 December 2006, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Stratos, P.). 'Musicola' jukeboxes were designed and built in Melbourne between 1949 and 1963.
- 36 Irene Pantazis (nee Kanaris) and Paul Pantazis, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 21 November 2006,

- tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Pantazis, I. and P.).
- 37 Robert Buchan, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 5 June 2006, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Buchan, R.).
 - 38 Ray Barry, Denman, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 28 June 2006, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Barry, R.).
 - 39 Jim Gavrilis, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 19 April 2003, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Gavrilis, J.).
 - 40 Kathy (Kiriaki) Orfanos (nee Mavromattes), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 8 December 2002, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Orfanos, K.).
 - 41 Dr Archie Kalokerinos, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 14 April 2003, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Kalokerinos, A.).
 - 42 Peter (Beneto) and Jack (Ioannis) Veneris, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 13 July 2001, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Veneris, P. and J.).
 - 43 Coula Salagaras (nee Papayianis), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 13 November 2006, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Salagaras, C.).
 - 44 John Harris (Harkiolakis), interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 11 April 1988, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Harris, J.).
 - 45 Victor (Vrettos Benetos) Cominos, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 10 July 2006, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Cominos, V.).
 - 46 Anthony (Antonios) Flaskas, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 4 April 1989, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Flaskas, A.). See also: Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, *Images of Home: Mavri Xenitia*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1995, pp. 90-91.
 - 47 J. S. Lyng, *Non-Britishers in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1935, p. 142.
 - 48 James Ploudias, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 4 June 1989, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Ploudias, J.).
 - 49 Hsu-Ming Teo, 'Multiculturalism and the problem of multicultural histories: an overview of ethnic historiography', in Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White (eds), *Cultural History in Australia*, University of NSW Press, Sydney, 2003, p. 153.
 - 50 Dimitrios Trambas, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis, 21 April 1988, transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Trambas, D.).
 - 51 Janiszewski and Alexakis, "That bastard Ulysses", p. 21.
 - 52 Ray Barry, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 28 June 2006, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives (Ref: Barry, R.). Such sentiments were expressed by British-Australian interviewees in all states and across generations.
 - 53 Tina Loukissas, interviewed by Leonard Janiszewski, 12 July 2002, tape and transcript held by the 'In Their Own Image' Archives, (Ref: Loukissas, T.).

For the Children: memories, stories and well-being in an Indigenous community.¹

Gwenda Baker and Joanne Garngulkpuy

Abstract

This article examines an AIATSIS funded research project 'Remembering Mission Time' on Elcho Island, Northern Territory, the site of a Methodist mission from 1942-1975. Led by Gwenda Baker and Joanne Garngulkpuy, the project's aim was to put together community resources to educate children about the work of the Yolngu in establishing and developing the mission. The project was developed as a co-operative venture with the local Yalu Centre which seeks to nurture children: to explain, teach and preserve Yolngu value systems to enhance the wellbeing of the children and the community. 'Mission Time', a small part of Yolngu history, was a time of developing the building blocks of two ways of living for the present community. Yolngu who participated in the mission worked to structure their own meanings of the experience. Their lives and work, and the memories of their descendants form the basis of this project. We used written, photographic and oral history sources to explore the memories of Yolngu who lived on the island during this time.

Beginnings

Time present and time past
Are perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.²

'Remembering Mission Time' explores present and past stories to discover what is of value, to provide guidance for the future. It seeks to examine the things that happened during 'mission time': things that were not right to be acknowledged and assessed; things which can be used to increase respect for the elders, pride in Yolngu adaptability and enterprise, belief in the future. We are exploring 'the future in time past'.

How can the stories from 'mission time' help the children on Galiwin'ku? Clan elders are acutely concerned about the welfare of the children. Of a population of approximately 2500 people, 48% are under the age of 20 years. These children are healthy, active and intelligent, but to enhance their wellbeing they need to reconnect to their Indigenous past and

Indigenous elders who offer positive role models for their lives. There is a belief among the older people who remember 'mission times' that knowledge of the past, before and during mission time will help the children develop a more positive, robust sense of self. Yolngu ways of knowing and living underpin all learning and knowledge. Knowledge, understanding, self-respect are all necessary for healthy well adjusted children. Self-respect is necessary to develop respect for others, for elders, Yolngu systems of family and governance and for European systems and structures.

The stories and photographs we collected form a resource base to help the children learn more about their history, and feel pride in the achievements of their families. The Indigenous work force was essential to the establishment and development of the mission. Over time the skill level of the workers increased and most work in the town was done by Indigenous workers. The participation in town activities outside work was also high. This was a vibrant working town. Now there are very few jobs for the local population, training and employment are limited and the children face an uncertain future. Their understanding of Yolngu culture is diminishing under the influence of European cultural forces.

The Yolngu World

The Yolngu world is where we must begin. In the Yolngu world all beginnings relate to the past: times of stories and other beginnings, time before *balandas* (whites), time before missions. We must start with and return to these beginnings to put the stories we gather in the context of the social and geographical groups that are fundamental elements of Yolngu life and of the understanding of Yolngu identity. These form the basis for any consideration and construction of the past. They form the basis of methodologies which enable us to enter the present and the past and provide the tools to reflect on what is of importance to the community.

Everyone within the Yolngu community has responsibilities based on blood line roles. Different groups within the community have their own ways of dealing with problems. Some groups will act like

sharks, straight talkers with sharp teeth to stop people from doing something. Garngulkpuy as a Wangurri person has to help people from other clans work out problems.³

The Wangurri clan works from a water story, not so much a story but based on a geographical place and the function of the river. In Garngulkpuy's words, 'When the water comes down from the source it is telling me as a Wangurri person to get rid of the rubbish out of a person's mind'.⁴ As in the river, detritus gathers and swirls down to its mouth of the river and blocks the river, so the Wangurri people must get rid of the rubbish. This process addresses any issues that are bothering people.

As Garngulkpuy has stated, 'This is a process that has been there all the time and I can still feel it today. The Yolngu world has the processes to make things work. These have not been understood by the *balandas* which has led to many misunderstandings and poor governance'.⁵

Methodology

From the beginning the study was designed as a joint venture, a partnership of researchers. Garngulkpuy and Baker worked together on a previous research trip when the plans Baker made with another person appeared to have fallen through. Garngulkpuy recognized the situation and stepped in to assist. Although we had not negotiated the project at hand, she immediately agreed to be interviewed. She also set up the conditions and the people to enable the research to proceed. Her participation in other research projects was extensive, and because of this she was an ideal person to work with.

When Baker approached Garngulkpuy with this new proposal she immediately agreed, with the proviso that we structure the research using a model of Yolngu research methodology which she had developed. Garngulkpuy proposed this at the planning stage and this paper follows our use of her Methodology for Yolngu Research. The Yolngu basis for this model is built on a CRAH sponsored project which concluded that a deterioration of the general health of the community since the arrival of the *balanda* could only be addressed by a return to Yolngu value systems, ways of looking after each other and relationship to the land.⁶

Using Garngulkpuy's research methodology we refigured the original proposal into a workable project. This proved surprisingly easy. The stages made sense structurally and we could see how it would work. Baker wrote up the project according to the Methodology for Yolngu Research as follows:

(*lundu-nhina*: properly in place): Greeting, sitting down and talking with old acquaintances and new



Gwenda Baker and Joanne Garngulkpuy taking questions after their talk at the Oral History Association of Australia Biennial Conference, State Library of Victoria, October 2012.

people, sharing of stories about family and people known to everyone.

(*rom-lakaranhamirr*: reminding each other of lawful ways of doing things): Meeting people and introducing ideas about the project, discussions about the project and the processes that will be undertaken.

(*ral-mirriyanhamirr*: sharing the tasks to be done): Photographs from the mission era shared to help stimulate discussion and to focus on aspects and issues seen as important to the participants; interviews at Yalu Centre and other places.

(*ral-gama*: bringing back what we must share): preparing transcripts, assembling recordings and material.

(*rulangdhua*: putting what we have produced in place): returning transcripts, accepting corrections and additions, arranging storage of recorded interviews and transcripts.⁷

Research

Working directly with another person on equal terms in a cross cultural medium is challenging. This was a deliberate research structure and we were both determined we would make it work. The relationship was professional but required constant contact from a distance. Baker had to develop the ability to work through ideas and propositions in a verbal-dominated world which was quite different to her



Nancy Gudaltji and Joanne Garngulkpuy at the Yalu' Marnngithinyaraw Centre at Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island, N.T., looking at a photo of the old Church, June 2011. (Photo by Gwenda Baker)

own. Garngulkpuy had to adjust her verbal dexterity and memory to Baker's need to write everything down. Reflecting on the run, Baker made notes during telephone conversations. Garngulkpuy got used to the silences, asking 'Are you writing this down?' This comment had varying meanings ascertained by the inflection used.

Actual visits were busy and the whole community became aware of what we were doing. There was widespread support and interest in the project. People would stop Baker on the street and ask to see



Djindulu Garrawitja telling his story to Gwenda Baker at the Yalu' Marnngithinyaraw Centre at Galiwin'ku, June 2011. (Photo by Joanne Garngulkpuy)

photographs. She was surprised at what they knew and every encounter became an opportunity for discussion and reflection on the past. This was a very active research milieu, rich in cultural and historical exchange. Are you writing a book on Galiwin'ku history? Can you ask a missionary for photographs and stories about my grandfather who worked with him? (This from Manuel Dhurrkay, lead singer and composer for the Galiwin'ku based Saltwater Band. He wants to write a song about his grandfather and what he did during 'mission time'). Can I download (onto a memory stick) the photo of the Junior Choir and that one of Mr. Sheppy [foundation missionary Shepherdson] Community acceptance of a research project is essential to the success of a project. Community participation at this voluntary level of genuine interest is absolutely priceless.

For the elders at Galiwin'ku the project gave a space and momentum to discussions about the past and the future: people talked about this all the time. They asked how did we get to this present situation and what can we do to improve the future for our children? Apart from the future of the children, questions of governance are paramount in their thinking. The assumption of control by the missionaries disrupted established forms of governance with long effects on the stability of the people. The moving together of groups in one geographical area also caused long ranging effects of contested ownership of land after the missionaries left. Now other European-Australians control the town and their lives and the Yolngu want this power back.

In the preliminary discussion period, before the interviews could start, Baker asked the women in the group if they had made up any songs when the missionaries came. She had been to a performance of the Tiwi Women's Choir at the Darwin Festival, and was fascinated by the 'contact songs' they had written and performed. She knew some contact songs from the mission era at Elcho Island, like the school song to the tune of 'Men of Harlech' that the old 'Junior Choir' sang at the 40th Anniversary of the opening of Shepherdson College. The Yalu women knew more. They nominated certain women who could sing certain songs, and were keen to record the ones they knew.

As the singing started more women arrived and joined in. This was not a direction nominated in the research plan but we recorded a number of songs over a number of days. It was fun for everyone. Singing and music were two of the most positive memories of the mission era. Individual conductors are named, the choir members can still remember the music and words of the old songs and hymns, and there are stories about going to eisteddfods in Darwin and Perth. A recording of the choir was also made during this time. The songs and singing will form the basis of further research. The experience was a valuable way of bridging the cultural gap between a white researcher and the Yolngu women.

The women were an invaluable source of information about people and occupations during mission time. In earlier interviews we were struck by how people located themselves in the mission landscape by the roles they had occupied in the work force. From the women we soon had a list of builders including some still alive who might be interested in the interviewing process. They also told of a building still standing on his outstation Howard Island that was erected by the first Indigenous builder Stephen Bunbatjun, filling another gap in the mission landscape. The building industry during mission times provided work for many people. Indigenous workers cut and collected timber on the mainland and the islands. These consisted of small gangs of men who worked unsupervised for several days at a time. Some men talked about bringing the logs across water, standing on the logs as they moved towards shore. Building was a priority and experienced workers could plan, set out and build houses with their own gangs and minimum supervision.

Baker and Garngulkpuy's first lengthy interview was with venerated Wangurri elder and ordained Church leader Timothy Buthimang. A direct descendent of one of the Yolngu who travelled with the first missionary from Milingimbi to Elcho Island in 1942, at the age of 17 Buthimang was chosen by the missionary to become a gardener because of his interest and abilities. He went on to become the chief mission gardener and has worked in and trained many other Yolngu in gardening skills for over 50 years. Buthimang wants his story told through modern electronic means all over the world.

In contrast our second lengthy interview was with respected senior Dorothy Bepuka Garrawitja, who wants her recordings for her grandchildren to listen to 'after I am gone'. Again the recordings are for posterity, but for a specific family audience. Bepuka spoke on a wide range of topics. She was greatly affected by the photos of the activities the children participated in during 'mission time', keeping them engaged and happy.

Some specific questions we used for all interviewees included which groups and families the people identified themselves with, where they came from, and why they came to the mission. Interviewees such as Djindulu Garrawitja could recount their full work history on the mission and make comparisons with the new lot of *balandas* who came after the missionaries, and their hopes and fears for the younger generations.

Across the interviewees there was a sense of self-esteem from the work they did. There was also a sense of excitement in trying new things and new jobs within the mission framework. Dorothy Yangathu Ganambarr recounted her jobs on the mission in great detail and with pride. Yangathu captained a women-only crew on a fishing boat and fixed the engine when it broke



Yangathu (Left) telling her story to Joanne Garngulkpuy (with Yurrandjil) at the Yalu' Marnnggithinyaraw Centre at Galiwin'ku, June 2011. (Photo by Gwenda Baker)

down at sea. She worked in the large mission garden and baked bread and scones in the new bake house for the missionaries. You could follow her directions for making bread and produce a good product.

Outcomes

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.⁸

Outcomes are about looking backwards and forwards, seeking explanations and directions and future options. Outcomes are seen in a longer perspective than fulfilling the terms of a research project. Some of the outcomes of the research grant project are tick list outcomes. Have we followed the right protocols (Yolngu, grant committee and university)? Is the distribution appropriate (gender, age groups, clan groups, occupations in mission times)? Have we conducted interviews with enough people (15 nominated)? Have we included other explorations of the topic (music recordings)? Have we collected enough photographs and written the paper we promised? The wider outcomes are less precise, more fluid. There are still more stories to collect; who will do these, how will they be stored and distributed? There are more photographs to collect. How do we get the missionaries to surrender the photographs that the people need to reconnect with family members and to tell their story? We have more lines of enquiry to pursue as researchers, such as governance, ethics and control of research. We are mapping research options that reach for wider participation and outcomes. The 'end' of the project is but an arbitrary point in time and space. There is an expectation that our journey will continue: *the end as a beginning*.



Aboriginal carpenters working on a house at Galiwin'ku, circa 1965. (Photo courtesy of Jim Henderson)

In discussing the desired results of our work, we see multi-dimensional outcomes beginning with the research itself, as against a more rigid definition of outcomes. A researcher experienced in interacting with the Yolngu world, Michael Christie, discusses the concept of 'outcomes' explaining that the process of investigating, talking about and documenting are all part of the outcomes for the Yolngu researcher, not just a carefully constructed set of findings and propositions.⁹ In his terms 'the "rightness" of the research was already being performed as soon as the research began'. He uses the measures of Goodman and Elgin who move from the concepts of 'truth, certainty and knowledge' to 'rightness, adoption and understanding'. For Goodman and Elgin 'rightness, unlike truth is multidimensional'.¹⁰

The binary opposition of rightness and truth is not a position that we would adopt, rather we propose that there are a multiplicity of outcomes and truths that need to fit within both worlds, Yolngu and European, beginning with the Yolngu world. Goodman and Elgin's concept of 'rightness' is established within the Yolngu research methodology. If the methodology is right then it will follow that the outcomes will start at the beginning of the research, and will have meaning and value because the process of research follows an agreed, culturally appropriate pathway.

The first two parts of the Methodology for Yolngu Research immediately starts a process of grounding the research in fundamental relationships and the sharing of information: 'lundu-nhina: properly in place: Greeting, sitting down and talking with old acquaintances and new people, sharing of stories about family and people known to everyone. Rom-lakaranhamirr: reminding each other of lawful ways of doing things: meeting people and introducing ideas about the project, discussions about the project and the processes that will be undertaken'.

There are immediate outcomes because people have the opportunity to discuss their priorities and concerns. Discussion and decision making are part of the desirable outcomes in a Yolngu context. The centering of the research in this way allows for ownership of the research to pass from white researchers to the people who will provide the substance of the research. The task then is to combine and adapt the research aims and desired outcomes to accommodate the project demands and peoples' concerns about a wider landscape of the research activity that is discussed.

Other processes are also taking place. Older women and men construct elaborate stories to tell the younger generations about the photos and the life they represent. There are stories about people, occupations, activities, and the contrast with the current situation in the town. The past, 'mission time', is being assembled by the Yolngu to suit their purposes. Baker's knowledge of Yolngu language is limited, so her ability to 'report back' on these informal teaching and learning situations is constrained. She knows enough to get a sense of the narrative and to realize that this process is as valid as writing down a precise report of what is being said. The adults' discourse is didactic: teaching, moralizing, comparing 'mission time' to the present. The careful weaving of important people and themes into the conversation ensures that the children's concentration is intense.

The gathering of stories and photographs of 'mission time' is placed in the wider concerns of the health and welfare of the children and the adults' need to examine the history of the town in relation to Yolngu law and value systems and concerns about governance, law and order and the future of the community. These too will continue with local people pursuing their own agendas, making sense of what we have done, arranging and rearranging the pieces according to their understanding and organization of the past and future.

The wider uptake by people with their questions and interest in the material we were gathering was one of the most important outcomes of our project. Discussing old times, locating buildings and industries and the most important of all, working their family members into the story line keeps the stories alive, brings more information and apportions greater ownership to the stories. The images we have assembled feed into the story; the story is told and passed on to others as all stories are passed around. Our research activity has helped to keep the story alive, to activate memories and to allow for the re-working of these memories.

Local activity in recording and storing information compliments and enhances our work. The Galiwin'ku monthly paper *Galiwin'kupuy Dhawu* (Galiwin'ku Story) includes stories of old people assembled by the home care workers. These appear under the heading: 'Celebrating Our Old People'.¹¹ Subsequent to our

research activities there has been a resurgence of interest in the activities of ‘mission time’, culminating in an extensive report on the Fishing Industry in the paper.¹² Interviews have been conducted with some of the same people we interviewed and appear under headings such as ‘Present, Past and Future, Richard Ghandawuy talks about Mission days, the future and homelands’.¹³

The gathering of photographs had a great boost with the 40th Anniversary of the school, Shepherdson College, in 2010. Many mission teachers returned their photographs through modern electronic means, paper and artifacts of school and mission life. Retired School Principal Kaye Thurlow, now a Town Councilor and Deputy President of the East Arnhem Shire Council, and Margaret Millar from the Translation Centre, put together DVDs and the school produced and sold class photographs to ex-students. Thurlow also ran a three day workshop on mission times making use of the interest shown in the *Galiwin’kupuy Dhawu* articles, and drawing together many of the participants in our project. These people talked about many of the concerns they articulated in our interviews. School children made videos of elders talking about the old times, cultural principles of respect and behavioural expectations. A library has been established at Galiwin’ku with access to the old photographs as part of its service.¹⁴

As our work continues well past the ‘end’ of the research project, the interviews and old photographs are ready for depositing in the AIATSIS archives, and a book of interviews with those who have agreed to publish and share their stories is nearly ready to return to these people for comment and suggestions. Garngulkpuy has translated most interviews conducted in Yolngu *matha* (language). These English translations will be combined with stories in Yolngu *matha*, in a language that is understood and used by most members of the community. Photographs of the participants are combined with photographs from the past that reflect the story lines: mission gardens, logging, houses built by the builders, the bake house, the saw mill, and the locations of other activities. Publication is still not organized, but the Media Centre at Galiwin’ku which produces the local newspaper is gradually moving to a Yolngu-based workforce.¹⁵ In time the Media Centre will be able to issue larger, more elaborate publications. This is where we hope to publish a book for a local readership: keeping and returning stories and photographs to the people.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Notes
An earlier version of this paper was given by Gwenda Baker and Joanne Garngulkpuy at the OHAA Biennial Conference State Library of Victoria, October 2011.
- 2 T.S. Elliot: *Four Quartets* Burnt Norton, 1.
- 3 Joanne Garngulkpuy, from transcript of paper presented at the OHAA Biennial Conference in October 2011.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 ‘Methodology for Yolngu Research’ Joanne Garngulkpuy and Elaine Lawurrpa for the First Language Community Harmony Project with Lorna Murakami-Gold, Terry Dunbar and Michael Christie, CDU, 2005. learnline.cdu.edu.au/yolngustudies/.
- 7 Using ‘Methodology for Yolngu Research’, headings/categories.
- 8 T.S. Elliot: *Four Quartets* Little Gidding, I.
- 9 Michael Christie, ‘Transdisciplinary Research and Aboriginal Knowledge’, *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, Vol. 35, 2006, p 87.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 ‘Celebrating Our Old People Cookie Wulambar’, *Galiwin’kupuy Dhawu*, December 2010, page 5, digifim.com.au.
- 12 *Galiwin’kupuy Dhawu*, September 2011, page 1, 6-7, digifim.com.au.
- 13 *Galiwin’kupuy Dhawu*, October 2011, page 1, page 3, digifim.com.au.
- 14 The library has now closed and the people are campaigning (again) for a proper Knowledge Centre.
- 15 The newspaper is no longer published but the Media Centre is still operating.

Communities of memory? The Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre, Melbourne

Michele Langfield

Abstract

The Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre (JHC), Melbourne, opened in 1984. Through the support of large numbers of Jewish people, it has become an important part of their lives as they age, a place of solace and memorialisation. It is a second home for some, providing networking support within and between the different Jewish ethnic communities. This paper will draw on the JHC's ever growing videotestimony collection as well as oral interviews on the roles played by Melbourne survivor volunteers and others in developing the Centre. The survivors have experienced many different aspects of the Holocaust, have come from all over Europe and elsewhere, and are sometimes culturally very different. It will discuss the role played by the various social and cultural communities in creating and responding to the JHC and the success they have had in establishing 'communities of memory' or, alternatively, representing and contextualising the various social and cultural communities.

Introduction

Since 2003, with the financial support of an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant, I have been part of a group of researchers analysing videotestimonies of Holocaust survivors who settled in Melbourne. Our book, called *Testifying to the Holocaust*, edited by Pam Maclean, Dvir Abramovich and myself, was published in 2008.¹ Since then, a research team with a slightly modified membership has been writing the broader history of the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre in Melbourne, which opened in 1984. Throughout this article, this institution will be referred to as the JHC or the Centre.

The paper was written specifically for the 17th National Conference of the Oral History Association of Australia (OHAA), held in Melbourne from 6 to 9 October 2011. The theme was 'Communities of Memory'. Most presentations focused on catastrophes, human disasters and their aftermath: droughts, floods,

persecution, wars, on-going trauma etc. The survivors often formed groups, preserved special places and shared their life stories through oral history. Stories were also documented to give the chance for others to discover unknown histories. Through the testimonies of other survivors, we can understand the importance of these life stories for future generations.

From the perspective of the JHC, the preservation of memory serves multiple functions which mission statements over the years have included, for example:

- to honour the memory of Jewish victims;²
- to convey the experience of survivors;³
- to create a resource for research and education for both the Jewish and wider community;
- to counter denial of the Holocaust;
- to promote tolerance in the wider Australian community.

The JHC's mission statement later became more general, such as:

- The JHC is an institution dedicated to the memory of the six million Jews who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945, and
- We consider the finest memorial to all victims of racist policies to be an educational program which aims to combat anti-Semitism, racism and prejudice in the community and foster understanding between people.⁴

What is the JHC for and how do we preserve the survivor memories and overall message to others? How successful has it been in establishing 'communities of memory' or, alternatively, in representing the experiences of various other social and cultural communities? As the Holocaust survivors age, has forgetting their experiences been more prevalent than remembering? This oral history project is based on the answers to such key questions through the opinions of survivors who, over the years, have had a close

relationship with the JHC and, of those, the ones who could be contacted so many years later and are still able to tell their stories. Jewish museums all over the world are also collecting life stories through oral and video testimonies.⁵

Stan Marks, (producer of two major books on the JHC⁶) alerts us to the views of Eva Hoffman who wrote that:

[T]he Holocaust, for evident reasons, has become the paradigm of traumatic collective memory – indeed, the model of current collective thinking about memory altogether. The second generation’s task is not only to honour and remember, but to think about the past strenuously and to investigate memory rigorously.⁷

Recent research by Victorians has been facilitated by evolving technology.

To retain anonymity, survivors’ surnames will no longer be used. In 1984, Bono, born in Lodz, Poland, became founder and co-president of the JHC, while Aron worked with people from the Kadima, the Centre for Jewish Culture in Melbourne, until his death in 1995. Aron and Mina represented various aspects of the Centre while Saba played an important role as the first voluntary curator from late 1984 to 2001 when she retired. Saba established the remodeled exhibition and the official opening of the much enlarged museum was in 1990. She says she ‘still has information pertaining to the earlier days. The exhibition that constituted the museum, as well as the temporary exhibitions, was the work of my initiative, my ten fingers and with the assistance of a small number of volunteers’.⁸

Bono and his brother Pinche arrived in Australia from Germany in 1950, and were members of the Bund.⁹ For them, the main purpose of the Centre was commemoration, to remember, and light a candle. They wanted to commemorate their parents, buried in the ghetto in Lodz. Although he no longer worked at the Centre, Pinche wanted the institution to progress and ‘to let history be shown’ through the museum display and survivor guides. Part of the process of commemoration in the early days included remembering Jewish culture and the destruction of the whole of Jewish life. They were keen to teach others what had happened through an exhibition.¹⁰

Anne, a Polish Jew, was at the JHC when it was opened by Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1984. She was born in England where she spent the war but half her parents’ families died in the Holocaust.¹¹ She came to Australia in 1959. Much later, after her husband had died, a friend suggested that she visit the JHC. She began as a volunteer in 1985, working four days most weeks as a book keeper, then on a computer. She also assisted in the ‘Archives’ where there was a large amount of material. She tried to obtain as much information as she could about the various photos, documents and objects

that people had contributed. Anne believed in keeping alive the memory of those who died. In her interview in 2009, we asked her what her own feelings were for the Centre over the last 25 years. She explained that many of the guides were no longer survivors; they were trained people mostly from later generations. The JHC had become a social meeting place where they were picked up and taken home after a lunch or informal occasion once a fortnight. Anne refers to the many groups within the JHC today, some long standing like the Child Survivors’ Group, and another for the second generation of survivors now in their sixties or older, which had only been in existence for about two years at the time of Anne’s interview.¹²

Anne also acknowledged the remarkable volunteer guides and donations from supporters, (not always Jewish), for upgrading the buildings and equipment. Phillip, the Head of the Testimonies Department, and others were and still are, very devoted to the JHC. Without such people, it would not exist or not as effectively.¹³ We asked what would happen when there were no survivors left. Anne responded disparagingly:

Eventually, it will just be a museum. I think it’s a very good one, considerable, because having seen the museum in Israel which is remarkable, I think that this one here is very good. ... This is a very fine museum, but it’s very cold. It’s a museum. Initially, the number of survivors that helped it, that’s what made it, because the number of survivors in Melbourne was very large and many helped the museum and wanted to make it their memorial. To them it was a commemorative place. They’re dying out. To the Jewish people it’s a very holy place.¹⁴

Anne obviously recognized the diversity of the JHC’s supporters and the value of the survivor guides.

On these issues, Saba, who began volunteering as a guide in September 1984, emphasizes that the JHC was always spoken of by the volunteers as ‘our museum’.¹⁵ There has been a strong sense of ownership and belonging over the last twenty-five years. Saba and others also felt that the Museum was a memorial even though they appreciated the need to have guidance in educating school children about the Holocaust. The exhibition is effective and ‘the feedback is colossal’, she reports about the first exhibition. ‘It does what it’s meant to do. For the Jewish community it has not just been an acknowledgement, but a verification and conservation of what happened’.¹⁶ This is what the JHC meant to many Jews in Melbourne, along with a strong sense of comradeship amongst the volunteers from its early years.

Several years ago, Ruth offered to volunteer as an Education Officer at the JHC.¹⁷ She drew up a list of Victorian schools and sent them material. School children benefitted from her work, which was very

popular. Ruth was involved for at least 12 years. The interviewers asked her who the Centre was for and who it served. Ruth explained that survivors wanted to help; they turned up every week and learnt on the job. They wanted to ask her every month about various issues. They got a name for themselves in the Jewish, then in the general, community. They were very enthusiastic and received all the support they needed from Aron and Bono who supported them and had a profile in the community. In the early days, the JHC was little known but it quickly gained a name, and a place on the map. This handful of people did it, she emphasizes. There was nothing else binding them. They came from different backgrounds and their survival experiences were diverse. Nonetheless, they were a 'community'. They always had a brief overview of the war issues, then a film, then one or more survivors speaking about their war experiences. Then they would all go downstairs and look at the exhibition. Survivor guides would show them around, a routine which lasted many years. That's what they devised as the education program and often the same schools came year after year. The guides would also go out to schools and normally Ruth went with them. The schools were very eager for them to come as the relationship was close and a type of community also existed in that realm.¹⁸

The responses from Jewish students were often less enthusiastic than those of the non-Jewish students since the former were taught these issues anyway. The situation improved but no one could replace what the survivor guides had to tell; they were there at a very early stage. Ruth regarded them as special groups of people. She was a volunteer herself and talked to the others constantly about the education program. She had a sense of duty to the memories of the survivors of the families they had lost but they also had their own lives to live with children, grandchildren and other interests. Nonetheless, the number of visitors grew over the years to several thousands. For example, in 2011 they had 20,000 school children and 6,000 other visitors coming through.¹⁹ Sometimes the survivors went on too long in their testimonies and were encouraged to speak only about their own experiences. They were not allowed to speak about hearsay, hatred or the politics of Israel. Once this was understood, everyone complied. They did start talking about Indigenous issues and also about other places of conflict or catastrophe, reflecting parts of the mission statement. Overall though, Ruth felt this picture of the survivors was misunderstood.²⁰

Henri's introduction to the JHC came via a request to do a testimony. He had done three other testimonies (one as a child) and written an autobiography. He explains that the idea of 'child survivors' is a relatively recent concept of the 1980s.²¹ It was widely accepted that children under fifteen were not affected by living through the Holocaust. It was expected that children like Henri would not have understood, therefore

would not have suffered. This is what he was given to understand. He appreciated that his parents had gone through terrible times but at fifteen he realised that he had a life ahead, and was young enough to brush it off. This was what his testimony taught him but he rarely made an issue of it. Others in his situation also suppressed or rarely talked about their experiences.

Nonetheless, a Child Survivors' Group was formed at the JHC which met informally and members told their stories to each other, in a separate 'community'. They met with a psychiatrist on hand, Paul, a child survivor himself, but many were unaware of the trauma their parents had gone through. People in this group mostly felt relieved to tell their stories, and be able to talk about their past. More women took part than men and the members were mostly Hungarian. The founder of this group was also Hungarian, unlike most of the other Jews associated with the JHC who were predominantly Poles. Indeed, many child survivors felt they did not fit into the group owing to ethnic and social divisions which were causing rifts. For example, several were French or Belgian. Henri acknowledges that the JHC community was largely Polish but this particular space for child survivors seemed to be predominantly from other countries, such as Hungary. Hence, from his child survivor's perspective, this was not a 'community of memory' for all; it had its internal ethnic and political groupings.²²

Henri explains that although everyone was invited to come, there were differences and social disconnections which made people, like the Lithuanians, feel left out. So there were social problems which were difficult to overcome. The leaders of the Child Survivors' Group allowed you to speak, Henri reports, but the languages and accents were different, even though they spoke Yiddish. Despite the fact that the JHC provided a place of consolation for all Jews, survivors and their families and friends had their ethnic and cultural differences and so did not always constitute close 'communities of memory'.²³

The survivors of Bialystok have a commemoration each year and the survivors from Lodz commemorate the liquidation of the ghetto every year. 'Indeed, the whole Jewish community commemorates "Yom Hashoah" (Holocaust day) every year. This is to remember the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto which took place on 19 April 1943 where a small number of Jews resisted the German might. It is a date marked in the Jewish calendar for Jews everywhere.'²⁴

Another issue Anne mentioned was to get sponsors for the Centre and more formally, a group called 'The Friends' emerged. Sponsorship was necessary for the Centre to survive and carry out its mission. These cohorts of supporters for the Centre organise social events together representing groups of people with something in common. Henri argues that the culture

is changing; the JHC is becoming all-encompassing, even to the extent of encouraging non-Jewish people to join them, or anyone who has suffered some form of discrimination. They want it to be a Museum of the Holocaust but approachable by everyone. Henri now knows that he wasn't alone, but admits that quite a few child survivors (mostly women) would only speak with other child survivors in their group, not to everyone. He argues that their stories must also be told.²⁵

Claude had previously been permanently employed twice but not at the JHC.²⁶ Getting to the end of paid employment, he looked for an avenue for volunteering. Having decided that the JHC was an excellent choice, he joined the organisation as a volunteer. For over nine years he volunteered and was then put back on the payroll. From 2009, he was doing 22 hours a week of paid employment, working in the JHC archives. Ursula, already Head of the Archives Department, was very happy to accept him as a volunteer and then a worker. He was also asked to do the accreditation paper work for the museum and then reaccreditation of the whole organisation. He was mainly involved with the cataloguing of the materials donated by people over the years.

In his interview we asked Claude what the importance of the Centre was to him. He answered that he was a child of the Holocaust, born in France in 1941 and, together with his parents, was hidden and saved by French farmers. He lost family members however; his grandparents perished in the Holocaust. His involvement has been to live for their memories and make sure that future generations are aware of what happened and try to ensure that it doesn't happen again. I asked him directly who he thought the Centre was for. He answered that it was for the public and also for those who established the Museum. In his view the public meant the students who came to the museum and it was important to teach them about the events of the Holocaust to ensure their support and avoid a recurrence. He stressed that they must make sure that their voices are heard by combating anti-Semitism and racism.²⁷ His commitment to the JHC was very clear.

I asked him if this mission had changed over the years, or if it had a different focus at any time. He said no and especially in relation to the Archives. He hoped the large amount of material being collected and donated will be accessed and used for research. This was its primary purpose. He explained the management structure to us. Firstly, the JHC had a Board and a President. It had a Director and an Executive Director and each of the Departments had a Head. And then there are paid people who worked under those Heads of Departments and then there were the volunteers. At the time the professional people were far outnumbered by the guides but as the Museum established itself, it has put itself on a professional level, and for those people it has had to pay. In Claude's view, in every area

there would have to be one paid professional, maybe two. The volunteers would still be the major way of transmitting information. Even when the volunteers died out, he argued that owing to the technology that's been acquired, there would still be equipment to put their information on record. Claude assured us that the volunteers today are being trained and are not necessarily survivors although most are Jewish. The JHC is a member of Museums Australia and, according to Claude, the new guides are getting the right training. In these ways it is a 'community of memory'.

When Claude was asked whether they had enough material to do the job of both anti-Semitism and anti-racism, he was doubtful. Much valuable material disappeared or was thrown out by relatives who do not know the languages or importance of the material being destroyed. I asked if the JHC could function without a universalist philosophy, given the role of the Centre in Holocaust history and other museums doing much the same thing. He again suggested Museums Australia but pointed out that they must keep very much to their own area of archives. He emphasized that:

[T]he Museum had a very clear mission statement and should stick to it and whatever they did should accord with that mission statement. The current mission statement is to combat anti-Semitism and racism and ensure that the memory of the six million who died is not forgotten.²⁸

He thinks that everything should be done methodically and that the Museum is set up with exhibitions and especially there should be upgrading to bring the museum's exhibitions up to modern standards. Again their background is crucial and that's why it's so important.

I asked Claude what he thinks is special in today's work at the JHC. He replied that the special meaning of the Centre is the fact that its education is manned by its Holocaust survivors and when they all pass away, their archives will be used continually to educate future generations. That is because it's a Holocaust Museum, not a museum for Jews in general. They form links with Jewish Museums Australia but although it is only in Australia, there are views that the two have to be kept separate.

I also asked Claude how efficient the JHC has been in fulfilling aspects of its mission over the last 25 years. He thought that the number of visitors to the Museum each year and the proportion of students in that number was a good indicator. The Centre encourages survivor family donations to make the story as authentic as it can be. He said:

After all, they set it up, it's their Museum, and it has become more professional over time; the Museum display was upgraded in 2010. Increasing multiculturalism is more important today than ever,

and the people who died in the Holocaust still need to be remembered. We must modernize, keep in the 21st century, attract students, and use the most modern technology.²⁹

In Claude's view, the JHC fits into the broader sense of Jewish culture and memory through the recognition of its being one of the most important Holocaust museums in the world.

Geri volunteered at the JHC in 1994 and was very committed to it.³⁰ She had heard about the Oral History Project and been to see Phillip. She explained to him at the time that she was interested in doing some interviewing. Her father was a Holocaust survivor so she had some degree of understanding and was trained by Pauline and Rae. Phillip was always set up with the camera at the back of the room and Geri's role was always with the audio-visual recording, rather than simply an oral interview. Sitting in on their interviews, Geri learnt a lot just by listening and taking notes about the style of questioning, especially allowing the survivors to talk. Over time she developed her own particular style. At the time, there were meetings every month in the evenings held by Phillip, sometimes with fifteen people. These debriefing sessions sometimes led to lengthy discussions of deep involvement. She felt it was right for her to stay there.³¹

We asked her about the importance of the JHC to her and the length of time and nature of her association. For thirteen years she was there regularly but then sadly, the survivors died or the Centre ran out of survivors to interview others, causing a lull for a couple of years. Subsequently, at the start of 2011, Geri came back. Between 1994 and 2012, there had only been a recent gap of three years in Geri's interviewing which shows great commitment on her part and willingness to be a member of a 'community' group.

We asked Geri about the importance of the JHC to her personally or collectively. She paused for some time and sighed, then said that it was important to have a *place*, an actual building that houses survivors and everything that goes with them. She thought it was really about memory and a home for the survivors and their records. She was speaking collectively. For the survivors to have a place that they can call their own, represents their survival and their very existence. A place they can share, where they can educate other people, must mean a lot to them in the light of 'communities of memory'. She sees survivors feeling very much at home there. She finds it a joy to sit in the tea room where they have their breaks in their departments and come together. Conversation might start about what they are doing at the week-end but it always ends up back in Auschwitz or back home or with their parents. The memories of their families are probably the most difficult thing for them aside from their own struggles and survival. She thinks the loss of family members is the largest

problem for them and that's why they always end up talking about it.

The Centre for Geri was a place she could also call home in the sense that she grew up under the dark shadow of her father's struggles. Even though he wasn't obsessed with them, they were there, and she always felt for his losses. Thus for her also, the Centre is a place that validates their survival. Later generations, like her father, went often to Acland Street, St. Kilda (a suburb of Melbourne where Jews congregate in cafes), but he still gave a testimony at the Holocaust Centre. Geri says:

I just feel for the survivors – this is not about me – I've always thought that these survivors, each and every one of them, in their own way, are to be admired and celebrated, and irrespective of whether they're good people or generous people or bad people or whatever, I just feel that, for them, to have a Centre called the Holocaust Centre, they deserve at least *that* ... It's a recognition and a validation of Holocaust survivors. So I look at them as a group of people and I think that as a group they are to be acknowledged and celebrated and given respect. But then the individual testimony situation which I've had the privilege of, has enabled me to validate individuals rather than just the group.³²

The case then is not always 'a community of memory'.

I asked Pauline (at the time of writing, President of the Board of the JHC), what the JHC meant to her as a person.³³ She responded:

Beyond even having to come to terms with it, I couldn't grasp it. I think of my father who came from Berlin and survived Nazi Germany and fortunately came to Australia in 1938. It wasn't until the Shoah Foundation came into being that I understood that some people between 1933 and 1945 were affected by Nazi policy; that's a survivor.³⁴ And there are different levels obviously. And something drew me. Through my life, what is it I wanted to understand? Coming here, when I came in to do the testimonies, it was like, yes, I can do something; I can feel empowered, because I'm able to contribute on a *real* level and - I'm not being clichéd - I could come in here, I could do something with these testimonies. They're going to be here. I'm building up working with the survivors. I have the greatest respect for the survivors; they've taught *me* so much and to be with them I'm often in awe at how they've put their lives together. It was very important. So *that* for me is the *place* for me.³⁵

But it's also when I see what it does for people. They can come in as volunteer Willy says: 'I haven't got a gravestone, I haven't got a marker.' This is for me where I can remember my family. This is the point of commemoration. It makes it

(the JHC) a place, and in some ways, even a holy place. I guess for me it was just that path of my life where everything made sense. This was what I'm here to do. I've seen the power of it for me. I've seen it for other people. I've seen not all survivors but many survivors who find this difficult.³⁶

Conclusion

These are just some of the reasons why Melbourne Holocaust survivors, their descendants, friends and others, come together at the JHC as a place representing a 'community of memory' (singular), or 'communities of memories' (plural), places depicted as positive or negative. The testimonies drawn upon here reveal that the significance of the JHC can be influenced by the givers of the information whether it is survivors, survivor/volunteers, non-survivor volunteers, paid employees who are survivors, board members who are survivors or children of survivors, and many others. This may affect the significance of the survivors or others. It is important to note that a person's connection to the JHC can change radically over time. One may be very closely involved in it for some years, but at other times not, depending on the current situation and particular feelings. Connections are varied and fluent. Another point to consider is the extent to which we are dealing with a 'community of memory' or 'communities of memories' as this implies connections between those doing the remembering. This of course brings up numerous questions about forgetting and the implications of this.

For many Jewish people in Melbourne, the JHC has become an important part of their lives and, as they age, a place of solace and memorialisation. It is, in fact, a second home for some, providing networking support within and between the various Jewish ethnic communities. The premise of this paper is how significant the JHC has become for those who have been involved in it over time. This article has drawn on the JHC's own oral and video archives, especially some recent interviews conducted by our research team at Deakin University on the roles played by some of the Melbourne survivor volunteers and paid staff. The interviews largely indicate a very close relationship in terms of developments over time. The interviews focus on how the Centre has developed and is now viewed. Holocaust survivors and their many different experiences, have come from all over Europe and elsewhere, and are sometimes culturally and politically very different. Nonetheless, the Centre has become a place hosting 'communities of memory' for regular meetings of various kinds, especially those we call child survivors and second and third generation organisations and groupings.³⁷ Much of the history and aims of the JHC have been shaped, supported and upheld by the staff and volunteers who are linked to the Centre.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Pam Maclean, Michele Langfield and Dvir Abramovich (eds), *Testifying to the Holocaust*, Australian Association of Jewish Studies, Sydney, 2008.
- 2 See Nanette Auerhahn and Dori Laub, 'Holocaust Testimony', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1990, for the centrality of ritual performance and reenactment in Jewish traditions of remembering, p.457.
- 3 Phillip Maisel, 'The Holocaust Testimonies' in Stan Marks (ed), *10 Years Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre Melbourne, 1984-1994*, Jewish Holocaust and Research Centre, Melbourne, Elsternwick, 1994, p.24.
- 4 In 2011, the Jewish Holocaust Centre Mission Statement could be found at <http://www.jhc.org.au/about-the-centre.html>
- 5 See Judith Berman, 'Australian Representations of the Holocaust: Jewish Holocaust Museums in Melbourne, Perth and Sydney, 1984-1996', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, V13 N2, Fall 1999, pp.200-221.
- 6 Stan Marks (ed.), *10 Years. Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre, Melbourne, 1984-1994*, Jewish Holocaust and Research Centre, Melbourne, 1994 and Stan Marks (ed.), *Reflections 20 Years 1984-2004*, Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre Inc., Melbourne, 2004.
- 7 Stan Marks' editorial *Centre News*, Vol. 27, No. 1, April/May 2005, See pp. 1, 12, 21, 24 and 26.
- 8 Personal communication with Saba, 9 March 2012. See also Marks, *10 Years*, p.57.
- 9 The Bund, short for Jewish Labour Bund, was a Jewish socialist movement in Poland. See Judith E. Berman, *Holocaust Remembrance in Australian Jewish Communities, 1945-2000*, University of Western Australian Press, 2001, p. 27.
- 10 Interview with Pinche (who died in 2012) by Pam Maclean and Andrea Witcomb, 19 May 2009.
- 11 Stan Marks (ed.), *10 Years. Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre, Melbourne, 1984-1994*, Jewish Holocaust and Research Centre, Melbourne, 1994, p.53.
- 12 Interview with Anne by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 24 July 2009.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Interview with Anne by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 24 July 2009.
- 15 Interview with Saba by Andrea Witcomb and Linda Young, 28 April 2009.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Stan Marks (ed.) *10 Years. Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre Melbourne, 1984-1994*, p.60.
- 18 Interview with Ruth by Pam Maclean and Bill Anderson, 5 May, 2009.
- 19 Personal Communication from Willy, 7 March 2012.
- 20 Interview with Ruth by Pam Maclean and Bill Anderson, 5 May, 2009.
- 21 Interview with Henri by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 6 October 2010.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Contribution from Saba, 9 March 2012.
- 25 Ibid.

- 26 Interview with Claude by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 9 July 2009.
- 27 Interview with Claude by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 9 July 2009. Direct quotations have been used where possible but much of the material is paraphrased.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Interview with Geri, by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 8 April 2011.
- 31 The Spielberg Foundation is the USC Shoah Foundation Institute collection of 52,000 videotaped Holocaust testimonies. The entire collection is available for viewing at YadVashem's Visual Center at www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/visual_center/usc.asp.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Pauline, interviewed by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield at the JHC, on 6 May 2011.
- 34 The Shoah Foundation is an organization that was formed to further the remembrance of the Holocaust of World War II.
- 35 Pauline, interviewed by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield at the JHC, on 6 May 2011.
- 36 Ibid. (Note Willy's quote within Pauline's.) See also Willy in Centre News, Vol.26, No.3, December 2004, pp.14-15, where he describes *A Day in a Guide's Life at the Centre*.
- 37 Bono Wiener and Shmuel Rosenkranz, 'Our Work is even more important Now. Ten Memorable Years' in Stan Marks (ed), *10 Years. Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre, Melbourne, 1984-1994*, Jewish Holocaust and Research Centre, Melbourne, Elsternwick, 1994, p.11.

From the cradle to the grave: Sister Lindsey and the blind babies' nursery

Judy McKinty and Margaret Tomkins

Abstract:

From the Cradle to the Grave: Sister Lindsey and the Blind Babies' Nursery is about an oral history project to document a part of the history of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (now Vision Australia) not previously recorded. The project documented the stories of several of the people who, as children, spent the earliest years of their lives in the Blind Babies' Nursery under the care of Sister Elizabeth Lindsey, the first Matron. The first child admitted to the Nursery was two years old, and others arrived as babies. Under the loving care of Sister Lindsey and her Nurses, the children were given opportunities to learn and grow together, and to take their first steps towards realising their potential as independent adults. Several of the children from this group went on to achieve remarkable success in their chosen fields, and the members of this cohort have remained close friends throughout their lives – truly a 'community of memory'.

Background to the project

The Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (RVIB) Nursery was established in 1933, during the Great Depression. It was a residential nursery for children from infancy to school age. At that time, the need for funds was particularly pressing, as the RVIB was a charity, relying heavily on the public for financial support. Blind babies were a significant attraction when fundraising, and many professional photographs were taken for this purpose. Back then, the concept of 'from the cradle to the grave' underpinned the thinking when planning services. Consequently, the nursery, school, sheltered workshop, hostels and aged care and nursing homes completed the 'life cycle' range of facilities for the blind.

The Nursery's Charge Nurse was Sister Elizabeth Lindsey, the first Matron at the Nursery, who served from its beginning until 1945. She was a remarkable woman whose innovative and positive approach to the care and education of blind children was to have a lasting effect on the lives of the children in the Nursery during that time. When she died, she left behind two



Sister Lindsey and the first group of Nursery children, photo courtesy Lindsey Collection, Vision Australia Archive

albums of photographs, 145 images, many of which give vivid impressions of life in the RVIB Nursery for Sister Lindsey, her nursing staff and the children in their care. These albums contain the rich source material for the Lindsey Collection.

The bulk of the images were taken in the period before the Second World War, and show children engaged in play and learning activities using toys and equipment specially made to help them gain confidence and learn to negotiate the world without vision. Music was an important component in the daily routine. At the end of the day in the Nursery, Sister Lindsey, a competent pianist, would gather the children around the piano and teach them songs. At two, three and four years of age, the children were taught to sing in harmony.

During her time at the Nursery, Sister Lindsey became increasingly concerned for the welfare of one of the children, a little boy who was blind and who could not walk unassisted. When it became evident that this child was to be placed in a residential home for people with physical and intellectual disabilities, she resigned from her employment with the RVIB and devoted her life to the care and welfare of this little boy. She went on to



Sister Lindsey and the little boy she legally adopted, photo courtesy Lindsey Collection, Vision Australia Archive

legally adopt the child, who became progressively and profoundly disabled, and later made arrangements for his life-long care as an adult.

Nearly eighty years have elapsed since the Nursery was opened. The aim of the project was to record the oral histories of a number of the surviving people featured in the Lindsey Collection. Evidence of the achievements of those who are now deceased was also included to complete the picture.

The project

The idea for an oral history project grew out of the work we were doing on a collection of historical photos of the Blind Babies' Nursery, which stood in the grounds of the former Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (RVIB) in St. Kilda Road, Melbourne. The photos had belonged to the first Matron of the Nursery, Sister Elizabeth Lindsey, and showed children engaged in various activities in and around the Nursery and at other places during the 1930s and 40s, as well as several images taken later in their lives. The collection

was contained in two albums of photos Sister Lindsey left behind when she died. She had given them to a friend – one of the people who had been a child in her care – who was also one of Margaret Tomkins' dearest friends and who, in turn, entrusted the albums to Margaret before she died.

Rather than lock the albums away for safekeeping, we set to work on digital copies of the photos, enhancing their clarity and visibility as much as possible for people with low vision (including Margaret). Then we set about putting names to the faces, and the result was a remarkable set of images, which were compiled into a Powerpoint file showing all the information gathered. Copies of the images were made, along with personalised Powerpoint files, and these were sent to the people in the photos and/or their families, most of whom did not know the images existed. The original albums of photos and a copy of the digital files were given to the Vision Australia archive. Throughout this stage of the project, our aim was to put the photos into the hands of the people pictured. Although she was never in the Nursery, Margaret had attended the RVIB School for the Blind with the children in the photos, many of whom had become her lifelong friends. She knew that their time in the Nursery and at the RVIB school had been a critically important part of their early lives.

As we worked on the Lindsey Collection, we discussed each person's story and their remarkable personal achievements as adults – some were pioneers and role models for blind people in the fields of music, education and technology. This led to a joint proposal in May, 2008 to the National Library of Australia to conduct an oral history project and interview some of the people who were children in the photographs, who had been brought up in the Blind Babies' Nursery by Sister Lindsey and her staff. We wanted to record their stories and any memories of Sister Lindsey, but we also wanted to explore what it meant to them to have



Water play with a hose, photo courtesy Lindsey Collection, Vision Australia Archive.



The children playing in a boat rocker, photo courtesy Lindsey Collection, Vision Australia Archive

grown up in a community of blind or vision-impaired children, with the kind of specialist education and support that no longer exists in Victoria.

At the time we wrote the proposal, Vision Australia was in the process of closing its Burwood Education Centre, the only remaining school for blind students in Victoria, and there was vigorous debate among educators and members of the blind community about the value of specialist education and the additional challenges faced by blind children in 'mainstream' schools. We felt that the views and experiences of people who had been involved in specialist education from their earliest years would be significant contributions to this debate, particularly as the level of educational and personal achievement amongst the group was so remarkable.

Our proposal was accepted and, with the support of Vision Australia, we took advantage, rather poignantly, of a farewell gathering at the old RVIB premises at 557 St. Kilda Road, Melbourne, which had been sold earlier that year. The site is listed on the Victorian Heritage Register as being 'historically important for its pioneering role in the welfare of the blind, being the first institution of its type in Australia'.¹ Its sale marked the end of a significant era in the history of the RVIB and in the education and welfare of blind citizens in Victoria.

We decided to use the farewell as an opportunity to record interviews with several of the people who had come from interstate or regional Victoria for the

occasion. Some of these interviews were conducted in an inner-city motel where some of the travellers were staying, on the evening of the farewell gathering, before they flew home the next day. We had booked a room for this purpose and we were able to set up the recording equipment in the lounge area and bring people in for the interviews. Luck played a part, too, as we were able to interview the former partner of a deceased member of the group, who happened to be passing through Melbourne the following day on other business. We also travelled to people's homes in Melbourne and regional Victoria during the following weeks to record their stories.

We managed to interview seven people who had been directly involved with the Blind Babies' Nursery or the RVIB School for the Blind, including those who had been children there, a teacher and a nurse who worked with Sister Lindsey. We also interviewed family members who were able to give us their perspectives on the influence of those early years on the lives of the people they knew as adults.

Opportunities and issues

From the outset, we had the advantage of Margaret's close friendship with some of the people we interviewed, and this helped enormously when planning and carrying out the interviews. Apart from making contact with people and gaining their permission for participation she shared common experiences with



Having a teddy bears' picnic, photo courtesy Lindsey Collection, Vision Australia Archive

them, including attending the RVIB School for the Blind and being evacuated to Olinda when the site was taken over by US forces during the Second World War. Her knowledge of people, events and issues in education for the blind community was invaluable and added insight and depth to the project.

We had a laptop computer with images from the Lindsay Collection, and this proved to be an invaluable *aide-memoir* when we were interviewing sighted people who had been associated with the RVIB Nursery, although this made it a longer session as the images were usually shown before the interview commenced, and there was discussion about the photos. Frustratingly, in one case, the person talked quite openly about Sister Lindsey while looking at the images, but simply gave a knowing look during the interview and refused to say what she had previously told us, even though it was a fairly mild observation. During another interview, the unexpected presence of very close and loving relatives had an effect on what was said. It was this interview that we were hoping would give us a really clear picture of Sister Lindsey and her motivation. While it did, to some extent, there was much left unsaid.

Five of the people we interviewed were blind or vision-impaired, and we were careful to make sure they fully understood the conditions of access and permission forms they were signing. Each section was read out and explained fully before moving on and, at the appropriate places, a record of where the ticks or crosses

were placed was made. We recorded the permissions process at the end of each of these interviews, so there would be an aural record of agreement in addition to the usual permission forms.

Although we were lucky to have had a once-only window of opportunity with the farewell gathering, the interviews that evening came at the end of a long and tiring day, and we were all feeling a little flat, given the nature of the proceedings. The interview about the early years went well, but it was so late in the evening that we weren't able to take extra time to fully explore the activities and achievements of the people in their later lives.

The oral historian's curse where really interesting or valuable information comes along after the recorder has been turned off also happened during this project. The first person we interviewed was the first boy to be enrolled in the Nursery, at the age of two. The interview went well – he has a remarkable memory – and we were sitting down having a cup of tea afterwards when he casually told us that he had been called in to re-establish radio contact with Darwin after Cyclone Tracy. The equipment had been carefully packed up and the moment had passed – what a pity!

Information and outcomes

From the outset, we felt that it was important that these stories of achievement by blind people be recorded and

preserved, and made available to the wider community. This is the first time this group of people has been interviewed about their early years, and we believe this to be a highly significant project, particularly in the light of changes to the way blind children are educated in Victoria.

In the Nursery and at the RVIB school, the children were given every chance to develop their own skills and abilities, and these early opportunities later led to lifelong interests, academic achievements and successful careers for a significant number of them. For instance, wiring electric lights inside a large dolls' house in the grounds of the RVIB school led to a career in electronics and radio, and an early interest in woodwork led to one totally blind man building his own house and furniture. The blind teachers at the school were inspirational, acting as role models and mentors, and offering encouragement or a push in the right direction when needed.

As adults, almost all of the group gained employment, and several went on to be successful in their chosen fields, which included teaching, music, photography, braille production and radio technology. One person researched and built a very complex and precise musical instrument called a Glass Harmonica, which he played in many public performances in Australia and overseas; another became a technician for the ABC and helped to establish 3RPH (Radio for the Print Handicapped) and another, who entered the Nursery the year before Sister Lindsey left, now broadcasts a twice-weekly Bluegrass Music show over the internet from his home in regional Victoria.

The people in this group were pioneers in the area of education for the blind, and as they graduated and took their places in the work force they became strong advocates and lobbyists in various areas of society, including the employment of blind teachers by the Victorian Education Department. Three of the children in the group later graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Music. Other tertiary qualifications gained were in the areas of Arts, Law and Social Work.

Most people interviewed were in favour of specialist education, rather than 'mainstreaming', as a choice for blind children. Some gave as their reasons their personal experiences of the social and practical difficulties faced by blind children attending sighted schools; others looked back on what had been achieved through their early years in specialist education within a community of their peers.

Throughout the interviews, there was a common thread relating to the closeness of the bonds that were created between the people in the RVIB Nursery and the friendship network that was subsequently established, much of which still remains today. Easy access to

communications technology such as email and Skype has made it possible for them to contact each other quickly and cheaply, despite several people living interstate, and support is as near as the telephone.

The interviews are now in the Oral History Collection of the National Library of Australia, together with a copy of the digital image files. The Lindsey Collection is now housed in Vision Australia's archive.

Conclusion

The children who lived in the RVIB Nursery gained a valuable foundation during their formative years in the unique environment Sister Lindsey created for their care and education. Her outstanding contribution is reflected in these people who, as adults, embrace life with confidence and demonstrate the ability of blind citizens to contribute to society.

During the past decade, Blind Citizens Australia has recorded that up to 70% of blind people of working age are unemployed,² at a time when the level of education has improved and technology is enabling the blind to carry out tasks that were not possible in the past. The reasons are complex, and it may be helpful to gain some understanding from the experiences of those who have travelled the path.

Educational theory and practice has also changed over the years, and normalisation is now the main concept underpinning education for the disabled. This change has both positive and negative components. Social isolation is very real for blind people trying to communicate in an increasingly visual world. In this context, the experiences of a group of blind people for whom life-long relationships, common memories and a shared history have been a source of inspiration and pride are particularly significant. Above all, it is important to acknowledge the contribution and achievements that are reflected in the lives of the first group of children to attend the RVIB Nursery.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Victorian Heritage Register Online
Item Category: Education: *Deaf, Dumb & Blind Institute*
<<http://www.doi.vic.gov.au/doi/hvoir.nsf>> viewed 10 April, 2008
- 2 Lynne Davis, 'Editorial', *Blind Citizens News*, February 2000, p.5

‘Double vision’: recording the oral histories of historians

Susan Marsden

Abstract:

I’ve lived through huge changes, given that I grew up in the fifties, participated in all those changes in the sixties and seventies and with maturity in the eighties and nineties. I do joke sometimes I’m spending the second half of my life writing about the first half. But I think there’s something interesting about writing about stuff that you lived through but now when you look back on it it’s really quite different from what you thought at the time. I mean there’s a double vision there. (Ann Curthoys)¹

The ‘double vision’ described by Ann Curthoys in an oral history interview recorded for the National Library of Australia in 2002, was a significant theme in a series of interviews with historians living in Australia I conducted for the National Library’s Oral History and Folklore collection.² The varied careers of professional (academic and public) historians in all parts of Australia and beyond, and the intersections between their personal and professional histories are also explored in these interviews. This paper provides an overview of that ‘Historians Project’, and delineates several themes with quotations from those historians who have given their permission for such use. (Several historians requested restricted access to their interviews, and I have not quoted from them in this article.)

The History Project

Deciding who to interview was a project its own right. I talked this over within the National Library (whose staff provided an initial list of ‘eminent’ historians, several of whom had already been interviewed, and except in one or two instances, I didn’t revisit them). I also discussed the project with many fellow historians, including on *H-Net New Zealand & Australia Discussion list*. Their suggestions included academic and professional historians employed as consultants and public servants; ‘Australianists’, and those whose work was outside Australian history; feminist and local historians. Several people recommended interviewing the relatively unknown historians practicing in places other than Canberra, Sydney or Melbourne.

I selected narrators along these lines. I also aimed for a

balance of women and men, and for historians working outside the main metropolitan centres, but time and funds reduced the geographic spread, and there were also some refusals.

Interview content also prompted discussion. As one historian suggested, every interview should consider both the individual’s career and their views of history and the state of history. A PhD student wrote in an email that it would be interesting to have both biographical information and ‘some understanding of the way in which the culture we live in conceptualises itself today’.

I decided to adopt a similar approach in every interview, outlined to each historian as follows:

Your history; your historical career (including academic, scholarly and public roles, working methods, sources); your historical impact; and your views on history (that is actual historical events in your lifetime as well as historiography). I aim to cover the basic biography and link that to a discussion of your life and observations as an historian. But oral history should tease out experiences other than those already in print, and place them in context.

The eighteen historians interviewed along those lines are: Margaret Anderson;³ David Carment;⁴ Inga Clendinnen;⁵ Ann Curthoys; Graeme Davison;⁶ Michelle (Mickey) Dewar;⁷ Bill Gammage;⁸ Marilyn Lake;⁹ Janet McCalman;¹⁰ Stuart Macintyre;¹¹ Susan Marsden, (interviewed by Roslyn Russell);¹² Alan Powell;¹³ Marian Quartly;¹⁴ Jill Roe;¹⁵ Mary Sheehan;¹⁶ Hugh Stretton;¹⁷ Alistair Thomson;¹⁸ and Trevor Wilson.¹⁹ I have also interviewed other historians and history writers.²⁰

All oral history interviews are collaborations between interviewer and informant, as often noted in scholarly accounts. Smith, for example, refers specifically to the oral history interview as a collaboration between historian and narrator, and adds, ‘From their collaboration occasionally emerges a richer, more nuanced understanding of the past...’.²¹ However, such collaborations usually involve only one professional historian – the interviewer – not the people on both

sides of the recorder, as in this project. However, Jill Roe was one of the few to mention ‘thinking about how I would shape this interview’.

The interviews were indeed more evidently collaborative than most, in my experience. A form of double vision was also evident in the ambivalence or self-consciousness of responses by these historians, unused to placing themselves as central figures in the narrative, and yet knowing that this was essential in their own oral histories. So, at the same time, most spoke frankly, and often about painful personal experiences.

I asked each historian for a copy of their CV and to indicate their most significant books and articles. I read as much as possible of their work, alert also to any biographical references. I took far too many notes, but, as anticipated, many interviews wove between their written work (by its nature, extensive) and their other professional and personal experiences. Internet references to some of these historians were also extensive, especially ‘public intellectuals’ such as Inga Clendinnen, Stuart Macintyre, Janet McCalman, and Hugh Stretton.

As the interviews proceeded, both common themes and distinct differences emerged, reflecting such effects as differences in age, gender, geographical location, historical education and career within or outside university (or both). Some of those similarities and differences are discussed here within the broad four-part interview structure outlined above.

‘Your history’:

My father played a behind the scenes role but I suspect a very important one because he was a natural intellectual. One of the things which has grieved me in my life is that he always had an inordinate respect for people with degrees. So I’ve accumulated a few to show him that my dad was as good as any of them (Inga Clendinnen).

The question about ‘your history’ elicited detailed family stories, throwing light on the lives and aspirations of generations of Australians, summarised by Alistair Thomson in recalling his own family history as ‘upwardly mobile through the church and education’ (Alistair Thomson). Inga Clendinnen referred to her father’s ‘Mechanics Institute tradition’, and said that this ‘radical working class heritage has mattered to me a very great deal. I’m delighted that I come from the wrong side of the tracks’ (Inga Clendinnen).

‘Grandfather Gammage, also Bill’ was a political activist and reporter for *Narrandera Argus*, and told a lot to his namesake.

He remained interested in politics all his life... He spoke often of the conscription campaign of World War One. He opposed conscription but he had a

brother in the AIF and there were all sorts of public and family tensions over that (Bill Gammage).

Family influences on history writing were significant. Marilyn Lake recalled her mother’s work in the orchard as an experience that ‘certainly did influence the sort of history I then wrote about soldier settlement and about rural life and farming families because she worked really hard. And it was very much a family enterprise’ (Marilyn Lake).

Alistair Thomson’s father was a career soldier who moved often. As a teenager Alistair discovered ‘a big sea chest with all the letters that Mum had written from when she got married to her parents’. Reading them was not simply a vivid memory. His recent book is about British post-war migrant women and the letters they wrote to their mothers in the 1950s when his own mother was writing.

And it really became clear to me that a lot of my work’s been as an oral historian, but under the surface I’ve been interested in life stories generally, and the different ways that people tell their lives. [I’ve been] drawn to letters, diaries, memoirs, and people talking. Reading my Mum’s letters was a very significant recognition of that (Alistair Thomson).

Asked why his writing drew so much upon personal experience Hugh Stretton replied:

I felt strongly with social science that you’re dealing with human thought and behaviour of infinite complexity. You ought to keep anything you do close to detailed individual human experience because that’s what ultimately it all has to enrich or impoverish and answer to democratically. So you can people it with real creatures (Hugh Stretton).

One surprising feature of these interviews is the variety in their life experiences. These are further enriched in recollection by the historian’s perspective. I was struck also by the very Australian occurrences shared by historians such as Powell and Lake, in losing personal possessions to bushfires and cyclones. This has particular resonance for historians.

Some people grew up on farms and in regional towns, including rural New Zealand, as well as the suburbs of Adelaide, Hobart, Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra.

Marsden: I’d like to ask a little bit more about the impact of being raised in a provincial city had on you. Do you think that’s had a lifelong effect or not?

Yes, and it’s given me a deep hatred of provincial cities, to be honest... I used to walk endlessly round and around and around and around and then back through the same old gate. The escape that doesn’t happen. I’ve rarely been back to Geelong after that... (Inga Clendinnen).



Historian David Carment (centre) talks to Beth and Garth Jenkins about Brown's Mart, Darwin, in 2004. (Photo: Susan Marsden).

Bill Gammage described himself as 'Wagga's country town boy'.

I was invited to write a history of Narrandera Shire and you can see very much a rural influence in that. Not simply an archival one but there's a lot in that book which stems from walking on the ground and talking to farmers and noticing relationships between trees and soil and the way things are distributed (Bill Gammage).

Gammage spoke of 'a dislocation between being a historian and being a rural person', noting that 'our education system trains the urban middle class and therefore alienates farmers', and that teaching history at a university effectively condemns you to an urban life'. 'There was a sense of discord for me because of my interest in rural life. In fact, I still have it' (Bill Gammage).

Jill Roe was also a country child, a farmer's daughter, raised on Eyre Peninsula. Like Gammage, she moved away through a university education into an urban professional life, but there is a gender difference between her perspective on that experience and that of Gammage. Roe observed that farmers liked their daughters to gain a good (and often, tertiary) education because they could get jobs when liquidity was poor. In her own family, as their mother died young, Jill and her sisters were also expected to fend for themselves.

'Your historical career':

Alan Powell remarked wryly that the trajectory of his career into history could be titled, 'From garbo

to prof', and he lived and worked in many places before settling into the Northern Territory. Each historian also discussed their working methods and colleagues – although, as Clendinnen observed, 'The loneliness of the long distance runner's got nothing on the loneliness of the long distance researcher and writer' (Inga Clendinnen). Margaret Anderson contrasted the collegiality she enjoyed in university history departments with her loneliness in having no colleagues initially when employed as a social historian in museums.

The careers explored in these interviews date from the 1940s, a period of great change for the profession both at university and in public history. Following an early academic career in New Zealand and England Trevor Wilson took up a lectureship at the University of Adelaide in the 1960s at a time of 'breathtaking' expansion. '[Prime Minister] Menzies had obviously been caught by the education bug and was developing the universities on a very wide scale, so this was the place you looked to, to get a job.'

Some historians were founding staff at new universities, including Gammage (Papua New Guinea), Roe (Macquarie), and Clendinnen (La Trobe). When Bill Gammage went to the Australian National University in 1961 he joined only around 260 full-time students, who were debating 'issues such as apartheid, but also internal issues such as whether the ANU should join the National Union of Students...' He lived at Bruce Hall from its first year.

It was a terrific place. It was the first coeducational college or hall in Australia and, therefore, had all sorts of eyes on it... It was a tremendously liberating experience... (Bill Gammage).

Inga Clendinnen recalled in the 1960s and 1970s 'a whole heavy degree of student activity, which the staff sometimes tried to suppress and sometimes supported. It was a very dynamic time'. High immigration rates fuelled influxes of Greek, Turkish and other newcomers. She introduced the only full year course on Aztecs in the world, teaching her students in workshops.

One of the fascinations for me teaching the way I did, with a fairly heavy emphasis on sociological and anthropological-type analyses was ... that it really helped quite a lot of the first generation migrant kids have a way of understanding what was happening in their relationship with their parents. They would start bringing their experiences to the very open circumstances of workshops and getting some distance on them ... then they could negotiate better with their parents, handle them with more tenderness and understanding (Inga Clendinnen).

Alan Powell was the only foundation staff member of all four of Darwin's tertiary institutions (now Charles Darwin University). After many arduous years getting

an education while engaged in a variety of jobs, he moved to Darwin and was employed for his first year in academia at a half-built Darwin Community College. Travelling south on leave in December 1974 he returned to a city devastated by Cyclone Tracy. In his own flat his patiently acquired books and PhD research material formed ‘a pile of pulp on the floor’ (Alan Powell).

Some historians introduced radical new courses to universities. While she was a PhD student Ann Curthoys helped set up two women’s liberation newspapers, *Mejane* and *Refractory Girl*. ‘We’d been reading mainly American texts and so in ’71 we were starting to develop our own stuff ... Then in 1973... the journal *Refractory Girl* got formed ... bringing together the scholarly side and the activist side’ (Ann Curthoys). Her own articles published in these newspapers and elsewhere on women’s liberation and historiography were ‘the basis, I think, on which I got the women’s studies job in ’76’, at the ANU. Some of her male colleagues were ‘very restive about women’s history, very unsettled by it’ (Ann Curthoys).

Stuart Macintyre also explored the intersection of ideological activism – in his case, in the Communist Party – with his research and teaching, while noting:

I choose topics because I have an attachment to them but also because I have a slightly ambiguous attachment ... And so, in the case of my doctoral subject on Marxist working-class education in the British labour movement up to the 1930s. It was ... extraordinary and admirable ... and yet I was also struck by the fact that the content of much of this education was very dogmatic. So, it was me trying to think more carefully about where I stand in relationship to something... I’ve always thought of history as a way in which it’s not simply constructing a past to suit yourself. It’s trying to clarify your own understanding ... towards subjects (Stuart Macintyre).

Some 1970s graduates became pioneer professional (public) historians who grappled with other modes of interpreting history. Those interviewed included Mary Sheehan, Susan Marsden (interviewed by Roslyn Russell), Mickey Dewar, and Margaret Anderson.

Anderson described moving in 1982 from the Western Australia Museum to the History Trust of South Australia, becoming first director of the Migration Museum at a time when there was very little published about the immigration history of Australia, and no other similar museum. The History Trust, she recalled, was ‘at the absolute forefront in terms of the public interpretation of history in Australia’. It was, for the same reason, venturing into an ‘intensely political’ area. Even before the museum officially opened it was committed to exhibit textiles and costumes from the Balkans.



Historians Marilyn Lake (who was interviewed) and Henry Reynolds sign their book, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, at Writers Week in Adelaide in 2008 (Photo: Susan Marsden)

Even I, with the little that I knew, knew that that was explosive... And the groups that were there had the most amazing political agendas. Knowing what we now know, we were dealing with the countries from Croatia, Serbia, Herzegovina ... Bosnia... And they were all expected to work together as one happy family. Of course, none of them spoke to each other and they all loathed each other... We even had the Macedonians in there just to add to the completely perfect mix (Margaret Anderson).

There was a dispute between Macedonians and Greeks about the origins of a costume. Anderson suggested that ‘the level of the tension over one label for one costume at that time’ reflected how naive Australians were about the politics of that region, ‘although, by golly, at the museum we were getting a crash course fast’. At the same time, as director Anderson acted to avoid ‘capture’ by a particular community. She concluded,

I still believe quite strongly that, that historians in museums, by and large, have the same responsibilities that historians anywhere do, to present the story as honestly as they can and as

dispassionately as we can, with everything that we now know about post-modernism, post-colonial discourse and all the rest of it, that nevertheless we still use our best endeavours to present exhibitions honestly. And if we feel that the material is so explosive that it can't be dealt with dispassionately, then I think I would prefer that museums didn't try and do it (Margaret Anderson).

Michelle (Mickey) Dewar discovered few historical resources of any kind on the Northern Territory on her arrival in the 1980s. Historiography involved 'a broad inclusive approach' encompassing heritage, publication and oral history, supported by the National Trust and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (where she worked). To the frequently asked question about Australia's recent 'History wars', she replied that her view of contact history was similarly shaped by her Northern Territory location. Active cooperation with Aboriginal people was a historical necessity, and she said there was no intent of genocide but there was forcible occupation; 'It was all about economics' (Mickey Dewar).

Historians were not only discovering and interpreting new forms of history but they were also relating them to wider audiences than students and colleagues. Dewar emphasised the importance of being accountable to your local community when working as a public historian. Carment said that although he wasn't the first academic historian to work in the Northern Territory, they were few, 'and I felt that what I should be doing was trying, in my research and ... my teaching and in what I was doing in the wider community, [to] promote interest in the serious study of the history of that region'. He continued,

I've also been trying to do history which is professionally respectable but at the same time useful to the wider community, in particular relevant to the community in which I'm living, and historians do have a significant role in that kind of area (David Carment).

Many historians learnt to address public audiences through the media; Powell drew an international media response when he told a journalist a wartime story of the British blowing up an Indonesian ship. These historians were also engaged by (and with) a variety of employers or clients, state agencies figuring prominently amongst them. Mention was made of statutory authorities such as the History Trust of SA/History SA and the Australian Heritage Commission, which funded much of the country's heritage work (mine included).

The methods of historical research and writing were varied. Trevor Wilson described himself as 'a relic from a former age' in continuing to hand-write his books.

I write my notes down and when I've got enough of them, I sit down and I read them and I think, 'What is this saying to me that I need to tell people?' No computers, no typewriter, no nothing... It's a more laborious and old-fashioned way... But it's too late to try learning a whole different way of doing it. I think with my pen on the page (Trevor Wilson).

The careers of most of these historians date from before personal computers, and for most of them the advent of 'word processors' was a boon. As David Carment said,

I never write by hand any more, I just redraft on the screen, and that's helped my writing immeasurably. It's not necessarily made it any better but it's made it much faster because of the way in which I write. I used to start on a piece of paper and tear it up and start again (David Carment).

'Your historical impact':

The question of having a historical impact of their own brought mixed responses. Bill Gammage's work on the First AIF fostered the resurgence of Australian interest in the Anzac experience.

Gammage: I have an ambivalent view of Anzac Day. It's a very powerful tradition and... was also a unifying thing for Australia. If you think of federation, the First AIF is the first national enterprise, and also the largest national enterprise... But the impact of Anzac and of war has been so great that in a way Australians have never been able to shake free of it. The terrible cost of war means that on Anzac Day we always look backwards. Whereas, in the nineteenth century I think the Australian rhetoric was to talk about the future, about what this country might become. ... [This] is an unfortunate thing for a country. I think it slowed down all those radical movements, republicanism, for example, egalitarianism; in the end Anzac undermined them to a large degree.

Marsden: Yet, you've had a role to play in that through your own work, haven't you? What are your feelings about that, given that ambivalence, that your own work has contributed to that?²²

Gammage: I'm pleased that the soldiers are getting recognition. I'm pleased that there is a distinction now commonly made, not universally made, between the experiences of soldiers, of citizens of war, and the rhetoric of war itself, that you can still admire the soldiers and detest war, which was a difference that was not being made in the sixties (Bill Gammage).

This was a period of expansion not only of universities but also of the 'parallel education system', including public galleries and museums.²³ Historians have played crucial roles in this development, as staff, consultants,

committee members and advisors, as well as having an effect through their writing. I did tend to select historians who had played such roles, and to ask about them. Ann Curthoys, for example, described her involvement with the Powerhouse and the Australian Museum in Sydney as well as the new National Museum of Australia in Canberra, from 'way back in '82, the interim council, the inquiry. This is where the bicentennial history fits in. Where they wanted to make historians meet museum people and they invited some of the people involved in bicentennial history' (Ann Curthoys). She was also later a member of expert advisory committees.

Marsden: What was your view of what the museum should be?

Curthoys: I said that it had to grasp the nettle of the national. It was a national museum so it had to deal with things at a national level and all the problems that that entailed because national history had become very troubled since '88 really, and Mabo and so on. So a lot of discussions about how to deal with the national in a context where the national is under critique. Like how to be both critical and yet not.

Marsden: Avoiding names like 'black armband'?

Curthoys: Yes, that's right. Like not turning people off history and not just having a tale of woe to tell (Ann Curthoys).

'Your views on history':

In these interviews with historians there was an additional level of discussion because they are 'professional' observers of their own times. My last and largest question invited each historian to review the past in their lifetime. Ann Curthoys responded,

I think it's been an interesting period to be a historian in and to be reflective about because the society changed so dramatically and yet some things are very persistent... such as racism. On the gender front it really has changed dramatically... [T]hat's been interesting to live through and to chronicle as a participant and eventually to write about as a historian... The last thing I'd say is the big change in my lifetime is the lessening of isolation... Australian society is much less isolated. People move, people travel, people know what's going on. People are interested in a worldwide culture, in all those different cultural forms. I think the difference between the young ... and older generation is that worldliness (Ann Curthoys).

In conclusion many different ways of knowing and telling history were described in these interviews. As Marilyn Lake said, 'I'm interested in different ways of knowing the past'. As early free settlers in Tasmania

her ancestors the Calvert family had a long history which Marilyn knew as a child, but it was not until she was formally educated as a historian that she learnt the original meaning of the name of Black Station. This was a site near her family's home and often visited by them, but she had not known that the name echoed an ancient Aboriginal occupation (Marilyn Lake).

While exploring the background, careers, working methods and contributions of Australian historians, this project also addressed such fundamental questions as 'What is history? What does it mean to you?'

Clendinnen: Humans are infinitely various and they come up with all kinds of solutions. The problems are existential but the solutions are cultural and particular. That's one of the fascinations of moving between different cultures...

Marsden: So how would you define history then?

Clendinnen: I would define it as the systematic and disciplined analysis of episodes drawn from past experience in an endeavour to comprehend them and therefore understand our species better (Inga Clendinnen).

History was discussed as a lifelong education, as a discipline and a vocation, sometimes as a revelation; and particular historical works – their own and other influential histories - were evaluated. I was interested to ground that work in particular places and times. Our discussions also included the ways that historians may use hindsight or return to places (such as Roe's Eyre Peninsula and Curthoys' Freedom Ride route) to make sense of their own lives, and to enrich and extend their work.²⁴

These interviews provide rich material for exploring a range of Australian stories and for analysing the role of the historians who have been recording and interpreting them.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Ann Curthoys, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2002, National Library of Australia, TRC 4911.
- 2 As one of the National Library's contracted interviewers since 2000 I have recorded more than 50 interviews with a broad range of Australians, including historians. My earlier paper on that project has been published as 'Knowing the past: interviews with Australian historians', in *The National Library Magazine*, June 2011.
- 3 Margaret Anderson, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2004, National Library of Australia, TRC 5320.
- 4 David Carment, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2004, National Library of Australia, TRC 5084.
- 5 Inga Clendinnen, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2003, National Library of Australia, TRC 5038.

- 6 Graeme Davison, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2003, National Library of Australia, TRC 4977.
- 7 Michelle (Mickey) Dewar, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2004, National Library of Australia, TRC 5187.
- 8 Bill Gammage, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2002, National Library of Australia, TRC 4912.
- 9 Marilyn Lake, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2008, National Library of Australia, TRC 5956.
- 10 Janet McCalman, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2005, National Library of Australia, TRC 5546.
- 11 Stuart Macintyre, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2006, National Library of Australia, TRC 5611.
- 12 Susan Marsden, interviewed by Roslyn Russell, 2003, National Library of Australia, TRC 4952.
- 13 Alan Powell, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2004, National Library of Australia, TRC 5186.
- 14 Marian Quartly, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2005, National Library of Australia, TRC 5545.
- 15 Jill Roe, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2005, National Library of Australia, TRC 5383.
- 16 Mary Sheehan, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2003, National Library of Australia, TRC 5037.
- 17 Hugh Stretton, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2002, National Library of Australia, TRC 4895.
- 18 Alistair Thomson, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2009, National Library of Australia, TRC 6035.
- 19 Trevor Wilson, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2008, National Library of Australia, TRC 5957. Note: further reference to these interviews is provided in the main text (giving the narrator's name in brackets).
- 20 They include Katerina Clark (TRC 4770), Hugh Lunn (TRC 6081), and Trisha Dixon (TRC 6078). Another historian, Philip Jones, has also agreed to an interview.
- 21 RC Smith, 'Analytic strategies for oral history interviews', in JF Gubrium and JA Holstein, eds, *Postmodern interviewing*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California, 2003, p 220.
- 22 Marilyn Lake, who was also interviewed, has written recently about wanting 'to show that the mythologising of Anzac as our national creation story and the popular re-writing of history that had occurred as a result had effectively marginalised other formative experiences, especially cultural, social and political achievements in the making of the nation'. (Lake, 'Introduction: What have you done for your country?', in Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds with Mark McKenna and Joy Damousi, *What's wrong with Anzac? The militarisation of Australian history*, New South, Sydney, 2010, p 10.) Gammage's part (as history-writer) in the mythologising of Anzac Day and its soldiers is also referred to in this book, in the main as Joy Damousi writes: 'Bill Gammage's *The broken Years* and the film *Gallipoli* [drawing on his book and advice] set the new trend [in Australian history] in their focus on soldiers as the innocent victims of war'. Damousi, 'Why do we get so emotional about Anzac?' in Lake and Reynolds, p 101.
- 23 See Donald Horne, Susan Marsden and Alison Painter, compilers, *A hidden Australian cultural resource - the parallel education system*, Monash University, Victoria 1993.
- 24 Ann Curthoys, *Freedom ride: a freedom rider remembers*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 2002.

‘Seth makes learning fun’: the Fremantle City Library/Lance Holt School Oral History Project

Heather Campbell and Lorraine Stevens

Abstract

The Fremantle City Library in Western Australia has been actively involved in recording oral history since 1979. In 2010 the Library in conjunction with Lance Holt School conducted a project with ten students aged between 10 and 12 years. The aim of the project was to gain an insight into childhood in Fremantle - schooldays, leisure activities, family life and interaction with the city. The information collected could then be used to compare childhood of today with that of the past.

Lance Holt caters for both pre primary and primary school students and is based in a two storey commercial building erected in 1892 in the city’s historic West

End. It is an independent, community school where individual needs are fostered and catered for. Learning is meant to be fun and children are encouraged to take part in decision making and understand and contribute to the Fremantle community. Parental involvement and commitment are essential.

This article discusses the background to the project, the planning involved, the process itself and its successful conclusion.

Introduction

On Tuesday 7 December 2010, the Mayor of Fremantle Dr Brad Pettitt and the city’s Local History Librarian, Pam Hartree presented the results of an oral history project to Lance Holt School Co-ordinator, Kathryn



Lance Holt School, 10 Henry Street
Fremantle 2012.



Interviewers Heather Campbell (left) and Lorraine Stevens sitting with the children involved in the project 2010

Netherwood at a school assembly which took place in the newly-constructed recreational hall. The young narrators were presented with a certificate to thank them for their participation.

This exciting project interviewing children was conceived by Fremantle City Library and received strong support from parents and teachers who were open and willing to engage with the community. The Fremantle City Library has been recording the lives of seniors for the past twenty years, and currently holds 623 interviews with local residents and those that lived in the area in the past. In late 2009 it decided to pursue a new direction and begin interviewing children in an endeavour to fill in gaps in the resources of its Local History Collection and gain an understanding of childhood from the perspective of members of the community while they were still young. This gave a freshness and immediacy to the narration, not present in most interviews with adults.

The Henry Street School which caters for students from pre primary to year 7 was approached to take part because of their long association with the Children's Library and community-oriented approach to education. For more than ten years, students have been visiting the Library fortnightly to listen to stories, develop research skills and locate information for

class projects. Community awareness is also fostered through the school's involvement with local theatre groups, tertiary institutions and Council's environmental care programmes. Daily contact with the community is the norm and may include visits to local historic sites, games on the Esplanade Reserve¹ (the school's play area was originally limited) and walks to nearby High Street to buy lunch.

Named after educational innovator, Lance Holt, the school was established in North Fremantle in 1970 and moved to the historic West End of Fremantle in 1974. It is the oldest community school in the state.

Lance Holt aimed to provide an 'alternate' form of education based upon equality, freedom from oppressive authority, with a focus on the environment, women's liberation and Aboriginal rights. Over the years the school has shifted its emphasis in subtle ways but still remains true to the principles advocated by Mr Holt, which include respecting the rights of the child and their families, ensuring the school is the centre of the community and focusing on the child's social and emotional growth as well as their academic ability. Students take part in the school's decision-making processes and enjoy learning. They are confident, bright, mature children, who have the ability to think laterally and this was clearly reflected in their interviews.

Planning the project

The project aimed to interview four to eight boys and girls between the ages of 10 and 12 who resided in the Fremantle/ East Fremantle municipalities (the municipalities served by the Library) to gain an appreciation of childhood today. Topics for discussion included schooling, family life, leisure activities, interaction with the city, environmental awareness, peer group pressure, religion, etc. It was considered that this information would provide useful and interesting comparisons with accounts of childhood in the past, already held in the collection.

The first step was to carry out some research into interviewing children. Interviewers Lorraine Stevens and Heather Campbell had plenty of experience with seniors but limited or no expertise in this particular area. Little information was available in oral history publications although there was a wealth of material in social work texts. What did prove useful were Ronda Jamieson's, *Young, old and in between: exploring family memories across the generations: how to interview for family history*, Library Board of Western Australia, 2005² and a chapter in Daphne Keats book, *Interviewing: a practical guide for students and professionals*, UNSW Press, 2000.³

Elaine Green, a former member of the Harvey Oral History Group,⁴ also provided some valuable information as a result of a project conducted with local school children between 1989 and 1993.⁵ She encouraged us to ask difficult questions about bullying, peer pressure and religious beliefs. The group's interviews are available through the J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History and a number were listened to.⁶ They were delightful but focused on pre-primary and early primary school students and our proposal was to interview year 6/7 students (aged 10 - 12) as it was considered that older students would provide a more insightful view of childhood in Fremantle, and this proved to be the case.

Permission was sought from the Lance Holt Co-ordinator in late 2009 and contact was made with Seth Yeomans, the year 6/7 teacher in February 2010. Both enthusiastically embraced the project and a time and location for the interviews was arranged.

Letters were sent out to parents explaining the project and seeking written permission to interview their child. The feedback was so positive that we were asked to increase the number of interviewees to 10, which was agreed to. The children came from a range of family structures and cultural backgrounds (Australian, Croatian, European, Scottish, Singaporean and South African). Only one parent requested anonymity for her child and throughout the whole project protection of the child's privacy was a paramount consideration, e.g. only first names were used and home addresses were

not disclosed in the interview. (This information was included on the copyright or 'conditions of use form' which was signed by a parent on behalf of the child. The forms are only available for consultation by Local History staff).

Background research was also carried out on the school through the Library's Local History Collection and the Internet. A detailed questionnaire was developed covering topics such as a typical day at school, friends, peer group pressure and bullying. Questions on family life included leisure activities, religion, food, pets, clothes and holidays. Perceptions of body image were also explored, as were attitudes to drugs and alcohol. Awareness of environmental issues, particularly climate change, was touched upon and attitudes to migrants and refugees were also canvassed. The child's view of the immediate future was captured in questions on high school and more long term, on the pursuit of a career in adulthood. A section focused on Fremantle – feelings about the city, its good and bad points, the importance of its historic buildings and what changes the child would make if in charge for the day. To a lesser degree notions of Australia and the world were also covered. On completion the questionnaire was tested on Heather's 10-year-old grandson who happily agreed to participate in the project and answered the questions in a manner which confirmed they were suitable for the intended age levels.

Both interviewers obtained 'Working with Children Checks'⁷ from Australia Post and a procedure was developed to deal with the recorded information. A letter thanking the parent/parents for the child's participation and a 'conditions of use form' was also designed.

As a way of introducing ourselves and explaining the oral history process to the children, we enlisted the aid of friend and fellow oral history practitioner, Margaret McPherson.⁸ Margaret spoke of her school days at North Fremantle pre- and during World War 2 and brought along her small Mills and Ware school case⁹ to show the students. They were amazed to learn that she had to wear a school uniform, keep her hair pulled back in braids and received the cane if she spoke in class.

The interview

The project commenced in February and was completed in May with a break for the school holidays. Initially we had hoped to be able to interview at the same time as each other but as there was only one convenient time and location available each week, this was not possible. The art room was initially used for interviewing but when it was required for Italian classes another venue was sought. School Co-ordinator Kathryn Netherwood kindly allowed us to use her office on Thursday mornings between 9.30 and 10.30am and 11 and 12 noon, while she was conducting

a class. This worked well in many respects but was not as sound proofed as we might have wished. The school is a hive of activity and the voices of the kindy kids drifted up to the office on the mezzanine floor and the sounds of running feet on the stairs echoed through the old building. Listening back, these sounds do not detract from the interviews but rather provide atmosphere. One sound however that was not appreciated was the building activity centred around a new school hall which was being erected next door and on two occasions interviewing had to be halted until the noise receded. Normally interviewing would not proceed in the home on lawn mowing, cleaning days etc but it was difficult to predict when the noise level would be high at the school.

The interviewers used their own personal equipment to record the interviews, and the Marantz PMD 671, together with an Audio-Technica stereo condenser boundary microphone (AT849) resulted in excellent sound quality. As it was not possible to conduct a pre-interview session, the teacher Seth Yeoman provided us with some basic information about each child. Interviewing was made more challenging by not knowing who our narrator would be until shortly before the interview. We would set up our equipment, go upstairs to the classroom and let Seth know we were there and ready. Sometimes he would look a little surprised to see us, but soon recovered to ask “Who wants to be done today?” Whoever had their hand up first was the interviewee for that day! Looking back this worked well all round, because the children were not taken out of class for more time than was necessary and they were not bored by the process. In fact they commented later that they had never been part of anything like this before and really enjoyed it.

The children were bright and confident and happily took part in the project. Basically they were interviewed over two periods of an hour or less, allowing time for follow up questions the following week.

The interviews highlighted the children’s love for their school and schooling and their appreciation and affection for their teachers. Seth certainly ‘makes learning fun’. A strong connection to Fremantle was also evident as was their awareness of the importance of retaining its heritage. Their awareness of environmental issues and the need to care for the environment was impressive. Parents should also receive a ‘guernsey’ as the children painted pictures of a happy family life and those children not living with both parents maintained close and loving relationships with both mum and dad and their extended families.

Below are some examples to illustrate the material collected:

Schooling

‘Seth Yeoman is a good teacher who believes you should have fun while learning, as it makes it easier to learn. He gets you involved and does more science lessons than other teachers.’ (Eli aged 11)¹⁰

School uniform ‘is boring, it’s more fun to wear what you want ... In a small school you get to know each other better.’ (Abraham aged 11)¹¹

‘Primary School is more having fun and just being a kid and wearing whatever you want, but high school is more serious, learn more – real scary ... You don’t have to worry about wearing something stupid.’ (Anaise aged 12)¹²

The best thing about school is the way our school teaches us and how we cooperate together.’ (Sagi aged 11)¹³

‘You get to draw and it’s not too much of a strain on your mind ... you just get to paint freely and express your feelings on paper really. School tries not to be too bossy and everything and it’s quite a close community. You do get to interact with the other classes.’ (Jaedyn aged 11)¹⁴

‘Bullying is not good. Ways to prevent – ask the bully questions such as “Why did you do that; you should apologise?” If they continue you no longer hang out with them. You can help or talk to the person bullied and talk to the teacher’. (Kaleb aged 11 years)¹⁵

Family life and friends

‘Friends are people you feel really comfortable with. You can tell them if something is bothering you. They make you feel better in every way. Cousins and friends are the special people in my life. Friends are cool, funny (make you laugh) and make you feel better.’ (Klaudia aged 10)¹⁶

‘He’s really cool.’ (Abraham aged 11, referring to his father, a chef)¹⁷

Meaning of friendship: ‘Talking to them and hanging out with them and complimenting them on things that they want to do.’ (Jaedyn aged 11)¹⁸

‘I don’t know what kind of person I am ... I try to be friendly but I don’t know if it works or not. ... I’d like to be the kind of person who has lots of friends, that everybody likes and everybody can get on with, yes that kind of person. ... I like being happy, it’s better than being sad.’ (Jaedyn aged 11)¹⁹

‘Everybody is my best friend. ... Friendship keeps you from loneliness.’ (Sagi aged 11)²⁰

Childhood

'I think it's much better being a kid these days than it probably was back then with all the worries of there being a war coming to Fremantle and getting the cane.' (Marley aged 12)²¹

View of his own children's childhood: 'They will probably have an easier childhood than I had, maybe, with new technology and such. They'll have it easier, but it will still kind of be the same.' (Marley aged 12)²²

Heroes and special people – 'Mum and Dad and every now and then my brother... Bear Grylls (Army commando) the presenter of "Man v. Wild" who goes into dangerous wilderness areas like Patagonia and tells you how to survive.' (Eli aged 11 years)²³

Leisure activities

'My voice is my instrument. I sing a lot.' (Anaise aged 12)²⁴

'I like reading because you can go into your own world and have a little bit of your own time.' (Sagi aged 11)²⁵

'It depends on the day of the week; it could be dancing, circus, or learning to play the piano and violin. If I am free I visit friends or just relax at home.' (Ella aged 12)²⁶

Religion

Perception of God, a man with a 'big white cloak and a large beard, really the stereotypical kind of God ... I believe in some kind of deity, but not really a particular one.' (Marley aged 12)²⁷

'I believe in Buddha ... Buddha is the most realistic one ... [He is] kind, helpful and gentle.' (Sagi aged 11)²⁸

Fremantle and its heritage buildings

'I enjoy the vibe of Fremantle, it's mellow and nice. In Perth [the capital city] no one would greet you; people are not good at walking and bump into you. In Fremantle they move smoothly and walk together. You can be anything you want to be in Fremantle. It doesn't matter if you are a guy wearing say a pink top or funny shoes, people do not really take notice or laugh at you.' (Ari aged 12 years)²⁹

'If you don't keep the old buildings you won't know as much about your past.' (Abraham aged 11)³⁰

'Old buildings create a better atmosphere and it feels warmer when you're around them and it kind of represents Fremantle to me.' (Sagi aged 11)³¹

Environmental Issues

'If I was in charge of the world for a day I would get rid of all the oil, money making people, make all the rich give up half of their money to third world countries, get rid of single car travellers, encourage people to take public transport or ride a bike.' (Ella aged 12).³²

'At home I turn off my computer and gaming console after use to save energy.' (Kaleb 11 year old)³³

'If I was in charge of Australia I would make a special day when you weren't allowed to use your car. ... and if I was in charge of the world I would ban smoking and have a day where you couldn't use anything electronic.' (Abraham aged 11)³⁴

Attitudes towards drugs and alcohol

'Drugs should not be used unless for medicinal purposes. You could overdose really easily and your life would never be the same again. Last year we had drug and education lessons. It is dangerous to drink and drive it can ruin your life in seconds.' (Ari aged 12)³⁵

'Alcohol is okay as long as you don't have too much.' (Abraham aged 11)³⁶

Body image

'It does not matter if you are fat or thin, it depends on how you are on the inside.' (Kaleb 11 year old)³⁷

'You shouldn't be mean to someone because of their appearance.' (Anaise aged 12)³⁸

'If you are fat then you kind of get thrown out of the community and you don't get as many friends and things like that and people make fun of you and it can be really tough. But if you're super thin then people can also do that ... If they are a good person and people like them then it wouldn't matter if they were fat or thin.' (Jaedyn aged 11)³⁹

Being fat or thin: 'I don't want to hear that from my friends. I don't want to hear them putting down themselves from something that's just there.' (Sagi aged 11)⁴⁰

Attitudes towards migrants and refugees

'Australia is a nice place, so good to share it with others who have come from not so nice places.' (Ella aged 12 years)⁴¹

'Should not say no to people coming in if they are different.' (Anaise aged 12)⁴²

'If I was in charge of the world I'd make it so that it's okay if you're different, because some people don't like it if others are different.' (Sagi aged 11)⁴³

Future

'I am worried about climate change and the economy. During the financial crisis I was worried that my parents would not afford to stay in their home. I must learn not to worry so much as I am only a kid. You have to be a kid while it lasts and not grow up too fast.' (Ari aged 12 years)⁴⁴

'On leaving school I would like to go to university, particularly London University as I love old buildings. I am unsure what to study at present but interested in being a Naturopath, a Biologist or a Doctor.' (Ella aged 12 years)⁴⁵

On plans for planned future career as a chef: 'I like food, I like the smells of the food and I like getting my hands in and making the food really ... Being a chef means that you've got to find ways to make your food unique and also very tasty ... you've got to manage it well and be very friendly.' (Jaedyn aged 11)⁴⁶

After the interview

After the interview the recordings were downloaded into the Library's server and our computers for safekeeping and the preparation of summaries. An inexpensive CD was burnt to allow the child and parent/parents to listen to the recording and note any corrections/additions they would like to include. In one case a minor piece of editing was necessary where a child was too open and disclosed their address. The inexpensive CD, summary, parent letter and 'conditions of use' form were then sent to the parent/parents via the school. A stamped addressed envelope was included to aid the speedy return of the documentation.

Once approval had been obtained an archival CD (Prodisc) was burnt, audio checked and sent to the parent/parents via the school. Additional discs were also burnt for the Library (access and offsite copies) and the School for later presentation.

Problems encountered

Very few problems were encountered during the project. In only two cases did we have to chase up documentation; one child told a whopper about his religion and another made a few inaccurate statements. The latter's Mother noted that these were her son's perceptions and allowed them to stand. Clarifications were made in the summary footnotes. Generally speaking parents were delighted with the interviews and at least one was very moved by what her son had to say.

Overview

In all, ten interviews were completed by May, providing a fascinating insight into childhood in Fremantle today (leisure activities, holidays, heroes, concerns, attitudes, feelings about Fremantle, etc).

We found the experience both challenging and insightful (the recording environment, lack of pre-interviews, no prior experience interviewing children, how much fun we had interviewing,). We were impressed with the students' maturity, knowledge of environmental issues and their joy and pride in the school. A great deal was learnt in the process (fascinating pets, hobbies, attitudes to religion, teaching methods, etc).

Below are some examples of unexpected insights:

'I have a two year old Stimson's python named Monty. She is very friendly and not poisonous. When I was small she bit my finger and tore a bit of skin off because she could smell mouse on my fingers. Would not like to get bitten now, as she is a lot stronger. Monty eats one to two mice per week.' (Eli aged 11 years)⁴⁷

'I am not religious and do not believe in God. I think of him as a little man in the clouds with a beam of light shining down to earth.' (Ella aged 12 years)⁴⁸

'We have three cats; Peppy (a big, flop ball who likes to lick people), Peaches (a gangster cat that likes to fight) and Archie (originally an abandoned kitten but now really big.) Also a dog named Lucy (a lazy staffi/blue healer/kelpie).' (Ari aged 12 years)⁴⁷

Conclusion

Viewed in hindsight the material collected so far makes a striking comparison with the childhood of yesteryear and the Library hopes to conduct a similar project with a government school next year.⁵⁰ Researchers will be able to access the material in the Local History Collection of the Library, which is open Monday to Friday 9.30am – 5.00pm.⁵¹

The formal presentation of the interviews was delayed until one of the interviewers returned from overseas.

The Library and interviewers would like to acknowledge the support received from the school, parents and children involved in the project. The teachers made us welcome and the children were a delight to meet and interview. After each session we left the building with smiles on our faces and a growing belief in, and respect for, the youth of today – reinforced by each interview.

A final word of parental advice passed onto one 12 year old boy 'Don't grow up too fast and always wear a helmet when riding.' (Ari aged 12 years)⁵²

(Endnotes)

- 1 The Esplanade Reserve (4 acres) is a short walk from the school and used by the students for sport and games.
- 2 Rhonda Jamieson, *Young, old and in between: exploring family memories across the generations: how to interview for family history*, Library Board of Western Australia, Perth, 2005.
- 3 Daphne Keats 'Interviewing children' in Daphne Keats, *Interviewing: a practical guide for students and professionals*, USW Press, Sydney, 2000, pp.91-100.
- 4 Harvey is an agricultural town situated 139 kms south of Perth. A group of volunteers in the town established an oral history group and conducted many interviews in the 1980s and 1990s which they deposited with the J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, Perth.
- 5 This collection is comprised of the following:

St Anne's Primary School Students, interviewed by Elaine Green, 1992, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/10.

Harvey Primary School children, interviewed by Bev Seaward, 1992, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/11.

Harvey Primary School children, interviewed by Bev Seaward, 1991, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/14.

St Anne's Primary School children, interviewed by Elaine Green and T.Kenny, 1991, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/15.

Harvey pre-school children, interviewed by Elaine Green, 1989, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/16.

Australind Pre-Primary children, interviewed by Elaine Green, 1991, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/17.

Brunswick and District Pre-School children, interviewed by Elaine Green, 1991, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/18.

Harvey Pre-Primary children, interviewed by Elaine Green, 1990, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/19.

Yarloop Pre Primary School children, interviewed by J.Mizen, 1991, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/20.

Leschenault Catholic Pre Primary School children, interviewed by Elaine Green, 1991, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/21.

Harvey Primary School children, interviewed by Bev Seaward, 1991, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/22.

Harvey pre-school children, interviewed by Elaine Green, 1991, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/23.

St Anne's Pre-Primary children, interviewed by J.Cussons and K. Davis, 1991, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/24.

Harvey Primary School children, interviewed by Bev Seaward, 1993, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/27.

St Anne's Pre-Primary School children, interviewed by Kerry Davis, 1992, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, OH/2311/28.

Harvey Pre-Primary School children, interviewed by Bev
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 A Working with Children Check (WWCC) is a national criminal history check required by individuals working with children (under 18 years of age) and young people in certain categories of child related work in W.A. and the territories of Christmas Island and Cocos Islands. The checks are carried out by the Working with Children Screening Unit. The work involved can be paid, unpaid or of a voluntary nature within an organisation or the individual can be self employed. Once the application is approved a WWC Card is issued which lasts for three years provided one is not charged with or convicted of certain offences during this period. Costs vary depending on your category of employment. See www.checkwwc.wa.gov.au for further details.
- 8 Margaret was self employed at the time but did work as an oral historian at Fremantle City Library 1998-2004. She is a member of OHAA (WA).
- 9 Mills and Ware (later Arnott, Mills and Ware) was a cake and biscuit factory that operated in South Fremantle from 1897 to 1992. For many years the company issued a small brown case (25x15x5cm) filled with biscuits at the Royal Agricultural Show. Children later used these cases to carry their books and lunch to school.
- 10 Eli interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 17and 24 February 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 11 Abraham interviewed by Heather Campbell, 29 April 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 12 Anaise interviewed by Heather Campbell, 22and 29 April 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 13 Sagi interviewed by Heather Campbell, 13 May 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 14 Jaedyn interviewed by Heather Campbell, 20 May 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 15 Kaleb interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 4 and 11 March 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 16 Klaudia interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 24and 25 February 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 17 Abraham interviewed by Heather Campbell, 29 April 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 18 Jaedyn interviewed by Heather Campbell, 20 May 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 19 ibid
- 20 Sagi interviewed by Heather Campbell, 13 May 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 21 Marley interviewed by Heather Campbell, 5 May 2012, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 22 ibid
- 23 Eli interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 17and 24 February 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.

- 24 Anaise interviewed by Heather Campbell ,22and 29 April 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 25 Sagi interviewed by Heather Campbell, 13 May 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 26 Ella interviewed by Lorraine Stevens,11and 18 March 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 27 Marley interviewed by Heather Campbell, 5 May 2012, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 28 Sagi interviewed by Heather Campbell, 13 May 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN
- 29 Ari interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 25 February and 4 March 2010 CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 30 Abraham interviewed by Heather Campbell, 29 April 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 31 Sagi interviewed by Heather Campbell, 13 May 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 32 Ella interviewed by Lorraine Stevens,11and 18 March 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 33 Kaleb interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 4 and 11 March 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 34 Abraham interviewed by Heather Campbell, 29 April 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 35 Ari interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 25 February and 4 March 2010 CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN
- 36 Abraham interviewed by Heather Campbell, 29 April 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN
- 37 Kaleb interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 4 and 11 March 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 38 Anaise interviewed by Heather Campbell ,22and 29 April 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 39 Jaedyn interviewed by Heather Campbell, 20 May 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 40 Sagi interviewed by Heather Campbell, 13 May 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN
- 41 Ella interviewed by Lorraine Stevens,11and 18 March 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 42 Anaise interviewed by Heather Campbell ,22and 29 April 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 43 Sagi interviewed by Heather Campbell, 13 May 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 44 Ari interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 25 February and 4 March 2010 CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 45 Ella interviewed by Lorraine Stevens,11and 18 March 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 46 Jaedyn interviewed by Heather Campbell, 20 May 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 47 Eli interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 17and 24 February 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library ,OH/LAN.
- 48 Ella interviewed by Lorraine Stevens,11and 18 March 2010, CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 49 Ari interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 25 February and 4 March 2010 CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN.
- 50 Unfortunatley this project has not advanced as the Government Schools approached to date are not willing to participate. We hoped to compare the experiences of children attending an independent community school with those going to a Government School.
- 51 H. Campbell and L. Stevens, *Lance Holt School Project*,2010 Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN
- 52 Ari interviewed by Lorraine Stevens, 25 February and 4 March 2010 CD and summary held by Fremantle City Library, OH/LAN

‘The other thing was...’: the reciprocal interview relationship and the impact of ‘unconnected’ traumatic memories

Christin Quirk

[This paper has been peer reviewed]

Abstract

In November 2009 a research project commissioned and funded by the Royal Women’s Hospital (RWH), Melbourne, set out to investigate delivery and adoption practices in relation to single women who were confined at the hospital in the period 1945-1975. The RWH was responding to calls from relinquishing mothers to explain its past adoption practices. As a result of the research, the hospital has acknowledged the ongoing trauma and suffering of women who lost a child to adoption, and issued a formal apology.¹ Oral history was fundamental to uncovering these past practices and investigating claims that these were unethical or even illegal, as most remain undocumented.² In the context of the larger project, in-depth interviews of sixty to ninety minutes were conducted with thirteen single mothers, two of whom kept their babies. Their stories covered the period from 1963 to 1977. While the intention was to conduct interviews that covered the entire time span under investigation, attempts to locate women who were willing to speak of their experiences prior to 1963 were unsuccessful. The objective of this research was to develop an understanding of how the policies, practices, and staff attitudes of the RWH affected the experiences of single mothers who gave birth at the hospital during this time. For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to examine one interview from this project and explore the challenges it posed in creating a reciprocal interview relationship, particularly in dealing with traumatic memories.

Introduction

Although the use of oral history continues to be contested, recent Senate Inquiries such as those into the Stolen Generations, Forgotten Australians and former Child Migrants have helped to increase the acceptance of testimony as a legitimate source of evidence.³ While debates surrounding the validity of memory as an historical source raise important questions, particularly with regard to reliability and ‘factual’ evidence, this research places its emphasis on the *impact* of past adoption practice. Indeed, therein lies the value of oral history. As Alessandro Portelli explains in his

interviews with workers in Terni: ‘oral sources may not add much to what we know, for instance, of the material costs of a strike to the workers involved, but they tell us a good deal about its psychological costs’.⁴ With regard to mothers who have lost a child to adoption, oral history affords the greatest opportunity to understand the effects and psychological costs of past practices, as well as the potential for informing present practices with the evidence from those most affected.

Motivated by a need to ‘provide empirical evidence about undocumented experience, and to empower social groups that had been hidden from history’,⁵ Alistair Thomson maintains that oral history is a powerful methodological approach that allows access to previously undocumented material. As such, oral history is not only a source of material evidence, but a method that is ‘informed by the more complex understandings of memory and identity’ and which explores ‘the relationship between individual and collective remembering, between memory and identity, or between interviewer and interviewee’.⁶ It is these interactions and relationships that form key tensions and challenges in building a respectful and empathic interview relationship with women who have lost a child to adoption, particularly when unconnected traumatic memories intrude and have an impact upon the interview relationship.

History of Adoption in Victoria

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, up to forty-five per cent of Victorian unmarried mothers were separated from their babies by adoption. At this time, adoption was widely seen as a mutually advantageous solution to the joint social problems of infertility, illegitimacy and impoverishment. For the women interviewed, adoption claimed to offer moral and social redemption for both mother and child, but only through silence and concealment. As such, the unmarried pregnant woman often spent time in a maternity home or with a distant relative in order effectively to conceal her condition. It was seen to be an issue of preserving her

family's moral standing within the community: there was no doubt as to the embarrassment her condition would cause. The visibility of a woman's pregnancy has been characterised as 'moral bad luck',⁷ in that only she would bear the burden of punishment, while the father escaped admonishment. Prior to paternity testing, the onus of proof was placed on the mother and she needed to be willing to support an accusation of paternity in court—with witnesses. In addition to these legal obstacles, past adoption practices prohibited the recording of the father's name.⁸

The reasons why women felt obliged to turn to adoption are inevitably more complex. The availability of contraception, the legality of abortion, and the age requirements of marriage conspired to limit the choices available to the sexually active single woman. Combined with the role of the church, the continued stigma of illegitimacy and the invisibility of single mothers in the community into the mid-1970s, particularly as a result of inadequate financial support, choices were further restricted.⁹ With all other options exhausted and amid enormous social pressures, adoption often remained the only viable solution that ultimately offered salvation. Shurlee Swain and Renate Howe have argued that relinquishment was seen not only as 'a necessary pain', but more importantly within this construct of censure and blame, it was 'the only way in which she could regain her respectability'.¹⁰ It required the single mother to be complicit in her own punishment, as her absolute silence—about her pregnancy and relinquishment—was essential for her to move forward and 'get on with her life'.¹¹ This arrangement rendered these mothers invisible and unable to acknowledge their grief and loss.

After years of silence, support groups for women who had lost children to adoption were established in the early 1980s. The recognition afforded by these groups offered affirmation of individual experience, as well as an arena within which a language became available to express the unspoken experience. The availability of language is an important factor in determining whether individual remembrances can be publicly shared, particularly if these do not conform to dominant views (in this case that single mothers willingly surrendered their babies to adoption). In the 1980s, the emergent discourse in the adoption reform movement provided a language to describe these experiences, portraying adoption as an 'exploitative system in which the "rich and powerful" took advantage of the "poor and vulnerable"'.¹² However it must be noted that the stigma of illegitimacy and the perception that adoption provided the only solution was present across all social classes. Support groups provided a safe place within which the reform discourse spilled over and a counter-experience could be acknowledged. With a mantra of 'you are not alone', support groups also offered a space within which a re-visioning of personal identity

could occur and members could contest the dominant narrative. Within this context, the women interviewed were able to integrate the trauma of relinquishment into a larger narrative of manipulation and abuse at the hands of those they trusted. But equally within this particular group narrative, there is no room for a positive experience of relinquishment.¹³

Current Research

Although much research is currently being undertaken into past adoption practices in Australia, very little work has yet focused on analysing the narratives of the mothers. Writing in the early 1990s, Judith Modell found that the language with which her narrators recounted their stories drew on the rhetoric developed within the American adoption reform movement and further 'popularised on television shows and in magazines and best-sellers'.¹⁴ This movement coincided with the emergence of self-help and support groups in which a collective memory of women's experiences developed. In the Australian context, the Victorian branch of the Association of Relinquishing Mothers, or ARMS, formed in 1982, follows a similar pattern. Despite expressing a belief that relinquishing mothers should refuse to be victimised, ARMS calls attention to the negative impact of relinquishment by emphasising the victimisation of the 'natural mother' at the hands of societal standards and (past) adoption practices. This is evidenced by the common feelings of 'guilt, shame, worthlessness and loss of self-esteem ... ultimately affecting their emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual health'.¹⁵

The use of mechanisms for creating a bearable and usable past is an essential tool for survivors of trauma and those dealing with traumatic memories, particularly because it is believed that 'such experiences produce shame, anger, often guilt in the victim, and are regarded as secrets rather than as stories to tell'.¹⁶ Mechanisms for dealing with traumatic events can include outright denial of the experience, repression or suppression of the memory, or even attempts to depersonalise the event. A working knowledge of the potential difficulties that could have arisen out of working with survivors of trauma was particularly pertinent while conducting interviews with mothers who lost a baby to adoption. It is not only the mothers themselves who insist that their experience be understood as traumatic; the Australian Institute of Family Studies report *Impact of Past Adoption Practices*, published in early 2010, stresses 'the usefulness of understanding past adoption practices as "trauma", and seeing the impact through a "trauma lens"'.¹⁷

This Project

In agreeing to be involved in this project, narrators were acutely aware of the opportunity it provided to

share their stories with a wider audience. Interviews were guided by and developed along terms dictated by the women themselves, whether this involved reinforcing a specific identity or conveying a political message. The motivation for women to place their stories on the public record became even more apparent after the commencement of a Senate Inquiry into past adoption practices.¹⁸ There is no doubt that the narratives shared in the course of this project have been composed in order to help women 'make sense' of their experiences. As Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzyck have pointed out, this construction operates not only in providing meaning for these memories, but also in 'finding a place for them in one's identity, [and] within the larger community's narrative'.¹⁹ This paper examines one interview which provides the most extreme and comprehensive example of this narrative identity, and as a result the challenges it presented for the interviewer. Margaret,²⁰ like the majority of the interviewees, was a member of ARMS. In 1970, she was an eighteen-year-old in a relationship when she discovered she was pregnant. This paper illustrates the ways in which Margaret was able to make sense of her pregnancy and the consequent relinquishment by arranging it within a narrative identity that had three key components. Firstly, she defined her trauma as both life-defining and lifelong. Secondly, and most surprisingly to me, she drew on out-dated social work theories to position herself as a 'typical' unmarried mother. Thirdly, she sought affirmation of this identity by challenging me to not just listen to her story, but to hear it, understand it, and even act on it in a way that had eluded her in the past. Within this context, I will examine how Margaret's self-perception, projection, and need for affirmation impacted on the relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

Within the first minute of the interview, indeed in response to the very first question, Margaret positioned herself as the victim of lifelong trauma. Her experience of relinquishment was just one of many traumatic episodes in her life:

The other thing was that I hadn't had an ordinary childhood or upbringing in that I had already experienced quite a bit of abuse in the family so I was very nervous about the whole thing, because I realised that I wasn't valued anyway, let alone being pregnant in those days was a very quick way to becoming even more devalued.²¹

This immediate disclosure surprised me; I had gone into the interview expecting that I would have to work to gain the trust of my participants. Given that the aim of the interview was to assess the impact of the adoption practices of the hospital on mothers, I chose not to directly pursue a line of questioning into the nature of her abuse. I was also acutely aware of my role as interviewer as opposed to therapist. However, throughout the interview, Margaret often returned to

the issue of her unhappy and unsupportive family life.

It is only in hindsight that it became apparent that Margaret was trying to integrate her experience of relinquishment by locating it within a bigger picture of ongoing trauma. As Valerie Yow has argued, 'people choose memories important to them: they repeat them over the years as they seek to reinforce meanings in their lives'.²² Memory is fundamentally charged with defining a person's identity and sense of self. According to Geoffrey Cubitt, a subjectivist approach to memory emphasises the consequence of such an assertion.

Memory is ... the central vehicle of subjectivity, crucially engaged in fabricating the inner meanings that we give to our psychic experience. Memory in this view is important chiefly as the primary locus of our sense of self and is assumed to be geared to maintaining that sense of self in the face of life's disruptive vicissitudes.²³

Therefore, central to the function of memory is its ability to provide justification and reinforcement for the ways in which we want to see ourselves, as well as the ways in which we want others to see us. Affirmation of identity is fundamental to these projections. It must also be noted that this multifaceted sense of identity changes over time, as the individual re-works old memories to fall in line with the new.

Although anchored in the past, memories are continually re-worked to reinforce meaning that is relevant to the present situation and to protect the individual's sense of self. The selection process is also dependent on 'present concerns and wider contexts including those of victimisation' as explored by Denise Phillips, in her work with Hazara refugees.²⁴ Memories must be framed within the context of current issues. For Margaret, not only was she recounting her experience of relinquishment at a time when interest in former forced adoption practice is high—influencing her selection of memories—but her identity and sense of self also play a decisive role in this selection. Having established her difficult childhood as the starting point for her sustained traumatic existence, Margaret went on to also recount the failure of her subsequent marriages:

I was married and the first husband left after my son was one month old and the second husband, it wasn't—that marriage didn't last, he had a drinking problem, and so I had to get out of that one.²⁵

Again, it was not until later that I stumbled on the work of Laura Brown and discovered that one traumatic event can trigger the recall of others, and as a result they become interconnected. Brown has suggested that a feminist perspective on psychic trauma can be useful in understanding it as an ongoing process, rather than a singular event. She proposes that we might begin to ask 'how many layers of trauma are being peeled off by what appears initially to be only one traumatic

event or process?’²⁶ And indeed this proved true for Margaret. While it was not apparent to me at the time of the interview, it has become increasingly obvious that the ‘unconnected’ traumatic memories that were intruding into the interview were not so ‘unconnected’ after all. For Margaret, these memories were equally important in defining her sense of self, with each instance in which she was devalued by her family, and then her two husbands, bearing consistently with her treatment as a single, pregnant woman.

The motivation for Margaret to define herself in a particular way is also consistent with the findings of Modell who identifies the challenges which women who have lost children to adoption face in dealing with the ‘inconsistencies in the cultural meaning of being a parent’.²⁷ Like her narrators, my interviewees were compelled to explain and to justify their status as a ‘childless mother’ to the outside audience. They needed to justify the ‘mistake’ of having a baby at the ‘wrong time’ and their ‘consent’ to adoption. At a time when motherhood was highly celebrated, the maternal status of these women was denied. During my interview with Margaret, I was particularly caught off-guard by her identification with the out-dated theories of American social worker Leontine Young in the justification of her experience:

Margaret: So in other words, I had a real need to have a baby because I had no love. There was no love at home.

CQ: Is this the psychology of the time or the—?

Margaret: No, no, this is my understanding of children who have been very deprived...

In the early 1950s, Leontine Young developed an enduring pseudo-psychiatric analysis of the unmarried mother.²⁸ Unplanned pregnancies, she argued, were wilfully premeditated. She further insisted that ‘anyone who has observed a considerable number of unmarried mothers can testify to the fact that there is nothing haphazard or accidental in the causation that brought about this specific situation with these specific girls’.²⁹ Young believed that the act of falling pregnant was an indication of an unwed mother’s dysfunctional family relationships and unfulfilled desires. There is no doubt that these key components are well aligned with Margaret’s projected identity. Young’s theory was widely accepted amongst social workers into the 1960s, but it was also picked up to various degrees in the wider population. Challenges to these perceptions were evident by the 1970s: with the increasing visibility and acceptance of single mothers in the community, ‘illegitimacy [was] no longer something that happened invariably by accident or as a response to unconscious needs. It [could] be a conscious choice’.³⁰

I was astonished when Margaret connected so strongly with these views and I asked her to clarify what she

meant. She proceeded to explain her understanding of why she had fallen pregnant, finally trailing off into silence. Although I paused to allow her to continue, I sheepishly returned to the focus of the interview when her gaze met mine once again. I was aware of Mark Klempner’s advice to expect the unexpected, especially in the case of trauma survivors, whom he argues ‘may have defense [sic] mechanisms in place that might make their responses sound strange or “off”’;³¹ however, I was still caught off-guard by her line of reasoning. Upon later reflection I was reminded of Mark Roseman’s research with Holocaust survivor Marianne Ellenbogen, particularly in the way a ‘re-working’ of memories can be used to make painful memories more bearable. Perhaps for Margaret, the belief that she represented a ‘typical’ single mother allowed her ‘to impose some control on a memory which could not otherwise be borne’.³²

However, the most confronting aspect of the interview was the way in which Margaret challenged me to really listen to her story, asserting that no one outside her circle of shared experience ever had. At the time of her pregnancy, Margaret recalls that no one wanted to know that she was single and pregnant. She pleaded with me to listen and validate her story.

People that found out about it later said, ‘Oh you should have told me. I would have helped you,’ but I did tell people and they all acted like I wasn’t speaking. I told a number of people and no one wanted to know about it. No one wanted to know. It was like I didn’t say anything and then they would move on to the next sentence, the next subject. Like I didn’t say a word; like no one could deal with it. It was like some sort of—it was like me saying ‘I just went down the street and murdered someone’.³³

At moments like this the interviewer’s response is critical. In this instance, I immediately reacted to Margaret’s intentionally shocking statement, almost interrupting her in my attempt to reassure her that I heard what she said; I restated her response and with this encouragement, she elaborated further. Harold Kaplan and Benjamin Sadock maintain the importance of empathy and ‘the capacity to put oneself into the psychological frame of reference of another and thereby understand his or her thinking, feeling, and behaviour’.³⁴ Margaret’s concern that her voice was not being heard persisted throughout the interview and she again raised the issue of the silence with which her disclosure was met. Fumbling through her response, she stated:

It was just quiet. There was this silence thing. People all just went ‘Oh’ and just changed the subject because what could they say? There was nothing. They could say, ‘Well, why don’t you keep the child Margaret and then you could go on this benefit or there’s homes where they look after people with their babies.’ No one—there wasn’t

hardly anything—I found out later there was some home, but I was never told about it at the time. But people—when there is no solution they’re inclined to just you know move on to the next subject because what can they say to me?³⁵

Margaret also recalls that the child’s father denied ever being told of the pregnancy, despite her insistence that she had—another instance when I became acutely aware of my obligation to listen:

CQ: Did you ever tell the child’s father that you were pregnant or was that a discussion that you had?

Margaret: Oh, I told people. Yes, I told him. He already had another woman pregnant and he was going to marry her. But, her parents would have kept her and the child. I’ve spoken to him since. Anyway, he said, ‘Oh you didn’t tell me,’ and I said, ‘Yes, I did, I told you.’ Lots of people, too, they all make out that they would have helped if they had known, but I did tell them. They did know. There’s all—massive denial, massive denial. So yeah, it was a terrible thing.³⁶

But how then do we listen? Cathy Caruth has pointed out that ‘there is no single approach to listening to the many different traumatic experiences and histories we encounter. The irreducible specificity of traumatic stories requires in its turn the varied responses—responses of knowing and acting—of literature, film, psychiatry, neurobiology, sociology, and political and social activism’.³⁷ I felt that no amount of knowing would equip me for the challenge presented by Margaret during this interview. I reiterated responses, I paused to allow her to expand, I tried to empathise and value her responses in a way that had eluded her at the time. My carefully planned open-ended questions and preparation seemed less than adequate. In the words of Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki: ‘what we plan on paper is never quite the same as what we experience in practice’.³⁸ Given that the aim of the interview was to assess the impact the adoption practices of the hospital had on mothers, Margaret’s diversions from this central issue disturbed me and initially appeared irrelevant. It was not until much later when I revisited the interview: listening to the audio, reading through the transcript, and having conducted other interviews in the same vein that I realised the importance and implications of these diversions: there is no single trauma and the adoption practices of the hospital can only be assessed as part of these women’s trauma.

To some extent, Margaret’s ability to share her story in the present provides the opportunity to overcome her sense of having been ignored in the past—in this case particularly by having someone listen to her pleas for help. Self-perception, projection, and the need to be

heard are integral to personal identity and the need to tell is a vital component to the story. As Portelli points out, ‘oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did’.³⁹ The opportunity to share her story has provided Margaret with the opportunity to overcome the injustices of the past: the silence, the separation, and the guilt. Telling, then, fulfils a therapeutic role as well as satisfying a more compulsive need to justify past actions. Dori Laub refers to the ‘imperative to tell’, in which a narrator may be compelled to constantly re-tell their story, yet warns of the risks of it becoming an all-consuming life task where no amount of telling seems to ever be enough. He says: ‘There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory* and *speech*’.⁴⁰ The dimensions of this need to tell are evident in the more than four hundred submissions to the Senate Inquiry into past adoption practices⁴¹ and the current research undertaken by AIFS on the Service Response to Past Adoption Experiences, in which seventy-six per cent of respondents want to participate in follow up focus groups.⁴²

Conclusion

Without memory, individuals would have limited understanding of their role or place in their family, or even within the community. Memory is one of many resources or tools that an individual has available in order to make sense of, and feel a belonging to, the world in which they are living. As oral historians, we access these personal memories for particular purposes and must be mindful of protecting our participants and ourselves. The interview process presents a multitude of challenges; those posed by this interview were threefold. The first involved the intrusion of ‘unconnected’ traumatic memories, although upon reflection, it became apparent that these formed an integral part of Margaret’s narrative identity and were inextricably linked to the trauma of relinquishment on which my research was focused. Secondly, I was caught off-guard by Margaret’s unexpected response to, and understanding of her unplanned pregnancy. Finally I was confronted by an interview that left me feeling like I lacked the listening skills and capacity to respond in a way that was appropriate to her demands. Each of these issues have reminded me of the sage advice of Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack who underline the collaborative nature of the oral history interview, and in particular the ‘fine line between accomplishing our research goals and letting the subject be in charge of the material in the interview’.⁴³

By responding to the challenge to listen together, we produced an interview which both yielded rich data for my research and satisfied, at least partially, Margaret’s

need to be heard. Despite feeling that I had reacted inappropriately to her identification with Young's theories, the further questioning provided me with a deeper understanding of Margaret, her perception of herself, and her understanding of her relinquishment experience. And while careful planning and preparation are always advised, as interviewers we must also be open to the unexpected: by sharpening our listening skills and pausing a little longer after each response.

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Creating and confronting community: Suicide stories in central Australia¹

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[This paper has been peer reviewed]

Abstract

Suicide is surrounded by stigma and silence, leaving individuals and communities in a wasteland of ignorance about how to prevent it or how to properly support the bereaved. I know. As one of the bereft, I've experienced the destruction silence can reap. I've also witnessed the healing that breaking the silence can bring. So when I was asked to record the stories of those bereaved by suicide as the first stage in challenging community stigma and creating an audio based community of support for the bereft, I leapt at the chance, even as my mother worried. But does my own experience help or hinder the interview process? Do I disclose, and if so, what and when? Is suicide bereavement really the same? Is breaking the silence everyone's cure? Is there a community to create after all? And what has being on both sides of the interview divide taught me about my 'mainstream' oral history practice and the wisdom of 'ordinary' people? This article is a reflective exploration of professional practice.

Introduction

If Albert Camus was right when he said that the only serious philosophical question facing mankind is suicide², then I'm privileged to have spent most of my life in suicide's shadow.

The opening lines of the paper I delivered at the Community of Memory's Conference in Melbourne, which I read word for word from the printed page, were carefully crafted for tone. I wanted to sweep away the cobwebs of pity which so often, in my personal experience, accompany discussions of suicidal loss. I wanted to sound and feel confident. I needed to dam a public display of grief. Though I have told my story many times in the intimate confines of informal conversation, this was the first time I had told it in a formal setting to an audience of strangers. I was scared; scared that tears once started would not stop. Though I am not sure I agree with Camus, the idea of suicide as a philosophical question rather than a social problem comforts. Starting a presentation with this idea was designed to calm my emotions. It worked. My paper, the compressed attempt to explore some of the ethical issues associated with an oral history project which

mixed the personal and professional was delivered without emotional interruption.

Project description

The 'Bereaved-By-Suicide Audio Project', was commissioned by the Mental Health Association of Central Australia (MHACA), a local non-government organisation respected for developing innovative mental health services, particularly in the area of suicide prevention.³ The idea, imagined in large brush strokes, was to harvest the wisdom of lived experience by interviewing people who had lost someone to suicide. The project anticipated recent recommendations about the 'importance of incorporating lived experience into suicide related policy development, research and practical interventions'.⁴ Unlike other projects which have interviewed the bereaved, MHACA was concerned to document the life of the bereaved not the life of the person who had killed themselves.⁵ Despite a proliferation of bereavement services in recent years, the 'personal (health and wellbeing) and social costs of suicide and self-harm on those bereaved' is 'not known'.⁶ We wanted to understand what enables and what hinders the quality of life for those 'left behind'.⁷ We wanted to document resilience as well as loss. The focus on personal rather than professional wisdom echoes the many statements in which the recently bereft attest to the usefulness of advice they have received from other bereaved individuals.⁸ My own story was integral to my appointment to the project.⁹

Once collected, the wisdom of the bereaved would be edited to encapsulate whatever themes of shared experience emerged. It would then be used in radio based community awareness campaigns, community workshops, an audio library, telephone waiting audio - an informative alternative to silence or muzak - and/or radio documentaries.¹⁰

The project was geographically anchored in Central Australia. The Northern Territory has a suicide rate twice the national Australian average.¹¹ Where suicide in the rest of Australia appears to have reached a plateau, in Central Australia it continues to rise.¹² Focussing on place rather than the relationship of the suicider to the bereaved - client, mother, child, spouse etc. - was also quite new.

Oral History or Journalism

It was the place-based focus of the project which prompted me to consider recording oral histories rather than journalistic style interviews. As Mark Feldstein has observed, these two ‘related but separate’ forms of interlocution are ‘the kissing cousins’, of the audio world.¹³ Differences derive from the realities of professional practice.

Radio journalists, unlike many oral historians, have first hand knowledge of the incredible amount of time it takes to ‘distil the essence’¹⁴ of recorded experience through the editing process. As a result, journalists almost invariably think of the recorded interview as their property, to do with as they like the moment the Record button is turned off, a view supported by Australia’s copyright laws.¹⁵ Oral historians, on the other hand, at least the ones I had come across at the time this project was conceived, have regarded the interview as the ‘property’ of the interviewee, to be listened to and approved by ‘the subject’ before being accessioned, edited or published.¹⁶ The difference is evident in the very different attitudes to the practice of obtaining written consent. Oral historians have been diligent about its collection; radio journalists assume consent is given by the act of participation.¹⁷

Influenced by Eurydice Aroney’s discussions about recording abortion stories for the production of a radio documentary,¹⁸ I thought an oral history approach more appropriate to a project focussed on collecting sensitive personal stories about a little discussed and frequently stigmatised topic.¹⁹ There was a sense of protectiveness here too. I wanted my interviewees to vet their stories before they went public. I wanted the responsibility for what was ‘publishable’ to be theirs, not mine.

Intimate knowledge of editing also means that media interviews are usually shorter and less open to the exploration of unexpected conversational pathways than their oral history counterparts. In my own experiences of documentary journalism, interviewees were selected to meet the audio needs of pre-determined narratives based on research already done.²⁰ Questions were determined before the interview began and the same questions were required to be asked of all interviewees.²¹ An excellent approach for a genre at the public and promotional end of the research spectrum, it is less suited to a project like this one, exploring a topic about which little is currently known. The time spent on the traditional formalities of personal genealogy with which oral histories usually begin, would also provide a relatively neutral emotional space in which to build rapport and a space to retreat to if and when the interview entered difficult emotional terrain.

The fact that the Northern Territory Archives Service (NTAS) was, at the time this project began, actively soliciting oral history interviews and managing the

processes, including transcription, associated with giving the interviewees a chance to vet their interviews contributed significantly to the final decision. NTAS’s ability to store completed interviews in a publicly accessible catalogued archive would also enable future ‘discovery’ increasing the project’s longevity, something encouraged by a social scientist colleague who is also a member of ‘the community’ of the bereaved. NTAS’s audio migration program was an added attraction, given that the project commenced during that very small moment in recent historical time when tape was ‘out’, mini-discs were ‘in’ and cheap portable hard drives had yet to be invented. The rapidity of this technological change was deleting from the audio archive of the future the recorded interviews of those individuals and organisations that lacked the temporal and financial resources required to keep up with audio migration tasks. Neither MHACA nor I wanted the interviews we did, especially because these stories would be hard to tell, to disappear into technologically driven early obsolescence. Depositing them in a government archive would ensure their migration as well as providing research materials for future social scientists, students of emotional history and local historians.

The search for truth

History, journalism and social science – the disciplines for which these interviews were being created – have in common a desire to construct some kind of ‘verifiable truth’.²² Though the goal of objectivity is now widely recognised as impossible to achieve because perspective blankets everything we do,²³ aiming for evidential truths is important,²⁴ otherwise what is there to separate history from fiction? Giving contemporary radio audiences and the researchers of the future as much background information as possible about the project would, I thought, assist the journey to truth by enabling my own subjectivities to be taken into account in the way both individual interviews and the MHACA collection could be interpreted/understood.²⁵ This meant documenting my own story. As an historian who has researched an historical event in which I have also been a participant,²⁶ I was also very curious to know how the recording of other people’s bereavement experiences would change my own narrative.

The easiest way to record interviewer influence and narrative change was to record my own oral history as part of the project collection. I hoped that by going first I would be able to identify some of the emotional turbulence the subject matter was sure to elicit and get my own story ‘out of the way’ so I could listen properly to the experiences of others.

The project manager, a trained mental health worker with limited formal interviewing experience, was

happy to conduct the interview. It would help her understand the oral history process and acquire some of the skills for conducting spontaneous oral history interviews herself should the opportunity arise in the course her work which includes running suicide prevention workshops in remote Northern Territory communities. It would also, we hoped, help us share her professional and my instinctual knowledge of the subject.

The interview as performance

The value of deciding to do my own interview revealed itself very quickly when it became apparent that both the project manager and I were procrastinating about when the interview would take place. It was easy to let busy work agendas overshadow our personal fears. The project manager was nervous about what questions to ask and how to frame them. I was worried about how what I said would be heard. These pre-interview nerves gave me more compassion for those interviewees who subsequently broke their interview appointments.

Pre-interview procrastination also made me realise that though it is not quite as physically nerve wracking as giving a speech at a conference, or talking to a reporter who wants to publish a recorded interview on local radio or national TV, a recorded oral history interview, especially one destined for a public collection, is also another kind of public performance. I was beginning to worry about who would come across my story, what they would think about it and as a consequence, what they would think about me. Telling people you are the child of a man who killed himself is, as one of my interviewees pointed out, a bit like 'coming out' as gay²⁷ and though I have told my story to many people, I choose the who, when and how.

Pausing to fill out the boxes on the consent forms was tangible evidence of the performance's beginning and its public purpose. The choices relating to public access were, I have since reflected, too simple for the emotionally complex terrain I was about to enter. Either I gave NTAS 'carte blanche' control or readers had to get my written permission for access. As a social historian and radio broadcaster who hates harassing people for interviews on difficult subjects and wishes more taboo subjects were in archives, I wanted to give 'carte blanche' access. But as an individual with a deeply personal story, who lives in a community with two rather than six degrees of people separation, and who is aware that many non-professionals access the NTAS collection, I also wanted to know who knew my story, but after the event, not before.

In this sense a conference paper is easier to deliver than a recorded interview. In a conference I can see who is listening and monitor their reaction. In an audio recording destined for an archive I cannot. I am performing for people who sit in another temporal and

geographic space from me. Though an oral history interview feels like an intimate conversation it is also an act of publication, albeit more akin to the production of a limited edition artist's book than a best selling novel.

'Coming out' in an oral history interview also feels more dangerous than disclosing oneself to colleagues in the pages of a professional publication or 'coming out' in a radio broadcast. Why?

In a written text, uncontrollable emotions - like anger, tears or shame which can sneak up on the bereaved unawares - can be deleted from the reader's view with much greater ease than they can be stifled in conversation. The very act of having a journal article accepted for publication signals that our thoughts are socially acceptable. Rightly or wrongly, it also feels less likely that I will be judged negatively writing for a community of oral historians, many of whom have collected much more difficult stories than the ones told here. Practicing oral historians will I assume have at least considered issues of confidentiality and ethics. The many non-professional readers of a transcript in a public archive may not have considered them before. And then there is the matter of context and surprise. I would expect to run into readers of the Oral History Journal in professional contexts - meetings and conferences - rather than on the streets of Alice Springs. In contrast, visitors to the NTAS archive can surprise me with their knowledge anywhere at anytime.

A radio broadcast - at least until the arrival of podcasts - is also more like ordinary conversation in its occupancy of a passing moment. Though small passages of spoken word might be repeated back at you to clarify meaning, no one can ever guarantee that the repetition was exactly the same as the original utterance, or repeat lengthy monologues on first hearing. This is why it is better to speak criticisms than write them. Pause and repeat buttons solidify conversational text. This can be very scary for those of us who think with our mouths wide open, by playing with words, rather than speaking only those thoughts that are fully formed. A real time broadcast has temporal boundaries in a way an open-ended archival deposit does not.

In the end, though I participated in my own oral history interview, I delayed signing the consent form, a privilege I was not so ready to grant to my interviewees.²⁸ I also delayed the delivery of the actual recordings, convincing myself that they did not need to be part of the collection until after everyone else's interviews were done. Public exposure of deeply personal stories can feel like being caught in the act of swimming naked by a fully clothed crowd one can hear but cannot see.

Microphone induced reticence and emotional authenticity

As a radio broadcaster I have observed, often with despair, how the physical presence of a microphone, the most obvious signal of recorded interview as public performance, changes the conversational atmosphere. When the 'live to air' sign in the radio studio goes on, talk often becomes subdued; the moment it is turned off, studio conversations become frank and enlivening. The 'off air' conversations are the stuff of radio broadcast dreams. Trying to capture them, however, is like trying to find fairies at the bottom of my childhood garden, impossible unless one records without permission, an ethical and legal²⁹ 'no no' in contemporary Australian audio recording culture. Microphone reticence is so common, radio journalists' call those people who don't have it 'talent' and seek them out to interview.³⁰ I am, as the local ABC will testify, 'good talent'. Microphones do not usually interfere with my speech.

It came therefore, as something of an enormous surprise to find myself bursting into tears the day my own oral history was recorded. Even more surprising than the tears, was the fact that they came at a point in my story which I had told many tearless times before and once started, were more than unusually hard to stop. Their appearance in the interview belied the lived experience of narrating my suicide story. When exactly the same thing happened to one of my interviewees, I asked myself 'why'? What was it about the formally recorded interview that changed the nature of my and other interviewees' emotional reactions? This was something different from the verbal reticence associated with a fear of hurting other people's feelings through the public expression of ideas usually spoken behind closed doors or of being publicly judged. Both tears had appeared in the middle of rehearsed and previously performed 'public' narratives.

Reflection suggested that the tears were triggered by the absence of ordinary conversational signals, the 'aahs', 'uhhuhs' and 'mmms', used in verbally focussed cultures to signal active listening and sympathy; sounds which appear more frequently in emotionally difficult conversations than in entertaining or news exchanging ones; sounds which form the staple diet of conversational security in the rooms of professional counsellors and psychiatrists even as they are entirely absent, or should be, in the professional sound recording.³¹ Though I regularly warn interviewees about their absence before I start recording and deliberately counter the silence with encouraging eye signs and head nods, I had not, until now, understood the emotional impact their absence wrought. Telling interviewees about interviewer silence now appears to me to be as important an interview task as setting the recording equipment up properly or completing

the paper work of formal consent. It is as essential to the short term 'emotional health' of the interview and its participants as it is to the production of an audio document authentic to the *lived* rather than *recorded* experiences of the interviewee. This is particularly important in an age where historians have moved beyond the study of political events and social transformations to the study of emotional states.

The interview as narrative influence

Though I was aware that the kinds of questions, their order and the language in which they were constructed would influence the quality of the interview produced and thought I knew that memories are, as Paula Hamilton beautifully puts it 'contingent and fluid'³² and hoped that the interviews produced would change listeners' attitudes to suicide, I had not anticipated the speed with which narrative transformations would take place or the fact that they would take place during the interview process itself.³³

The triggers for these epiphanies of self-understanding were some fairly obvious questions which the interviewees had apparently not asked themselves before. For me, it was being asked how it felt to have no siblings with whom to share my journey. My interviewer comes from a very large family. For another interviewee, for whom the idea of suicide was absolutely incomprehensible, it was the sudden realisation that her very Catholic upbringing may have influenced her incomprehension.³⁴ Another interviewee, who had spent years thinking the teacher-parents of her childhood friend could have stopped his suicide because teachers were professionals who knew 'the warning signs', realised that she had no idea what the warning signs for suicide were, even though she was now a teacher herself.³⁵

If all oral history interviews have similar contours which explorations of particularly sensitive topics merely highlight then what does it mean for our professional historical practice if the interview process not only describes memory, but changes it?³⁶ Should we be giving interviewees pre-prepared questions and sticking to them after all? Is the impact of this change greater in those interviews which are spread over several sessions and where recorded interviews are based on non-recorded pre-interviews? How can the oral historian monitor, limit and/or document their influence during the interview process or indeed know what, if any, changes are taking place? Though I have since come across the idea that oral histories, unlike written documents, don't just collect memories, they influence them,³⁷ I felt like I had 'discovered' this on my own, another good outcome of the decision to interview myself at the beginning of the project.

Even more of a surprise was the way in which, almost without exception, all the interviews I conducted triggered memories of suicides forgotten. My personal list tripled in size. This not only returned me to that complex set of emotions I had experienced when these people had killed themselves, but created a whole set of new ones. Was the act of forgetting an act of betrayal, as many of those who advocate monuments to atrocity contend?³⁸ Or is forgetting, that by-product of the silence which stigma and shock induces, also part of healing?³⁹ A long ago conversation with an old Aboriginal man in the Eastern goldfields of Western Australia returned to me. This man would not talk about past abuse, not because it had not happened, but because he did not want his children to carry the anger of past wrongs. He thought it would prevent them from engaging in mainstream community, from living happy and fulfilled lives. It was a similar logic which had informed my grandfather's advice to my newly widowed mother not to talk to me about my father's death. Though I still don't agree with this advice, remembering suicides I had forgotten helped me understand its logic, even as my mother finally understood mine the day, at my insistence, she told her friends how her first husband had died. She could not believe how big the burden of her undisclosed emotion had been. It was this very personal experience of the emotional relief that talk can bring that lay at the heart of my personal commitment to this project. I believed that recording the experiences of people who had talked their way into emotional release would help those who were still keeping their speech circles closed. But was that experience true for everyone?

Is there a community to create after all?

Awareness that my own story *was* different and might hinder rather than help the interview process came the day a potential interviewee (hereafter called the informant), someone who only talks to those who have also lost someone to suicide, told me that s/he felt like a victim of the way their⁴⁰ partner had chosen to die. I was stunned. One of the things I really hate about naming the way my father died is being treated like a victim. The pity which almost invariably follows belies the fact that my life has been easier without him than it was with him, an opinion my mother shares. Breaking through the almost unassailable cultural assumption that pity is the only and most appropriate response to suicide disclosure runs the risk of making me appear callous and disloyal to my father's passing and somehow complicit in his death; it is so much easier to stay silent than to speak my truth. Not to run the gauntlet of other people's un-nuanced responses is, however, to till the soils of the silence which helps make suicide 'the most stigmatised of human behaviours'.⁴¹ Challenging the automatic presumption of victimhood, though it can

appear uncharitably rude, is something I've done for years. It was absolutely inappropriate here.

Listening to this person's story, a story that I kept bumping into in the informal conversational spaces of Alice Springs, a story s/he refused to record, helped me understand why s/he could feel like a victim when I did not. The informant was a very much loved member of the Alice Springs community whose life and glowing happiness was admired by all. S/he was not the only one stunned by the partner's death. The partner had been the informant's best friend, the love of their life. There had been no previous suicide attempts or signs of mental illness; absolutely no one thought that this person would kill themselves. There was no room for error in the person's choice of death. There was no note, no explanation, nothing to console. For my informant, the partner's failure to disclose emotional pain was an act of love betrayed. It was death, divorce and a car accident rolled into one. This sense of victimhood was no more an absence of compassion for the loved one than my mother's sense of 'relief' that years of living with an emotionally absent, mentally ill, partner were over.

It was another interviewee who gave me a bigger context for my informant's response. An Aboriginal man with many experiences of loss, both personal and professional, told me that 'unexpected suicides are the hardest' to grieve.⁴² It was one of those pearls of experiential wisdom I had been searching for. It was also a pearl that challenged one of the project's fundamental assumptions, namely a belief that there was a community of shared emotional experience amongst the suicidally bereaved. This was not necessarily true. Those who don't feel like victims can be very offended by those who do.⁴³

This realisation, and a growing understanding of other fault lines of difference which emerged as more interviews were conducted, made me question how much those bereaved by suicide actually have in common. It was looking more and more like a community connected by the experience of stigma, a community of opposition rather than commonality. This had considerable implications for how much of my own story I should disclose and the kinds of questions I could ask. In a suicide-stigmatising world where the dead cannot speak for themselves, the bereaved are often fiercely protective of the deceased and the family and friends who survive. This is why so many of the bereaved only speak to others similarly bereaved and why so many choose not to speak at all. Though suicide is usually a solo act, it is rarely a solo story.

Whose story is this?

This had a big impact on the numbers of people prepared to be formally interviewed for this project and the kinds of stories we could record. Though everyone I approached welcomed the opportunity to tell their

tale, pouring their stories down telephone lines and into the whispered conversational spaces of chance social encounters, most would not undertake a formally recorded interview until they had obtained 'permission' from others in the bereavement circle. Some of the people I talked to couldn't bring themselves to ask for the permissions they needed. They had, it turned out, never spoken about their loved one's suicide since that person's death, not even to their closest relatives and friends. One informant wanted *me* to ask her children if she could participate. She hoped the answer would tell her how they were getting on. Another participant encouraged her son to participate for exactly the same reason. I refused the first mother's request, because it went against the grain of my very conventional ideas about who owns an oral history interview and where history ends and therapy starts.

The closer I got to preparing the interviews for public presentation, the more I realised how artificial some of my 'professional boundaries' actually were. Why was I refusing to tell a mother whose son I had interviewed how I thought he was travelling when she could, if she wanted, eventually go to the archive and read the transcript of his interview herself?

Though the public use aspect of this project and fear of potential stigmatisation discouraged many participants from recording their experiences, exactly the same factors motivated others to participate with enthusiasm. Deaths by suicide have a public dimension, even if they go unnoticed by the media, because they are always the subject of coronial inquiry. At least two interviewees relished the opportunity this project gave them to 'set the record straight' by giving their side of the story.⁴⁴

Gathering interview reflections

As I grew to appreciate the diversity of people's bereavement experiences, the ways in which the interview itself was influencing the emotional landscape of the sound recordings and the kinds of people choosing and not choosing to participate, I started asking new interviewees why they had agreed to be interviewed and what they thought about the interview process. The answers, both the revealing and the prosaic, seem so integral to both reflective practice and the search for 'truth', I wonder why I have never thought to ask them before.

At the shocking end of the revelations was the confession by the son of the mother who had wanted to know how I thought he was travelling, that the only reason he had participated was because his sister and mother had told him to. So much for informed consent. I could, I suppose, have pressed the recorder's delete button, though that would not have done justice to this

young man's laughing reassurances that he was happy to have participated anyway.⁴⁵

At the other end of the spectrum was a woman who called the interview process 'tough' because it re-ignited hard emotions. Notwithstanding this, she was, she said, glad to have reflected again on an event of significance in both her own life and in the community of Alice Springs, the memory of which was beginning to fade.⁴⁶

If I ask myself the same question, I would give a similar answer. Though this is undoubtedly the most challenging project I have worked on, and there was a moment in the middle of editing a collage of 'wisdom pearls' when the unbelievable sense of responsibility I felt to both protect my interviewees from public scorn and honour the emotional truths they had entrusted to me very nearly drowned me, I have undoubtedly learnt more than tears lost. Two wisdoms stand out.

The first came as I selected images for my conference presentation PowerPoint. Two headlines collided across time. The first was from the newspaper article which reported my father's death. Big bold black letters declared: 'The doctor who died in search of perfection'. The second was from the MHACA web site's top ten tips for mental health resilience. More big black letters told me to 'Have the courage to be imperfect'.⁴⁷ There was no need to follow my father's footsteps. Knowing that one is doing the best one can to respect the truths people share with us is the bottom line of ethical behaviour.⁴⁸

The second wisdom came from the 'reluctant' teenage interviewee. 'Grief' I heard him say, 'accumulates'.⁴⁹ While suicide may not, as many people believe, be catching,⁵⁰ people's emotions are. I, like some of those involved in interviewing the survivors of Victoria's recent bush fires, had forgotten. In our conscientious efforts to ensure the comfort and consent of interviewees, have we oral historians overlooked our own emotional needs? What impacts do recording difficult stories have on the emotion-scape of our own memory lanes?⁵¹

I did not protect myself properly during this project. In the future I will begin all my interviews with some lightly chatty questions focussed on what the interviewee plans to do when the interview is over. I will also carefully consider and share my own post interview activities. In trauma interviews this could include a massage, coffee with a friend, going to the movies or getting some formal counselling.⁵² There are so many simple but important ways to prepare the interviewer and the interviewee for the emotion and memory *creating* journey that an oral history interview is.

Coda

Memory is an ever changing landscape in which talk and silence, remembering and forgetting, are essential parts. Talk and silence feed memory, like water given or forgotten, feeds plants. If bad memories are weeds, how many of them should we help grow? How do we know when individuals or communities have had enough? And when the sad memories are archived, catalogued and podcast, will it be possible to forget again? Audio recorders in the digital age are doing to conversation what writing did to Homer's poetry.⁵³ They are solidifying memory. As such, they may be changing how memory operates.

Though I still believe talk is a great cure for trauma I am no longer quite so tunnel visioned about its effects being always and necessarily good.

(Endnotes)

- 1 This paper was presented at at 'Communities of Memory', the Oral History Association of Australia's Biennial National Conference, October 2011, Melbourne, and is reproduced here with post participation reflections.
- 2 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, New York, Vintage Books, 1991, p.3.
- 3 Suicide Prevention Australia, *Northern Territory Inquiry into Youth Suicide*: Sub No. 20, Part 1, 6 October 2011.
- 4 John Mendoza and Sebastian Rosenger, *Suicide and Suicide Prevention in Australia: Breaking The Silence*, ConNetica Consulting Pty Ltd, 2010, Queensland, on-line at <http://connetica.com.au/resources-1/suicide-and-suicide-prevention-in-australia-report> p44-46. They also recommend that more personal stories should be collected.
- 5 See for example Kari Madeleine Dyregrov et al, 'Meaning-Making through Psychological Autopsy Interviews: The Value of Participating in Qualitative Research for those Bereaved by Suicide', *Death Studies*, 35: 685-710, 2011. Mendoza and Rosenger (ibid, pp. 101-105) note the absence of evidence based post-intervention initiatives and then focuses on their importance in preventing the bereaved from killing themselves and talks about bereavement in terms of its psychological problems.
- 6 Mendoza and Rosenger, op. cit., p. 199; 16; 120; also Minna Pietilä 'Support groups: a psychological or social device for suicide bereavement?' *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 2002, pp. 401-414 ; Isaac Sakinofsky, 'The Aftermath of Suicide: Managing Survivors' Bereavement', *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol 52, Supplement 1, June 2007, pp. 129-136; Dorothy Ratnarajah and Margot J Schofield, 'Parental Suicide and its Aftermath: A Review', *Journal of Family Studies*, Vol. 13, Issue 1, May-June 2007, pp. 78-93; Natalie C. Hung & Laura A. Rabin, 'Comprehending Childhood Bereavement by Parental Suicide: A Critical Review of Research on Outcomes, Grief Processes, and Interventions', *Death Studies*, 33:781-814, 2009; Anne Wilson & Amy Marshall, 'The Support Needs And Experiences Of Suicidally Bereaved Family And Friends', *Death Studies*, 34: 625-640, 2010.
- 7 The absence of a non-judgemental language to describe suicide and its 'players' is itself an indicator of the lack of talk-based knowledge associated with the topic. For a more detailed discussion see Doris Sommer-Rotenberg, 'Suicide and language', *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 1998, 159 (3), August 11: pp. 239 - 240.
- 8 Mendoza and Rosenger, op. cit., p. 104; Beth Hudnall Stamm & Ann D. Kirkwood, *A Community-Based Suicide Prevention Planning Manual For Designing A Program Just Right For Your Community*, Institute of Rural Health, Idaho State University, 2012, p. 13; Minna Pietilä, op. cit.; Anon, 'Left behind after suicide', *Harvard Women's Health Watch*, July 2009, p. 5.
- 9 Academic research into bereavement was not used in the early stages of the project because our access to journals was limited by our remote location and lack of academic affiliation. Recent access, through the portal of the local library, has confirmed many of the propositions on which this project was based. Institutional limitations and publication 'pay walls' still prohibit access to the full range of academic research in this area.
- 10 Mendoza and Rosenger, op. cit., p. 49, assert the importance of community awareness programmes in reducing stigma.
- 11 Suicide Prevention Australia, *Northern Territory Inquiry into Youth Suicide* op. cit.; Mary-Anne L Measey, Shu Qin, Li, Robert Parker, & Zhiqiang Wang, 'Suicide in the Northern Territory, 1981-2002', *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 6, Dec 2006: 26-30.
- 12 Leon Petchkovsky, Nigel Cord-Udy & Laurencia Grant, 'A post-Jungian perspective on 55 Indigenous suicides in Central Australia; deadly cycles of diminished resilience, impaired nurturance, compromised interiority and possibilities for repair', *Australian Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, Vol. 6, Issue 3, 2007, pp.172-185, www.auseinet.com/journal/vol6iss3/petchkovsky.pdf.
- 13 Mark Feldstein, 'Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History', *Oral History Review*, 31(1), Winter/Spring, 2004, pp. 1-22, www.historycooperative.org/journals/ohr/31.1/feldstein.html.
- 14 Michelle Rayner, 'Australian Generations Project Forum', paper for *Communities of Memory OHAA Conference*, Melbourne, 2011; Siobhan McHugh, *Oral history and the radio documentary/feature: intersections and synergies*, PhD Thesis, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong 2010, at <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3194/>, p15.
- 15 Caitlin Mahar, 'An historian's excursion into radio land', *Circa: The Journal of the Professional Historians*, Issue 2, 2011, p3.
- 16 Eurydice Aroney, "'You Should Be Ashamed": Abortion Stores on the Radio', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, No. 30, 2008; Melinda Hinkson, 'The Circus Comes to Yuendumu, Again', *Arena Magazine*, no. 25, October/November 1996: 36-39; Wendy Rickard, 'More Dangerous than Therapy?: Interviewees' Reflections on Recording Traumatic or Taboo', *Oral History*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Autumn, 1998, p. 43.
- 17 Siobhan McHugh, op. cit., p. 49. The question of whether written consent should be obtained before or after a recording is also a matter of some contention. The media, when it gets written consent, usually asks that forms be signed before recording commences. In contrast Beth Robertson's *Oral History Handbook*, Oral History Association of Australia

- (South Australian Branch), 4th edn, 2000, p. 15, advises that forms should be signed at the end of the interview. A colleague experienced in trauma interviews insisted that forms should be signed before on the basis that access restrictions can always be added, but the effort of recording must preclude destruction. The act of signing before recording signals the interview's public purpose. Other colleagues said they didn't think it mattered when consent was obtained as long as anyone who wanted to withdraw their interview from public access was able to do so at any time, including after written consent was given. As Mahar, op. cit., p. 5, citing Portelli, notes: 'ethics is not learnt by following ethical codes but by respect for our interviewees irrespective of what documents they have signed; signed documents can inhibit real ethical practice. In this project interviewees signed two consent forms, one for media use, the other for archival use with everyone having copyright'.
- 18 Eurydice Aroney, op. cit.
- 19 Jacqueline G. Cvinar, 'Do Suicide Survivors Suffer Social Stigma: A Review of the Literature', *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, Vol. 41, No. 1, January-March, 2005, pp. 14-21.
- 20 Not all radio documentaries conform to this pattern of course. For a detailed discussion of the spectrum of journalistic interviewing see Siobhan McHugh, op. cit., p.69-72. My own experience includes giving public form to PhD theses, public lectures, events, etc., where, with few exceptions, interviews are used to 'illustrate' research already done rather than investigate new ideas. If I combine McHugh's descriptors these are best described as 'long form news documentary features'.
- 21 Siobhan McHugh, 2010 op. cit.,: 54-62. This does not, of course, preclude the asking of other questions.
- 22 Siobhan McHugh, *ibid.*, p. 40-41.
- 23 Dr Valerio Massimo Manfredi, 'Storytelling & History Writing: Which Came First?' *ANU-Toyota Public Lecture Series*, Australian National University, Podcast, 2006.
- 24 Feldstein, op. cit., says the pursuit of truth is 'as much a goal as a destination', p. 8.
- 25 See Portelli's recommendation that we find new methods for acknowledging our subjectivities, as cited in Siobhan McHugh, op. cit., p. 55.
- 26 Megg Kelham, 'Waltz in P Flat: The Pine Gap Women's Peace Camp', in *Hecate*, January 1, 2010, and 'All We Are Saying ...', *Hindsight*, ABC Radio National, 2003.
- 27 NTAS NTRS 3475 BWF 2.
- 28 Following up on consent forms after an interview has been finished can be a very time-consuming process.
- 29 Mahar, op. cit., p. 3.
- 30 For a broader discussion of the features that make good radio 'talent' see Siobhan McHugh, 2010, op. cit., pp. 78-80.
- 31 See for example Peter Kolomitsev and Silver Moon, 'Finding Your Inner Audio Geek', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* no 33, 2011, pp. 15-21.
- 32 Hamilton, Paula 'Connecting the History in Oral History' (podcast, 2011), *Oral History Association of Australia NSW*, http://audio.mediaheads.com.au/OHAA/Connecting_the_History_in_Oral_History/.
- 33 See also McHugh, 'Oral History Goes to Air: reflections on crafting oral history as radio narrative', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, No. 33, 2011, p. 60, for a description of a similar experience
- 34 NTAS 3475 BWF 4.
- 35 NTAS NTRS 3475 BWF 1.
- 36 See for example, Aroney, op. cit.
- 37 Siobhan McHugh, 2010, op. cit., p. 93-94.
- 38 For example, Peter Read, 'The Limits of Oral History', paper presented to the Oral History Association of Australia Conference, Melbourne, 2011.
- 39 Alison Winter, 'A History of Memory', *All in the Mind*, Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2012, ABC Radio National, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/allinthemind/a-history-of-memory/4001354>, '... until about 10 or 15 years ago it was thought that the best way to heal trauma was to revive memories of traumatic moments that had been "repressed" therapists and neuro-scientists are now suggesting that the more we dwell on upsetting things from the past the more upsetting they will be'.
- 40 Grammatical error deliberate, pers. comm., informant anon.
- 41 Thomas Joiner, *Myths About Suicide*, 2010 London: Harvard University Press, p. 1.
- 42 NTAS NTRS 3475 BWF # yet to be assigned.
- 43 The bereaved are audience as well as informant in any de-stigmatising community awareness project.
- 44 NTAS NTRS 3475 BWF 3 & NTAS NTRS 3475 BWF 5.
- 45 NTAS NTRS 3475 BWF # yet to be assigned.
- 46 NTAS NTRS 3475 BWF 5.
- 47 www.mhaca.org.au.
- 48 See also Mahar, op. cit., p. 5.
- 49 NTAS NTRS 3475 BWF # number yet to be assigned.
- 50 Joiner, op. cit., pp. 137-148.
- 51 Pers. comm. with Dr Sue Mardsen, Liza Dale-Hallet and others prompted by participation in 'Engaging People on the Margins' with Jen Barrkmann & Chris Plowman, Red Thread Stories, a pre-conference workshop at *Communities of Memory*, 2011.
- 52 *Ibid*; Interviewees in this project were able to access regular MHACA services though none did. As Mendoza and Rosenger, p. 44, and Dyregrov et al, amongst others note, talking about suicide bereavement is usually cathartic. The presumption of vulnerability, like the presumption of pity, is to be challenged. For an interesting discussion about ethics and presumed vulnerability see Gunsalus, C. K. (2004), 'The Nanny State Meets the Inner Lawyer: Overregulating While Underprotecting Human Participants in Research', *Ethics & Behaviour*, 14(4): 369-82.
- 53 For a detailed account of this process in the context of 1930s Yugoslavian oral traditions see Manfredi op. cit.

Jogging alongside or bumping off? Fiction and oral history in dialogue

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[This paper has been peer reviewed]

Abstract

This paper emerges from my practice-led PhD thesis investigating the ways fiction writers can engage with oral history in Australia. In this paper, I survey the current literature in order to identify the status of fiction within the practice of oral history in Australia and demonstrate the practice is still an emerging one. I seek to extend the dialogue between fiction and oral history, arguing that oral historians and fiction writers are, among other things, both concerned with understanding subjectivity. I consider how one of the specific qualities of fiction, that of character, can provide a space to explore subjectivity, and rely on my own writing practice in order to demonstrate how oral history theory can enrich fictive writings. This paper, while positioned in the field of oral history, exists within a wider debate around how the past can legitimately be represented; I argue oral historians and fiction writers have shared concerns.

Fiction and history

For some time, fiction's capacity to legitimately represent the past has been contested. Inga Clendinnen articulates this debate in her essay, 'The History Question: Who owns the Past?'¹ Here, Clendinnen proposes that historical fiction writers, in particular Kate Grenville, challenge historians' role as custodians of the past.² Clendinnen states:

Novelists writing on historical topics and historians writing history used to jog along their adjacent paths reasonably companionably. More recently...novelists have been doing their best to bump historians off the track.³

Clendinnen believes that Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* is a 'serious attempt to do history, but value-added history: history given life and flesh by the novelists' imagination'.⁴ However, Clendinnen doubts fiction writers' capacity to authentically empathise with, or represent, historical figures. She claims that, misled by their confidence in their imagination, fiction writers often 'project back on their carefully constructed material setting contemporary assumptions and obsessions'.⁵

In response to Clendinnen's assertions, Kate Grenville denies she ever intended to write history; Clendinnen's claim is based on quotes taken out of context.⁶ Grenville states that she never thought fiction was superior to history, or that her novel was superior to the work of historians.⁷ Rather, Grenville describes her book as 'solidly based on history'.⁸

Like Grenville, I am producing writing 'solidly based' on historical sources, although my sources are specifically oral history interviews. I rely on oral history methodology to guide the ethical considerations underpinning the design of the project⁹, and to conduct the interviews, and, before writing, I listen to the audios and read the transcripts many times, paying attention to distinct vocal strategies, vocabulary, syntax and speech habits. I turn to oral history theory to understand the act of storytelling, a process I have documented in a previous article.¹⁰ However, I do engage in imaginative acts to re-present the oral histories; I describe my work as 'fiction'.¹¹ Unlike Grenville, who bows out of the debate, I offer a different way of conceptualising the issue. I argue that fiction writers and historians can enter a dialogue, rather than jogging along adjacently or attempting to bump each other off the tracks, as Clendinnen fears. I focus specifically on the field of oral history because, as I explore in the following sections, this discipline shares particular concerns with fiction writers, most specifically an interest in exploring subjectivity.

Oral history scholarship has long engaged with the problematic nature of interviewees' interpretations of the past.¹² The issues of memory, narrative construction of the past and subjectivity are the focus of many of the debates in the field. Likewise, historical fiction problematises how writers and storytellers construct representations of the past. Jerome de Groot states that 'the very mode of imaginative writing about history demonstrates the...subjective ways in which we know, engage with, and understand the past'.¹³ In the next section, I demonstrate that oral history has proved a fertile space for attempts to understand the act of oral storytelling through multiple symbolic languages in diverse disciplines.

Oral history as interdisciplinary practice

Thomson observes the interdisciplinary nature of oral history from the 1980s onwards.¹⁴ This interdisciplinarity is generally accepted, although occasionally sits uncomfortably in oral history's traditional historiographical framework. In a paper presented in 1983 and re-published in the *Oral History Review* in 2007, Willa Baum states that:

The primary purpose and use of oral history is the collection and preservation of *historically significant information* for the use by future and present students in interpreting and writing *history*.¹⁵

Similarly, Beth Robertson, in her textbook advocated by the OHAA, positions oral history within the historical discourse.¹⁶

However, the interdisciplinary focus of oral history practice in Australia in recent years is apparent. Increasingly, arts-based approaches are being documented alongside traditional historiographical ones in Australian oral history journals and at conferences. For example, Marie-Louise Anderson's paper 'Travelling to Unknown Places: Oral History and Art', considers her practice-led research, which is informed by oral histories.¹⁷ Anderson is an installation artist who has worked with a number of interviewees in Tasmania, Norfolk Island, South Africa and South Korea. In her paper, Anderson explains that her interest in oral histories is not always in the facts. Rather, she is concerned with the experiential aspects of the interview, in order to imbue her works with a deeper emotional and thematic authenticity.

Jen Brown is an artist interested in using oral histories in her new media installations. Her paper presented at the 2009 OHAA conference, demonstrated her desire to capture, in her artwork, the discourses, present in oral histories, of a particular time: the War on Terror.¹⁸ The conference also hosted a performance of Stella Kent's play *New Tasmanians*. The play was based on oral histories of Tasmanian migrants. The work was a vivid and compelling re-enactment of the hope, anxiety and ambivalence felt by migrants travelling to a new country and encouraged an empathetic response from the audience. This work continues a longer tradition of oral history and theatre, or 'verbatim theatre' as it was termed by Derek Paget in the 1980s¹⁹ and taken up by Tim Carroll in his work in western Sydney.²⁰

At the 2011 OHAA conference, held in Melbourne in October, an entire panel was dedicated to 'Creative Approaches to Documenting Lives' (session 3b, Friday 7 October 2011). I presented a paper on this panel, documenting how I explored family memories in fiction,²¹ alongside Janis Wilton, who presented a paper

describing how she worked with artist Fiona Davies to produce a traditional history and art exhibition documenting the past functions of the current Maitland Regional Art Gallery, drawn from oral histories,²² and Jessica Tyrrell, who presented a paper on creating new media outputs constructed from oral histories.²³

These examples demonstrate the shift away from traditional uses of oral history interviews in Australian oral history scholarship. In such contexts, oral histories are not valued so much for their factual content but as sources that are at once dynamic, evolving, emotionally and culturally authentic, and ambiguous. It is within this interdisciplinary context that fiction writers can enter a dialogue with oral history scholarship in Australia.

The term 're-presentation' has been used by a number of researchers to describe how they, as author or artist, alter oral history interviews to produce creative products. For example, Corrine Glesne²⁴ and Laurel Richardson²⁵ both describe how they re-present oral histories as poems; Mo Pei Kwan re-presents oral narratives as visual ones;²⁶ and Marie-Louise Anderson re-represents oral histories as art installations.²⁷ This term encompasses the way these artists feel bound to conform to certain restraints imposed by the interviews, while at the same time editing, altering or transposing the interview into a different symbolic language. This notion of re-presentation is key to understanding fiction's place within oral history. As I demonstrate in the next section, fiction writers, such as Terry Whitebeach, who claim to re-present oral histories feel bound to present a story with close ties to the original oral history interview, while at the same time imaginatively responding to it.

Fiction and oral history

Many fiction writers use interviews as inspiration for their work. For example, M. J. Hyland's novel *This is How*²⁸ is based on a transcript of an interview she read in Tony Parker's *Life After Life*.²⁹ However, the extent to which their writing is constrained by the qualities of the interview is often not explicit. One example of an Australian writer re-presenting oral histories with a concern for retaining the vocal qualities of the interview is Terry Whitebeach.³⁰ Whitebeach, in collaboration with her son, Mick Brown, wrote a novel, *Bantam*,³¹ and a radio play about the process of putting the book together, called *Bantam, a real book by Mick Brown and Terry Whitebeach*.³² The novel offers a fictionalised account of Brown's life in rural Tasmania, which he described to Whitebeach over the telephone.

Whitebeach, former editor of the *OHAA Journal*, published a paper in the 2010 issue of the journal, titled 'Place and People: Stories by and of Unemployed Youth in Australia'. Here, Whitebeach uses the term

‘transmuted’ to describe her process of collecting, transcribing and transforming Brown’s story into literature. Whitebeach’s decision to publish her article in an oral history journal seems to signal her concern with linking her writing practice to discussions about oral history in Australia. In the article, Whitebeach documents the reasons she turned to fiction as a means to tell Brown’s story. When Whitebeach’s adolescent son, unemployed because of an injury and living in a rural town, attempted suicide for the second time, she began searching for strategies to stay in contact. She knew Brown’s oral storytelling skills were powerful. Brown ‘was and is an excellent raconteur’, Whitebeach states.³³ However, his time in school left him lacking the confidence to write literature.³⁴ Whitebeach conceived of the idea of recording his conversations and transmuting his stories into fiction. *Bantam* is filled with textual markers that are reminiscent of a male adolescent’s spoken voice. For example:

The first thing that Mick decides is that he wants to live on his own for a while. He hitches into town to see if he can line up one of Brian Little’s picker’s huts.

‘Dunno,’ Brian Little says, unenthusiastically, ‘but I’ll see what I can do fer you, laddie.’ And he turns away, hawking and spitting.

Mick is pissed off. Dirty old miser’s only got about fifty huts. You think he could spare one.³⁵

In this extract, the text is peppered with slang words indicative of a distinct vocabulary, such as ‘hitches,’ ‘line up’ and ‘pissed off.’ The use of the ‘and’ to begin the sentence in the second paragraph mimics common speech habits, such as interlinking phrases and sentence fragments. The second sentence in the third paragraph shifts from third person into Mick’s interior monologue, and the reader hears his thoughts apparently unmediated by a narrator. These writing strategies indicate Whitebeach’s intention to closely mimic Mick’s vocabulary, attitudes and point of view. Importantly, both Brown’s and Whitebeach’s name appear as authors of the text, indicating the collaborative nature of the enterprise, and Brown’s identification of the work as representative—if not directly—of the stories he told his mother.

However, both acknowledge a process of fictionalisation took place. In *Bantam*, Whitebeach and Brown ‘conceal the name and exact location of the town [where Brown lives], and made composite characters from real people’.³⁶ Whitebeach turned to fiction both as a collaborative healing process and:

In order to stand witness to a community’s memory and experience and also to ensure that particular individuals not be shamed—a dialogue which includes the conflicting accounts, attitudes, opinions and versions whose effective

coexistence is essential to maintaining co-operative interdependence in small island communities.³⁷

Here Whitebeach identifies one way in which fiction can enter a dialogue with oral history: by giving interviewees anonymity so they need not be ‘shamed’. Implicit in Whitebeach’s argument is that individuals may feel shame as a result of having their name associated with the stories they tell, which could be contested when published publically. Thus, in the same way that oral historians achieve anonymity by removing identifiers and using pseudonyms, fiction’s anonymity is achieved through creating composite characters and blurring the features of places. This allows writers to tell their stories in a way that would not otherwise be acceptable.

A further example of the flexibility of fictional accounts is drawn out by Penny Russell, in her review of Thomson’s *Moving Stories: An Intimate History of Four Women across Two Continents*³⁸ (hereafter referred to as *Moving Stories*). Russell recognises the complex process of negotiation oral historians must engage in when claiming to directly represent their interviewee’s subjective experience. Russell asks: ‘How does a male academic historian represent the life story of four women, on their own terms, without resigning his own critical or analytical faculties...?’³⁹ As Paul Thompson warns, ‘history should not merely comfort; it should provide a challenge’.⁴⁰ In *Moving Stories*, Thomson frequently (and I believe successfully) navigates the tensions between the ethical imperative to affirm the women’s life stories, and social history’s mandate to challenge or re-interpret them. Although, as Russell acknowledges, Thomson does steer clear of the potential pitfalls, there are moments when ‘it’s a close run thing’, and Thomson adopts ‘the tone of an anxious host at an ill assorted party’.⁴¹ Thomson must negotiate between the social historian’s compulsion to produce an account that is analytical and challenging, and the ethical constraint to write in a way that is acceptable to those he claims to represent.

As Whitebeach’s discussion demonstrates, fiction can offer one means to navigate this tension. While this approach may not be pertinent in some projects, it is possible that, as an author of fiction does not claim to directly represent the subject, they can tell stories that may otherwise be contested, while still drawing on the oral history interview. In other words, creating fictional characters based on interviewees’ stories allows for more space to present conflicting accounts and explore the act of narrating a story, while at the same time creating an account that can be transmitted to readers. Fiction thus becomes a space for exploring the nature of subjective perception without the requirement of representing an actual person.

In other contexts, researchers have used fiction as a means to present contentious issues in a manner

acceptable to both participants and readers. For example, Heather Piper and Pat Sikes, in *Researching Sex and Lies in the Classroom*, use ‘composite’ fictions as a way of ensuring participant anonymity.⁴² Piper and Sikes interviewed teachers who had been accused of sexual misconduct, but were later cleared of all charges. Piper and Sikes felt that the people who had agreed to participate could not be adequately protected by standard strategies of pseudonyms.⁴³ They fictionalised the accounts, ‘creating characters, contexts and setting, inventing dialogue and crafting plots’, but at the same time they did not make up anything directly related to their research question: the experiences and perceptions of the allegations of abuse.⁴⁴

In these instances, fiction has offered a means to represent interpretations of oral history that would be troublesome, even unethical, if the author claimed they were purely factual. As Thomson’s *Moving Stories* demonstrates, nonfiction representations of life stories must be negotiated with the interviewee. Because fiction does not claim to directly relate to the oral history, there is space to imaginatively explore possible representations, and in doing so dimensionalise rather than reduce the interpretative possibilities.

Outside of Australia, it has been argued that fiction can enter a dialogue with oral history scholarship in other ways. In their paper, *Katrina Narratives: What can Creative Writers Tell us about Oral History*, American researchers Anna Hirsch and Clare Dixon argue that creative writers can engage with debates in oral history because their training shares a similar concern with narrative structure of oral stories. Hirsch and Dixon state:

In the face of a world that is outrageously complex... we must, acting as creative writers, operate as a magnifying glass and work to bring into sharp focus (if, therefore, also slightly distorted like any discipline distorts its object of study) the nuts and bolts of an authentic, though fictional, human story vis-à-vis narrative structure.⁴⁵

Although Hirsch and Dixon seek to ‘springboard a larger conversation’ about how creative thinking and storytelling could shed light on both interviewees’ and oral historians’ acts of re-telling the past,⁴⁶ their call has gone largely unanswered in the oral history community.

Oral history’s acceptance of interdisciplinary approaches has opened up a space for writers of fiction to engage in discussion with oral history theory. The exploration is, however, in its infancy. While, as I have documented above, writers and researchers have identified fiction as a means to offer anonymity to interviewees who may be ‘shamed’, as Whitebeach has it, by direct representation, I argue that there is perhaps another way that fiction can enter a dialogue with oral

history in Australia: as a space to explore subjective experience. In the next section, I argue that some writers of realist/historical fiction and oral historians share an interest in subjective experience as a means to construct the past. I document how this concern may be explored in fiction by turning to oral history and fiction theory and my own practice.

Oral history interviews as subjective experience

Thomson identifies a paradigm transformation in oral history as ‘the development, from the late 1970s of the post-positivist approaches to memory and subjectivity’.⁴⁷ Thomson observes how, as a result of new understandings arising from post-positivism, ‘oral historians turned criticism of the unreliability of oral history on their head by arguing that...oral history’s strength was the subjectivity of memory’, because it ‘provided clues not only about the meanings of historical experience, but also the relationship between past and present, between memory and personal identity and between individual and collective memory’.⁴⁸ Robertson echoes this sentiment, arguing that ‘many researchers have come to appreciate that truth in oral history is not always found in factual accuracy’.⁴⁹

These ‘truths’ may lie in the fact that the oral history interview is a source created in the present, which seeks to narrate the past. In this way, the interview is ‘evidence of the ways in which history lives on in the present’.⁵⁰ Alessandro Portelli argues that ‘the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian, and which no other sources possess in equal measure (except literary ones) is the speaker’s subjectivity’.⁵¹ It is thus the interviewees’ act of narration, of making sense of the past, which is one of their key values. In this way, ‘interviewees are their own historians, capable of elaborate and sometimes confusing methods of constructing and narrating their own histories’.⁵²

This approach emphasises the importance of ‘language and story in the formation of the connection between individual experience and collective behaviour’.⁵³ Embedded in this discussion is a concern with subjective experience. Thomson adds, quoting Daniel James, that the importance of remembering lies in its embodiment in cultural practices such as storytelling.⁵⁴

The place of character: fiction and subjectivity in the oral history interview

Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle argue that ‘fundamental to a work of fiction is the requirement of character...The form privileges character as the means through which to tell the story (plot)’.⁵⁵ Fiction shares oral history’s emphasis on subjectivity because of the

ways character operates in fiction. I argue that realist fiction's requirement of a life-like character can offer a means of understanding the complex ways fictional characters can mimic acts of narrating the past.

E M Forster states that, in fiction, characters can be flat or round.⁵⁶ A flat character, usually used for comedic purposes, such as many of Charles Dickens', is one that demonstrates only a few characteristics and can be summed up in a few words. A round character has complexity, ambiguity and sometimes behaves in a contradictory manner. They are capable of 'surprising in a convincing way'.⁵⁷ Realist fiction often requires life-like, and therefore round, characters. Bennett and Royle, like Forster, argue that, to be life-like, a character should have a number of different traits—qualities which may be conflicting or contradictory; the character's words and actions should appear to originate in multiple impulses.⁵⁸ Forster's requirement for characters to be convincing results in the need for 'these tensions and contradictions to cohere to a single identity'.⁵⁹ A character's credibility, and their capacity to engage the reader, lies in the tension between the contradictions and the need for coherence.⁶⁰ Fiction's capacity to show characters that are at once contradictory, and at the same have a coherent sense of identity, closely reflects storytelling acts in oral history interviews. Robyn Fivush and Catherine Haden argue that 'ways in which any given individual constructs a life narrative [in oral histories] are influenced by larger cultural frameworks available for understanding what a self is'.⁶¹ In unpacking this assertion, it is possible to document the ways fiction's emphasis on character can explore how self is constructed in oral histories.

Firstly, embedded in Fivush and Haden's statement is the assumption that life narratives are a means of constructing self. In the telling of life narratives in the oral history interview, interviewees attempt to recall and articulate the complexity and contradictions of their lived experience, and their own motivations, attitudes and interpretations, while at the same time presenting a coherent representation of themselves as individuals. Fiction can mimic this process of 'telling self' through narrative by presenting life-like characters that are at once contradictory and coherent; despite their changing motivations, desires and actions throughout the text, there is always a unified 'I'.

Secondly, Fivush and Haden identify that life narratives are drawn from larger cultural frameworks that dictate what an identity is. Fiction, as Stephan Greenblatt identifies, is also shaped by these wider cultural frameworks.⁶² At the same time, fiction has the capacity to influence notions of self. Bennett and Royle describe this interaction as the paradox of character: 'people in books are like real people who are in turn like people in books'.⁶³ Bennett and Royle state that 'to know a person...involves understanding a mask...this suggests that there is a complex, destabilising and perhaps

undecidable interweaving of the real and the fictional: our lives, our real lives, are governed and directed by the stories we read, write and tell ourselves'.⁶⁴

Fictional narrative's capacity to influence oral history interviews has been demonstrated by Thomson in his seminal article on ANZAC memories. Thomson observes that when interviewing ex-ANZAC servicemen, 'some men related scenes from [the movie] *Gallipoli* as if they were their own'.⁶⁵ This finding demonstrates the way fiction influences life narrative, and at the same time, fictional narratives have the capacity to represent lived experience in ways that are meaningful to those who internalise them.

Fiction's ability to represent 'life-like' characters offers one means to mimic or enact an individual's construction of self in an oral history interview, and to analyse the cultural frameworks that shape those constructions, alongside other modes of narrative analysis. The individual and collective constructions cannot be separated, but operate dialogically, each one co-dependent, and informing the other. Fiction can demonstrate the paradox of character: in reading and writing stories, writers can explore the ways in which cultural and fictional frameworks at once shape the way we see identity, and enact the complexity and contradictions of characters/people while attempting to achieve an effect of unity, which is expected in cultural and fictional narratives.

My own writing

As I document in a conference paper I wrote in the initial stages of developing my research project,⁶⁶ it was essential that interviewees understood and were comfortable with the process of fictionalisation. After I described my project to potential interviewees, I asked them to sign a consent form that licensed me to use their story in my creative work. I was careful to ensure that potential participants understood that they still retain the copyright of the stories told in the interview, and had only given me permission to re-present their stories in my fiction. In addition, I gave participants copies of the audio and transcript of the interview (which they could correct), along with any accompanying ephemera I have gathered, such as scanned photographs and newspaper articles. In one case, the participant's family used this material to create a photobook to share with younger generations. While, unlike Whitebeach, I do not describe my work as collaborative, I identify it as 'informed by oral histories.' This title indicates my concern with retaining in the creative work the vocal qualities of, and authentic details present in, the interview. Elsewhere, I have documented how, in my own practice, I draw on both oral history methodology and theory to capture and understand the interview.⁶⁷

After conducting the interviews, I set about transcribing them. I used Express Scribe software to support the

transcription process. This software allowed me to upload the audio file, and play, stop, rewind and slow down the audio, using hot keys on the keyboard, as I typed the transcript.

I felt I needed to fully transcribe rather than produce summaries, despite new trends towards cutting transcription costs and privileging audio technology in order to ‘alleviate some of the reliability and validity issues associated with written transcripts’.⁶⁸ I fully transcribed the interviews because I was interested in the specific voice of the interviewee, which I would need to replicate in written rather than audio form. I wanted to be able to unpack the way the interviewees structured sentences and phrases, their vocabulary, their rhythms of speech and their values and attitudes revealed in their interpretation of life events. I found that transcribing the interview made me consider the interview in a different way. Instead of listening to the story for an overarching narrative and for missing details or incomplete stories that I should follow-up with further questions as I did in the face-to-face interview, I was paying attention to each sentence, to the words used and the way they were arranged. This close level engagement with the audio and transcript allowed me to build up an understanding of how I should construct voice in the fictive work.

In the following extract from the historical novel emerging from my practice-led PhD, based on an oral history interview I conducted with a former Brisbane nurse, I create a character engaged in an act of attempting to narrate their past. In the interview, the interviewee describes a vivid memory:

Question: Do you remember any cases you dealt with that stick in your mind?

Answer: Not particularly. Oh well, the night they found, when the *Centaur* was sunk ‘cause they didn’t find them until the following twenty-four hours after it was sunk. They were brought in and we were all hauled out of bed in the middle of the night to go down to the wards. Someone came and woke me up. I said, “I can’t. I’ve had days without sleep on account of my burning the candle at both ends.”

“Well you’ve got to get up because there’s been some sort of a tragedy” and so up we got. That was in ‘42? ‘43? I don’t know. I was a fairly junior nurse. I didn’t have a great deal to do with it. But we got quite a number of them in the surgical wards, of course’.⁶⁹

In the work of fiction, I develop this moment described in the interviews into a scene, borrowing phrases and details from the transcript, in order to explore the narrator’s subjectivity.

One night we were all hauled out of bed. Someone was shaking me and trying to get me to wake up.

I said, I can’t. I’ve had days without sleep, burning the candle at both ends.

The nurse who was shaking me said, You’ve simply got to. There’s been some kind of tragedy.

So I tumbled out of bed, and somehow managed to get myself into my uniform. Everyone was being sent off to their various wards, so I staggered off to surgical, but I seemed to have got my second wind up at that stage. It was absolute chaos down there, I can tell you. And in those days, it was a pretty bloody business, in surgical.

I said, ‘Would someone mind telling me what’s going on?’

‘There’s been a ship sunk’, one nurse said. ‘*The Centaur*’.

They hadn’t started finding people until twenty-four hours after it was sunk and they were all being brought in. *The Centaur* was a hospital ship, of course, so there were fellas on her who were already pretty badly beat up. A lot of them had sunk with her. They wouldn’t have been able to swim and—have you ever seen plaster when it gets wet? Those in plaster casts would’ve sunk like stones. And, of course, the ship was in flames. There were a lot of them there in burns ward.

There was this one fella who was all in pieces. He should have been in plaster.

So I said, ‘Look at you! How is it you’re not bandaged?’

He said, ‘Two nurses were changing my bandages. We heard two terrific explosions. It took me a moment to realise what was happening, that we were going down. There was a lot of shouting. Everyone was being called to the decks and the nurses weren’t sure what to do. I was on this trolley so they wheeled me up too with all my bandages around me and managed to get me on a raft, which was then lowered to the water. But the nurses, they didn’t ever get on with me. I don’t—’

I said, ‘Yes, yes, but I must rush on.’ Which was true, you know. I just left him there.

We heard later, of course, that all but one of the nurses had died. They made a terrible hoo-ha about it.

In the morning, I was bathing one of the fellas who’d come in off the *Centaur* and he grabbed me by the arm and he pointed to the fella who’d spoken to me the night before and he said, ‘See that bloke?’

I said, ‘Yes.’

He said, ‘If it weren’t for him, I’d be dead.’

I said, ‘Is that right?’

He said, 'It is. He hauled me up onto the raft with him. I'd put my hands out, I was grabbing at anything so I could get myself into the boat and I grabbed onto his legs and hauled myself up, him helping me all the time. It was only afterwards I realised, you see. About his legs. He didn't say anything, but I seen him this morning with all the plaster and I thought, cripes! But he kept pulling people out of the water until the raft was as full as a goog.'

So that's how I met Fred Devine.

To produce this piece of fiction, I invented a situation where the narrator, Judy, met her husband, Fred Devine. I drew on additional archival research for details about the state of the passengers on the hospital ship. The detail about the plaster 'sinking like a stone' came from another section of the interview, where the interviewee described how she was taking some of the patients out in a canoe as a way to help relieve the soldiers' boredom when their boat tipped over:

This fella said, 'Well, someone had better do something because once this plaster gets wet—'

On one leg [the plaster was] all the way to his hip and I think one shoulder and arm.

He said, 'I'll sink like a stone'.⁷⁰

In this extract, I show the narrator in an act of re-interpretation. The reader has a sense that Judy made a decision about Fred Devine in the first scene—that perhaps he was a coward because he let the nurses die—that is never explicitly stated but implied through her action of dismissing him. She assures the reader she *was* very busy, and this assurance makes us wonder if she is 'protesting too much'. Judy is presented as engaging with cultural narratives about heroism, and these shape her interpretations and expectations of others.

In the second scene, after she hears the other soldier's story, she names Fred for the first time, and allows herself to consider him a man worthy of her interest. Although the narrator never explicitly states she changed her mind, the reader infers this. In this way, Judy is established as a fallible narrator, and her act of narrating self is rendered suspicious. This complex representation of character allows readers to at once empathise with her while still being aware of the artificiality of her attempts to narrate the past.

Michael Frisch notes 'how experience, memory, and history become combined in, and digested by, people who are the bearers of their own history'.⁷¹ In this extract, I explore this notion by representing a narrator's subjectivity in telling her own life story. It is impossible to argue that this is a superior way of representing subjectivity to nonfiction forms. Rather,

I use my own writing to demonstrate the shared concerns of oral historians and fiction writers, and that both practices can operate in a dialogue. Fiction may provide a space to explore and enact oral storytelling, particularly because there is no requirement to directly represent the interviewee, while at the same time, my fiction is enriched by theoretical notions around subjectivity arising from oral history scholarship.

Conclusion

The debate around fiction and history is a long-standing one. In this article, I turn to theory in oral history scholarship to demonstrate that fiction writers and oral historians have a shared interest in understanding subjectivity. I argue that fiction's requirement of life-like characters means that fiction writers can enter a dialogue with theory around acts of narrating the past; that fiction is at once enriched by oral history theory and offers a space to enact subjective interpretations of the past.

(Endnotes)

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Developing a web gateway of oral history interviews for the SA 175th anniversary:

An account of the project of the Oral History Association of Australia (SA/NT Branch) 2008–2011

Madeleine Regan and June Edwards

Abstract

In 2008 the committee of the Oral History Association of Australia (SA/NT Branch) began discussions about how it would mark the 175th anniversary of the settlement of South Australia in 2011. At the branch's Annual General Meeting in July 2009 two proposals were discussed: the development of either an interpretative walking trail using oral history or a web gateway of oral history interviews. OHAA members voted for the oral history web gateway as they thought it would have more universal appeal. Two years later, in July 2011, the SA175 anniversary oral history web gateway was launched in Adelaide.

This paper outlines the aims and the steps involved in bringing the project to completion. It also describes the impact of the web gateway project on the OHAA (SA/NT) members and its role in expanding oral history research resources in a digital context.

Aims of the project

The central aim of the SA 175 anniversary oral history web gateway project was to create a facility on the OHAA (SA/NT) website to showcase a collection of oral history interviews conducted by members to highlight the breadth of their work. Another aim for the Association was to commemorate the 175th anniversary of the settlement of South Australia in 2011 through the resource of recordings and transcripts relating to the history of the State. The committee also wanted to highlight links to oral historians in the Northern Territory and mark the centenary of the formation of its government and transference to Commonwealth control by including interviews from the Northern Territory.

What is the SA175 anniversary oral history web gateway?

The SA175 anniversary oral history web gateway consists of 20 oral history interviews. As a new media

format it presents an online audience with opportunities to: listen to interviews through downloading audio files, read full transcripts and obtain a clear idea of the components of each interview through the timed summaries or logs. Each interview includes photographs of the interviewee and/or images related to their story.

The interviews provide pathways into the life experiences of a diverse range of people from South Australia and the Northern Territory who were born between 1900 and 1977. Most interviews are an hour in length, and some are excerpts from longer recordings. The original recordings are held in the collections of the State Library of South Australia (SLSA), the Northern Territory Archives Service (NTAS) and the National Library of Australia (NLA).

The selection of 20 interviews reflects the diversity of work undertaken by professional members of the Association in South Australia and the Northern Territory. Over the past decades members have recorded interviews that provide insights into different periods of South Australian and Northern Territory history, events and people. Each interview captures parts of an interviewee's life story and adds pieces to the mosaic of our society. The web gateway showcases the unique and important contribution that oral history makes to resources for primary research which complements existing archival records in South Australia and the Northern Territory.

The web gateway site has the capacity to add interviews, and from 2012 new recordings will be added each year so it will expand over time, and provide wider perspectives of the history of South Australians and Northern Territorians.

First steps

The OHAA (SA/NT) committee undertook considerable research to plan the SA175 web gateway project from 2008 when the project was first proposed. At the 2009 Annual General Meeting the proposal was further developed and the committee decided that 20 interviews would be an appropriate number to launch

the 175th anniversary oral history web gateway, and the committee appointed a Coordinator, Madeleine Regan, to manage the project. In the 2009 spring edition of the Association's periodical, *Word of Mouth* (WOM), members were invited to submit interviews for the project. The committee contracted *Wildfire Design* run by web designer Dave Smids to create the website design to include MP3 audio files, transcripts, timed summaries and photographs for each of the 20 interviews.

2010 – achievements in planning the project

By March 2010 significant progress had been made. The committee drew up an initial list of interviewees ensuring a diverse grouping. It accepted the quotation of the website designer to develop the audio delivery system for the web gateway. Collaborative arrangements were made with staff in the Preservation section of the SLSA for in-kind support for the time of the audio technicians to convert interviews on cassette tapes to digital format and then to MP3 audio files. The Library also agreed to supply transcripts where they were available. Initial meetings were held with the website designer, the SLSA sound engineer and OHAA (SA/NT) committee members to discuss the scope and technical aspects of the project.

The committee decided it would be beneficial to conduct a pilot of two interviews with the associated documentation to resolve any technical issues in the development of the website. The pilot was conducted over a couple of months and it was a critical stage to develop processes for loading the MP3 files with the documents and photographs onto a separate page of the Association's existing website.

Financing the project

The Association looked for grants in South Australia to provide funds for the project. The first application to the 2010 annual round of History SA grants was unsuccessful. However, in March 2011 the committee learned that its application to the SA175 Anniversary Grant scheme through History SA would contribute \$1,350.00 towards the costs of the web gateway. These funds enabled payment of the production of documents such as the transcripts and timed summaries.

Administration of the project

The process of contacting members and inviting them to submit one of their interviews and asking for copies of recordings, transcripts, if appropriate, and photographs involved considerable time. Another lengthy part of the planning process involved making contact with the interviewees. Interviewers contacted their interviewees

where possible - and if they were still alive.

The committee also developed a copyright permission form which required interviewees to give their agreement to the electronic publication of the recording and transcript of their interviews. We discovered that a number of interviews did not have transcripts and we contracted Allison Murchie, a Branch member, to produce transcripts of interviews. Allison also prepared timed summaries of each of the 20 interviews for uploading to the website. Three of the 20 interviews on the web gateway are from the Northern Territory. The Coordinator worked with staff of the NTAS to invite representation of interviews from its collection.

Progress towards the launch

By early 2011 all the technical issues had been resolved and a meeting was held with the web designer where the remaining MP3 files, Word documents and photographs were handed over. During the first months of the year all transcripts were completed and edited, and the timed summaries were produced. It was a day of celebration when all the documentation for the 20 interviews was finally submitted to the web designer for processing.

The next phase of the project involved the committee members who were asked to review and edit the draft website. Members provided suggestions including feedback on the introductory text. A final meeting was held with the web designer, and all processes were confirmed. The committee decided on the date of the launch in July 2011. After a number of suggestions, an ABC journalist, Ian Henschke, accepted the invitation to launch the web gateway. The SLSA agreed to host the event, and publicity was arranged. All participating interviewers and interviewees were sent invitations, in addition to relevant community members.

The launch – 5th July 2011

The launch of the SA175 anniversary oral history web gateway brought together many of those involved in the project from its inception in July 2008. It demonstrated the positive interaction which had occurred between the interviewees, interviewers and members of the SA/NT branch during the time of the project. The interviewees were delighted to see and hear their interviews on the website and felt their effort was highly valued. The interviewers felt the process was affirming as it highlighted the breadth and value of the work which has been undertaken by branch members over the years.

Journalist, Ian Henschke, gave a rousing speech to launch the site which acknowledged the significance of oral history and the effort of all involved. At the launch the interviewees were acknowledged for agreeing

firstly to be interviewed, and secondly for consenting to contribute their interview to the collection for the SA175 anniversary website. It is a significant act to agree to their interview being accessible on the Internet – an extension to the recording just being in the library's collection for researchers to access. A number of interviewees attended the launch and were acknowledged and congratulated for their contribution to adding their voice to the history of South Australia.

Silver Moon, one of the interviewees, explained the experience of being behind the microphone which gave us all food for thought. Looking at oral history from the interviewee's perspective has been a fascinating outcome of the project.

There was interest in the SA175 anniversary oral history web gateway project from the State Government as demonstrated by the presence of Hon Carmel Zollo representing the then Premier, Mike Rann and representatives of the State Government's Member for Adelaide.

The launch provided a rare opportunity to bring together a diverse group of oral history proponents and interested parties to acknowledge the value of the work and the positive impact it has on all those involved.

Impact of the SA175 anniversary oral history web gateway project

The obvious impacts of the project on the OHAA (SA/NT Branch) were on time and money. The administration time was equivalent to a part time job for Madeleine Regan. The role included coordination of a number of aspects: organising collection of the recordings from the interviewees; liaising with the web designer; managing the processes for completing the transcriptions and logs; collecting the photographs from the interviewees and digitising many of them; and liaising with the audio technicians at the SLSA to digitise cassettes and turn the digital recordings into MP3 copies. Finalisation of the History SA175 anniversary grant application and the acquittal of the grant also took time.

The SA/NT Branch committee was involved in project planning and decision-making and the organisation of the project launch. The Branch President, June Edwards, attended various meetings with Madeleine Regan, the SLSA and Dave Smids the web designer, and also drafted the grant application for the History SA175 anniversary grant scheme. OH member Allison Murchie spent 55.5 hours on the preparation of transcriptions and logs. She also transcribed the speeches made at the website launch. The focus of the SA/NT branch for 2010 and early 2011 was the SA175 anniversary oral history web gateway project. Very

little time was left for other initiatives.

Costs of the project

The project cost \$7706.30 and the SA/NT Branch received a \$1350 grant from the History SA SA175 anniversary grant scheme. The Branch also did a reprint of the *Oral History Handbook* in 2010 so finances plummeted rather dramatically which was a concern. The History SA grant did bolster the account at an opportune time for the treasurer. Without Madeleine Regan being the volunteer Project Coordinator, the volunteer services of the committee, the contribution of the SLSA's free technical work, Allison Murchie's transcribing work, and Dave Smids at *Wildfire Design* being more than helpful, the project would not have been viable for the Branch.

Wider benefits and impacts of the project

The more esoteric impacts of the project relate to affirming the value of oral history, developing relationships, and having a resource for future development. The SA175 anniversary oral history web gateway is seen as a valuable primary resource which is available for those interested in South Australian and Northern Territory history. The branch has had positive feedback on the content and ease of use: 'Truly fantastic June. A functional, no-fuss site, and doubtless a relief to have it launched. I really love the quotes' (email from Michael Piggott 19 July 2011).

People new to oral history have found it useful as a model for doing interviews. It has helped them think about how to approach an interview. It has also been of assistance for reluctant interviewees as the site demonstrates the process, the sorts of people who are interviewed and enables a discussion to happen about the worth of oral history. The site promotes oral history in general and the work of members in SA and the NT in particular. It has been highlighted in university archives and library courses.

The project changed the branch's relationship to its country and NT members as it provided a focus on those outside Adelaide. Our *WOM* newsletter has always been an avenue for highlighting the work of NT and country SA members but distance limits interaction. The website project brought people together and has enabled a means of promoting their work to the world. It also led to the incorporation of NT in our Branch title. The project has created a more inclusive approach in the Branch.

The SA175 anniversary oral history web gateway is creating some interest from organisations who would

like to add their interviews to the site. A group from the Greek community, for example, has applied for a project grant which includes funds for managing the oral history interviews online. The group has approached the OHAA (SA/NT) to ask if their interviews could be uploaded on the web gateway. At a recent Branch committee meeting in 2012, members agreed that there could be further opportunities for collaboration which will ensure the OHAA becomes relevant to a wider audience with the consequence of increasing its membership.

In the immediate future the SA/NT Branch will need to ensure the SA175 anniversary oral history web gateway stays dynamic. The Branch has a modest program of adding at least two interviews per year to the site. This will not be a burden either time wise or financially but will ensure the site changes and grows over time. The intention is to include interviews by members who have not contributed to date including those in the Northern Territory.

Overall SA/NT Branch members would all agree that the SA175 anniversary oral history web gateway has been one of the more positive enterprises undertaken in recent times. It acknowledges the strength and influence of oral history in the broad research arena, the contribution made by interviewers and interviewees over past decades, and the impact of the site on those directly involved in its creation over the period 2008 – 2011.

Conference report Melbourne October 2011: communities of memory

Jill Adams

In recent years memory has been an increasingly significant resource for many different types of communities: for survivors of natural catastrophe and human made disaster; in country towns dealing with demographic and environmental change; for cities and suburbs in constant transformation; in the preservation of special places or the restitution of human rights; for the 'Forgotten Australians' and 'Stolen Generations'; for migrants and refugees creating new lives; among virtual communities sharing life stories online. Memories are used to foster common identity and purpose, to recover hidden histories and silenced stories, to recall change in the past and advocate change in the present, to challenge stereotypes and speak truth to power. Oral historians, in a variety of guises and combining age-old listening skills with dazzling new technologies, play important roles in this memory work. Our conference welcomes participants who use oral history in their work with and within communities of memory across the many fields and disciplines that contribute to community, public and academic histories (Al Thomson, Conference Committee Chairman 2011).

Communities of Memory—17th Biennial Conference of the Oral History Association of Australia — was held at State Library Victoria (SLV) in Melbourne's city centre on 6 – 9 October 2011. The conference was organised by members of the OHAA Victoria Branch committee in partnership with ABC Radio National Social History Unit, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, the Institute of Public History at Monash University, Museum Victoria, the National Film and Sound Archive, the Professional Historians Association, the State Library of Victoria and William Angliss Institute.

Approximately 200 people from Australia and overseas attended the 3-day conference and participated in its full program of workshops, public seminars, walking tours, panels, keynote addresses and social activities.

Three keynote speakers inspired attendees with thought provoking papers: Steven High, Centre for Oral History & Digital Story Telling Concordia University, Montreal on The Montreal Life Stories Project; Nathalie Nguyen, Australian Research Council Future Fellow, Monash University, on the experience of Vietnamese women refugees; and Peter Read, Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow, University of Sydney, on the

changing representations of memorial sites in Chile and the limits of oral history.

There was a wonderful diversity and depth of panel presentations; from 5-minute 'lightning papers' to 20-minute in-depth presentations; and from discussions on national training for oral historians to the problems faced by interviewers when interviewing victims of trauma. Attendees commented on the interesting papers all delivered with great enthusiasm and knowledge, the excellent speakers, delicious morning and afternoon tea, and faultless organisation of the event.

The conference dinner was held at William Angliss Institute in a live classroom; both front of house service and cooking were done by students under instruction from their teachers. We enjoyed a 5-course Australian colonial dinner themed on colonial cookbooks and recipes by colonial cook and cookbook writer, Hannah Maclurcan. The food—mulligatawny soup, stuffed schnapper, beef with pickled walnuts, cabinet pudding and coffee jelly—was washed down with a selection of wines from Tahbilk. Guest speaker Charmaine O'Brien did her best to dispel the myth that Australia's food heritage was mutton and damper by showing us a more inspired culinary history.

Di Ritch and Joyce Cribb were awarded Life Membership to OHAA for their services to the organisation and the Hazel de Berg Award for excellence in Oral History was presented to Frank Heimans, whose oral history activities started in the mid 1970s with documentary films and television and have continued over a 35-year period. Frank has conducted more than 850 audio interviews, has produced eight documentary films and produced 32 programs in the *Australian Biography* Series. Frank's work as an educator and mentor of oral historians was recognised.

Many thanks to the conference committee for its dedication and planning over an 18-month period and in particular thanks to Al Thomson for chairing the organising committee and Kerrie Alexander for her remarkable administration and organisation of the event. The South Australian branch will organise our next national conference in 2013 in Adelaide and planning is already underway. We look forward to another wonderful event and an opportunity to immerse ourselves deeper into our discipline and craft and to meet up again.

Book reviews

Book Review

Alistair Thomson, *Moving Stories: An intimate history of four women across two countries*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2011. 344 pages. ISBN 978 174223 278 2.

I am a great admirer of Alistair Thomson's work. I particularly appreciate his ability to travel to and through different encounters with the past and, each time, add significant insights into our understanding of memory, interviewing, interview relationships, and the complementary place of oral history interviews as one source among many. In *Anzac Memories* he got us thinking about the clashing and convergence of individual and public memory; in *Ten Pound Poms* (with Jim Hammerton) he got us experiencing the emotions and daily lives of British migrants; and in his many articles and other writings, he has immersed us in the changes, challenges and richness of oral history scholarship and practice. Now, with *Moving Stories*, he explores the ways in which different sources, including oral history interviews, fold into the telling of women's lives and migration experiences.

Moving Stories addresses multiple themes. It lures us to engage with the transnational nature of migration through the going and coming, going and coming of migration and return migration. It invites us to empathise with the ties that bind and the ties that tear: the fraught connections to family and place that so often mark moving between countries and cultures. It encourages us to contemplate the transitional roles experienced by women in the post World War Two years in England and in Australia with their tensions between expectations about marriage and motherhood and the possibilities of greater independence and other forms of fulfilment. It immerses us in the power and richness of life stories, and also in the power and richness of the ways in which memories, letters and photographs offer different and complementary perspectives on the exploration and construction of life stories. It also invites us to contemplate the challenges and depths of close collaborative authorship.

The book balances interpretive insights with the words and narratives of the four women who generously and deeply shared their experiences with Thomson: Phyllis

Cave, Gwen Good, Joan Pickett and Dorothy Wright. It has a complementary structure. Part 1 offers a chapter on each of the women, their migration experiences and their - and Thomson's - reflections on those experiences. Part 2 steps back from the narratives and focuses a chapter each on, as the chapter titles eloquently declare, 'letter stories', 'photo stories' and 'memory stories'. Throughout Thomson, in consultation with his co-authors and creators, has thoughtfully ensured that the different voices can be seen and heard in the ways in which words are used, and the text has been revised and formatted.

Thomson's writing is evocative. He slips comfortably from narrative to description to interpretation, and he allows the women's voices to complement and counterpoint his accounts. In Part 1, four potent life stories emerge as do four different perspectives on the experiences of growing up female in 1930s and 1940s England, migrating to Australia as young women and then either settling in Australia (Gwen Good) or returning to England. Snippets from headings, the women's words, Thomson's words capture the tone and texture: 'It looked like heaven to us.' (Gwen Good) (p.29); 'Everybody else was married, so it was time I was married.' (Dorothy Wright) (p.57); 'I didn't want to tell them [her parents] anything that would upset them.' (Joan Pickett) (p.109); 'I think we'll like living here very much. It's very hot today after the rain.' (Phyllis Cave to her Mum) (p.161); and '...those Australian years would become, in memory, the peak experience in her life.' (Thomson on Phyllis Cave) (p.178).

Part 1 ends with a chapter (5) in which Thomson draws together the themes recurring across the four women's lives. He pauses to reflect on the ways in which their experiences add texture and insights to our understanding of the historical contexts of their lives. Sub-headings capture the focus: 'Education and expectations', 'Young married women in 1950s Britain', 'Home-buyers, home-makers and housewives', 'Housewife blues?', and 'Blossoming'.

Retaining the reflective and interpretive tone of Chapter 5, Part II turns to the three key sources – letters, photographs and memories - used to construct the women's life stories. A chapter is devoted to each of the sources but the emphasis is on the ways in which the different sources complement and inform each

other. As Thomson observes 'there have been few attempts to combine contemporary and retrospective migrant narratives, to contrast the different ways they relate a migrant story, or to consider their distinctive qualities as historical evidence.' (p.204).

The reminders and insights are powerful and, throughout, are illustrated and extended with examples from Thomson's participants. Written and audio letters become documents that track changing relations between the women and their parents, and that mark different content for different audiences. They also provide insights into the ways in which the women made sense of their own experiences, and created records and accounts of those experiences. And there is contrast between the sentiments expressed and images recorded at the time with later reflective comments by the letter-writers about changing values and attitudes and about what they did, and did not, share with family in England.

The chapter on photographs continues this reflective and interpretive tone. The stories and messages created by the photographs - including accounts of the who, what, where, why and how of taking the photographs - are central. Here are stories of keeping visual records and creating positive images of home, family, place, adventure, difference. Here, too, are reflections on the ways in which photographs can fix and shape memories and how they can trigger different memories and different stories.

The last chapter, 'Memory stories', takes us to the third category of sources used to build and cement the life stories and also draws together the threads of the book. The focus here is on the different forms in which the women have looked back on their lives and shared their memories: there is autobiographical writing and there are oral history interviews. There is also *Moving Stories* and their role, in collaboration with Thomson, in creating his version of their lives. The chapter begins with a discursive section on the nature of memory and remembering, and the ways in which looking back offers different insights to those provided by the letters and photographs created in the past. Significance and sense, self-identity, changing values and circumstances, life experiences, different audiences: all of these come into play as memories of past events are shaped and reshaped. Photographs gain different contexts and meanings; letters reveal hidden layers and unwritten or unspoken elements; and remembering itself causes encounters with moments, people, places, emotions not recorded elsewhere. Life stories are written and rewritten. And then there is the power of sound: the speech patterns, rhythms, accents, pauses, silences and hesitations as memories are shared in an interview. There are the rhetorical questions, reflective moments, tangential remembering, surprised encounters, humour and sadness. And there are the relationships between participants and historian, so

central to oral history work. Thomson ends the chapter and the book with reflections on his role in shaping the women's remembering, what he refers poetically to as 'a conversational dance' (p319) as, over time, he asked and he listened. In response, his participants settled into ever more detailed and diverse forms of remembering and sharing. They also settled into a process of challenging and being challenged about the nature and meaning of their memories, and into a process of exchange as interview transcripts and draft chapters invited comment.

Moving Stories evocatively engages with the life experiences of Phyllis Cave, Gwen Good, Joan Pickett and Dorothy Wright. It effectively traverses the complex territory of life stories, memories, different perspectives, different interests and different sources. It powerfully challenges us to think both broadly and deeply about the ways in which we gather, interpret and present other people's stories. And it encourages and exemplifies the richness of scholarship and practice that informs Alistair Thomson's work.

Janis Wilton
University of New England

Book Review

Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson (eds) *Oral History and Photography*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp.252 ISBN: 9780230104600

I found this addition to the extensive Palgrave series of *Studies in Oral History* very difficult to review. In the introduction the editors identify a significant gap in oral history literature that their book is not intended to fill. The editors' revelation was so exciting that I became impatient with the book's original purpose. After several false starts, I decided to write about this book in relation to the book the editors have convinced me needs to be written. What follows is presumptuous but may be helpful in furthering the cause.

The call for papers for *Oral History and Photography*, still online via www.H-net.org, sought original research essays exploring 'the interconnections and synergies between theory, method and politics in the two fields' of oral history and photography. The resulting publication contains 12 essays by academics and post-graduate scholars from Canada, United States, Brazil, Germany, Great Britain and Australia. Their fields include History, Anthropology, Sociology, Education, Cultural Studies, Media Studies and Photo Studies.

Each essay describes the ways in which the authors have used photographs in their practice of oral history. Most uses are familiar; interviewees are asked to talk about their own photographs during the interview, or interviewers ask them to respond to photographs the interviewer has assembled for the interviewing program. The photographs may be private (passed

down in a family or created by the interviewee), public (published in newspapers or created by government offices) or both (Ana Maria Mauad interviews a photographer about images he created as a freelance photojournalist).

Janis Wilton's approach is different. She describes her extended family's response to her mother's death, which has included photographing her mother's household possessions and interviewing one another about the memories they evoke. Penny Tinkler chooses to focus her interviewees' attention on photograph albums that have survived intact from their youth. Carol Payne writes about a 'visual repatriation project' in which Inuit students interview their elders about photographs taken by The National Film Board of Canada in the 1950s and 1960s to document the relocation of Inuit into permanent settlements.

It appears that between the call for papers and the subsequent publication of these case studies the editors determined that, despite photographs having always been an integral part of oral history, handbooks including my own have been silent on any theory or best practice relating to the use of photographs. A check of major British and American oral history anthologies on my shelves confirms that their editors and publishers also make assumptions about oral historians' proficiency in the use of photographs that are not extended to recording technology, interviewing technique and the functions of memory.

As *Oral History and Photography's* editors contend, oral history instruction to date has failed to provide 'the concrete advice that oral historians need for a systematic and reflexive use and interpretation of photographs.' (p.3) However, having identified this significant gap in oral history literature the editors advise that their book will not fill it.

This book is not written as a guide or handbook for oral historians seeking concrete advice on using photographs in their practice. Rather than prescribing best practices, it show-cases them. ... This will allow readers to become more conscious in their own use of photographs. Readers will appreciate that rather than leaving it up to happenstance, they can and must make choices about the kinds of photographs to be used, the diverse forms of their presentation ... and the questions to be asked about the photographs and their history. (p.18)

The case studies are indeed conscious-raising, but it is an exaggeration to suggest that they show-case best practices. There is no evidence that the authors' methods are more successful than those of other oral historians. Much more problematic is the false hope raised by the publisher's publicity about the book. Both advertisements and the book's back cover state that *Oral History and Photography* reveals 'how oral

historians can best use photographs in interviewing practice and best understand them in the interpretation of oral histories'.

Hence my impatience with the original purpose of the book and my imaginings of what a book about the best use of photographs in oral history might contain. Ideally it would be based firmly on the findings of oral historians who have deliberately applied different methods of using photographs as memory triggers and analysed the results. The first essay in *Oral History and Photography* introduces a Canadian project that appears to meet these criteria – a three-year interdisciplinary project in which a group of academic historians and folklorists interviewed 600 men and women who before 1940 had lived in one of three prairie provinces.

We used three interview methods: a survey questionnaire, a life story interview, and the so-called photo-interview. For the photo-interview, interviewees were asked to look through their family albums, photo boxes, and room displays (photographs hung on walls or set on mantelpieces) and select about ten photographs from the period before World War II. During the interviews, we asked for descriptions of the photographs. The interviews were audio-recorded and the pictures digitally photographed. (p.29)

The project recorded 57 photo-interviews. The authors, one of whom is *Oral History and Photography's* co-editor Alexander Freund, report usefully but much too briefly on analysis of a sub-group of 25 photo-interviews with descendants of German-speaking immigrants, before focusing on a single interview and the interviewee's wedding photograph. We are not told whether the life story interviews in the project made use of photographs and whether they will be used to provide a comparison of outcomes.

It is frustrating that none of the other essays represent projects with a range of methodologies. For instance, having reported on interviews based around interviewees' girlhood photograph albums, Tinkler cannot go on to discuss comparative interviews that use, say, a selection of images that have been removed from the context of an album. However, the editors and several authors emphasise the importance of Judith Modell and Charles Brodsky's 'Envisioning Homestead: Using Photographs in Interviewing' published in *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, 1994. We learn that Modell and Brodsky 'developed an interviewing method that... asked first for an oral narrative and then for a response to archival photographs, photographs taken by Brodsky, and family photographs. They then analysed the relationship between oral narrative and "visual story"'. (p.4)

Advice on the best use of photographs could no doubt also draw on methods tested in related disciplines. Lynda

Mannik explains how she used the ‘photo-elicitation’ method pioneered in the 1950s by John Collier and published as *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* (1967, 1986). Collier compared the results of ‘identical interview settings, where, in one, photos were introduced and discussed and, in the other, only verbal questions were asked’. (p.78)

A guide to oral history and photography would certainly describe practical aspects of using photographs during interviews. Two authors provide details of methods with wide application. When Mannik interviewed Estonian refugees who had travelled by boat to Canada in 1948;

Together we looked at large photoboards, where I arranged a collection of 55 images in collage fashion with approximately ten photos on each board. My sorting criteria were based on eliminating repeated images to create a collection that was comprehensive, yet small enough to facilitate a two-to-three hour interview. (p.83)

Co-editor and contributing author Alistair Thomson scanned the photographs of British migrants to Australia into his laptop computer. ‘Tiny Kodak Instamatic images from the 1970s now filled the computer screen in dramatic detail. As [interviewees] looked at each image they triggered stories that often spiralled off in unexpected directions and enriched my understanding of the photos and the moments they pictured.’ (p.179) This method can also solve the notorious problem, usually mentioned in oral history handbooks, of interviewers borrowing and failing to return precious photographs.

For a general readership, I would caution against too much reliance on photography theory. The authors were instructed to ‘consider oral history and photography as distinct but related research methods’. Certainly all researchers can benefit from reminders that smiling faces in photographs may mask unhappiness and pain, and that professional photographers are skilled in framing or staging portraits and scenes to meet their clients’ or their own expectations and agendas. We know this from personal experience but can overlook it in depictions of other people in other times and places. The Palgrave series’ primary audience is academia and the authors apply concepts such as the ‘photographic turn’ and ‘punctum,’ and use of compound words like ‘imagetexts’ and ‘postmemory’. However, oral history is generally free of specialised language and concrete advice is best written in plain English.

On the other hand, instruction on the history of photography and a recommendation that oral historians acquaint themselves with the practice of photography in the time and place they are researching deserves emphasis. *Oral History and Photography* unwittingly demonstrates the pitfalls in an uninformed use of

photographs. The aforementioned wedding photograph from 1935 depicts the husband standing and the wife seated. The authors note that the bride’s gown and hairstyle are in keeping with the fashion of the day but state that ‘gender roles are clearly visualized in the arrangement: The man standing watchfully over his wife, who is femininely fragile and weak and therefore must sit’. (p.38) A generation earlier the arrangement was often reversed – husband seated and wife standing. While gender roles are an important factor, other cultural influences are also involved. It is similarly unfair for the authors to write that ‘it is difficult to make eye contact with Henry’ (p.38) the husband, who they learned later deserted his wife. The wedding photograph is a hand-tinted studio print. Surely it is the tinter’s hand, not the man’s character, which is depicted.

There is also a surprising failure to adequately identify *Oral History and Photography*’s cover photograph that is a key image in Janet Elizabeth Marles’ essay exploring memories elicited by a shoebox of documents and photographs given to her mother Heather 60 years after Heather and her older sister were orphaned as children. The photograph’s caption is ‘McD’s Victor Harbour’. It is described as showing ‘a family group dressed in overcoats and hats on a boardwalk next to a windy beach circa 1934’. (p.216) At the time the photograph was taken the family was still intact and living in Nhill, Victoria near the South Australian border.

Marles writes that the use of the photograph ‘opens up a torrent of stories and emotions. Heather says: My mother must have been a bit of a photographer. She seems to have taken most of the pictures. I’d never seen these until Andrew sent them. See this one. That’s my father... and look... he’s holding my hand’. (p.217) Yet there is no hint in the essay, or the corresponding website *The Shoebox*, of knowledge or curiosity about the location of the photograph. It is Victor Harbor (the correct spelling) South Australia, which was described in the title of a promotional film of the same era as ‘South Australia’s Premier Pleasure Resort’. Victor Harbor and the Blue Lake at Mount Gambier were popular South Australian holiday destinations for residents of rural western Victoria. The author’s forebears may have had relatives living there. The anachronistic use of the Americanism ‘boardwalk’ could be forgiven in an international publication such as this was the subject not the use and interpretation of photography.

A handbook would also have to confront the issue of copyright in photographs, entirely absent in *Oral History and Photography* despite essays featuring press and official photographs created in the second half of the twentieth century. The related and similarly vexed issue of how to associate relevant photographs with the interview over time also requires attention.

Conventional handbooks have advised including a copy of the photograph with the transcript, but the issue is much more complicated than that in the online era.

Oral History and Photography does not reveal how oral historians can best use photographs. Nevertheless, it deserves a place on public and private library shelves for the thought-provoking ways in which it raises issues surrounding this largely overlooked aspect of oral history. Given that *Oral History and Photography*'s co-editor Thomson is resident in Australia again and leading a master class on the topic for OHAA's NSW Branch in November 2012, there is reason to hope that the needed guidance on the best use of photographs in oral history might emerge from our shores.

Beth M Robertson

State Library of South Australia

Book Review

Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory is Another Country Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora*

Praeger, Oxford, England, 2009, pp. 212 ISBN978-0-313-36027-5 hard copy—ISBN 978-0-313-36028-2 (ebook)

More than two million refugees left Vietnam in the two decades following the communist takeover of South Vietnam in 1975—the largest and most visible mass migration of the late 20th century. The toll on life was immense, with losses of boat refugees estimated at between 100,000 and 1 million people.

In 1975 Nathalie Nguyen's family became political refugees and her parents moved to Australia with their four children.

It is against this backdrop of war, migration, and loss that Nguyen investigates memory, the memory of refugees, the intersection of memory, narrative and trauma in refugee stories and Vietnamese women's memories.

Nguyen's book came out of a five-year project on 'Vietnamese Women: Voices and Narratives of the Diaspora' and is based on in-depth interviews, conducted between 2005 and 2008, with forty-two Vietnamese women in Australia. The interviews, which lasted from half an hour to six hours, varied in length, focus and intensity. Some women focused on particular events in their lives, others provided lengthy life histories. Gaining narratives from these women raised particular challenges for the author. In her preface Nguyen comments that many Vietnamese women were reluctant to tell their stories because it is seen as individualistic rather than for the community and because many experienced censorship and imprisonment in post-war Vietnam. Vietnamese women find it harder to speak than men because they

generally have a lower level of education and are expected to remain quietly in the background. Many were hesitant about bringing their private stories into the public domain and many had experienced trauma during the war or during their escape from Vietnam. Once they had made up their minds to speak they did so with outstanding honesty.

It is this outstanding honesty and the way that Nguyen allows these women to tell their stories that give *Memory is Another Country* its extraordinary power. Nguyen provides the reader with framework and context and then steps aside and allows us to hear the voices of the women and to understand their personal histories. Nguyen offers her insights on these relationships, differing memories and the form and structure of their story-telling, but mostly she allows the women to speak directly to the reader through long tracts of uninterrupted transcript. The reader gains new insights and understanding of Colonial history in Vietnam; the effects of years of war and conflict on individuals, family, community and country; migration and resettlement; and the resilience of these women as they tell their once suppressed and silenced stories.

Nguyen constantly reminds her readers that the act of remembering can be frail and vivid, painful and positive, deeply personal and convergent. Siblings Suong and Anh's shared past is remembered and interpreted differently. Le's memories are strongly visual – bloodied pock-marked walls of the room she shared with her mother, panic and confusion after the bombing of Buan Ma Thot; and Hanh, Tuyet, Lan and Kieu all chose partners from a different culture than their own, and have positive and transformative memories.

Penny Summerfield writes that women's experiences are routinely omitted from public accounts of the construction of national identity through military activity, and hence from accounts of war, which is reproduced as (inevitably) predominantly masculine (Nguyen pp. 87). A chapter on Women in Uniform allows four women to tell their stories of the time they served in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNFA). The women reflect on their lives and their work and acknowledge the highlights and the drawbacks and time spent in re-education camps after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Nguyen writes, 'women are traditionally perceived to be the keepers and transmitters of culture ... their stories reflect changing cultures and histories and provide counter-stories to national narratives circulating in their native country ... By speaking their stories ... [they have] enabled the people and the country they have loved and lost to live on in their memories, in the words they utter, and in the pages of this book' (Nguyen, pp. 164).

Jill Adams

Notes on contributors

Jill Adams

Jill Adams graduated with honors in Geography and majors in Literature, Journalism and Fine Arts and went off to Paris to pursue a career in hospitality. She is a qualified teacher, a graduate of Cordon Bleu École de Cuisine in Paris, and, until recently, was the Training and Development Manager of Coffee Academy, a joint initiative of Douwe Egberts Australia and William Angliss Institute. She completed a Masters in Oral History and Historical Memory at Monash University in 2011. Her book *Barista a guide to espresso coffee* published by Pearson Australia is used widely in espresso coffee training in Australia and overseas. Her book, *A Good Brew*—a history of Melbourne tea and coffee trading business H.A. Bennett & Sons, and social and cultural change in Australia through the rich stories of people involved in our tea and coffee industries—will be published early in 2013. In January 2012 Jill commenced study towards her PhD at Central Queensland University in the School of Creative and Performing Arts, Faculty of Arts, Business, Informatics and Education. Her current area of interest is Australian culinary history post World War II. She has co-edited a special edition of on-line journal MC and has published papers in numerous academic journals and presented papers at local and International conferences. Jill is president of the Oral History Association of Australia.

Gwenda Baker

Gwenda Baker is an historian with a long relationship with the people at Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island, NT), particularly the women. In 2005 she was awarded a Northern Territory History Award to interview people about their mission experiences as part of a larger study of Aboriginal history in mission times. In 2006 she recorded stories at Galiwin'ku with Joanne Garngulkpuy and the women at the Yalu Marnggithinyaraw Centre. In 2010-11 she was co-researcher with Joanne Garngulkpuy on an AIATSIS funded project. With Garngulkpuy she interviewed Yolngu about family stories and memories of working and living on the mission. These interviews drew on extensive archival studies which connect people, place and history. Baker's methodology includes using photographs from the mission era to rekindle memories and promote story

telling across generations. In articles and seminar papers she examines the intersections between Aboriginal religious beliefs and Christianity; the re-interpretation of missionary activity by Aboriginal leaders; relationships between Aboriginal women and women missionaries; the political activism of Aboriginal leaders; the effects of missionary and government interventions on Aboriginal family life; the fight for Land Rights and Aboriginal Labor on Methodist Missions in Arnhem Land. Baker is currently Adjunct Research Fellow at Monash Indigenous Centre, Monash University, Victoria.

Heather Campbell

Heather Campbell is currently the secretary of the West Australian Branch of the Professional Historians Association. She has a Primary Teaching Diploma and a BA from the University of Western Australia. From 1978 to 1995 she was secretary, and on occasions Acting Coordinator, of the Oral History Program and the Oral History Unit of the Battye Library of West Australian History. Since then Heather has been working as an historical researcher and oral history interviewer. Her work has included oral history interviewing, curatorial and research assistance, and researching and writing online resources for the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. This work included interviewing John Curtin's son, John Francis Curtin in 2004 and writing *Diary of a Labor Man 1917-1945*, now on line at <http://john.curtin.edu.au/diary/index.html>. *Katitjin*, a Guide to the Indigenous Resources in the Battye Library, was researched and written for the Friends of the Battye Library in 2003. A more recent focus has been oral history interviewing, mainly for local government bodies with interviews conducted for the Shire of Cottesloe, Mosman Park and Peppermint Grove, Fremantle City Library, Nedlands City Library, the City of Perth, and the Shire of Wanneroo. An oral history project with Valuers was also managed for the Australian Property Institute. A member of OHAA since its foundation, Heather served as secretary and on the committee of the WA Branch. She is now an Honorary Life Member.

June Edwards

June Edwards joined the Oral History Association in Queensland in 1992 when she worked as the

University Archivist at James Cook University of North Queensland. The Archives began an oral history program of staff associated with the early development of the university. Together with Barbara Erskine they ran oral history workshops, held the oral history conference for the Queensland Branch on Magnetic Island and included a discussion of oral history in the Australian Society of Archivists' conference which was run in tandem with the Magnetic Island event. From 2004 until 2008 June was the Archival Field Officer at the State Library of South Australia where she looked after the oral history program, developing the collection, running and hosting workshops and supporting individuals and groups who undertook oral history projects. She is President of OHAA SA Branch 2006-2012, and the SA representative on the OHAA National Council 2007-2012. Since retirement June has been involved in a variety of volunteer and paid consultancies involving both oral history and archives work.

Joanne Garngulkpuy

Joanne Garngulkpuy is an experienced teacher, a Wangurri elder and a social researcher. She has guided and mentored numerous research projects. A co-founder of the Yalu' Marnggithinyaraw Centre at Galiwin'ku she supervised the Yalu' Marnggithinyaraw project and was chief investigator of the CRCATH Funded Project 'Yolngu Theories of Transformation: The Yalu' Story'; associate investigator of the Psychosocial Impact Indicators SCRIF Funded Project; helped develop the Yothu Yindi school curriculum for the local primary school; was involved in collaborations with CRC for Aboriginal and Tropical Health; involved in the Menzies School of Health research; and the Northern Territory University (Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies). In 2007-2008 she was chair of the Council for Aboriginal Alcohol Program Services Inc. She has co-authored many important social research documents which link the history of the community with health and social problems and with programs to strengthen family life and well-being. In 2010-2011 she was co-researcher with Gwenda Baker on an AIATSIS funded project. Garngulkpuy is currently manager of the Yalu Marnggithinyaraw Centre at Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island, Northern Territory; and Adjunct Research Associate at Monash Indigenous Centre, Monash University, Victoria.

Megg Kelham

Megg Kelham is a professional historian, educator and radio broadcaster who lives in Alice Springs. She has taught history and comparative legal studies in remote Australian high schools and in a gaol; produced radio documentaries for local, national and international audiences; audio tours, multi-media installations and educational resources for museums in Tennant Creek and Alice Springs; undertaken social history projects in traditionally male dominated spheres– railways,

gaols and mining towns – maintaining her woman's view and worked on community awareness audio education projects in the areas of domestic violence and suicide. A passionate advocate of public history she regularly holds public lectures in old buildings where she projects digital images of the primary sources onto the walls as a way of engaging the community in the processes of how history is made. Examples of Megg's digital productions can be found on youtube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTNFTOvavDw> or in the HistoryNT section of Territory Stories hosted by the Northern Territory Library. This year Megg took to the stage, giving guided tours of the Alice Springs gaol thinly disguised as 'Mrs Muldoon' the first gaol keeper's wife as a way of exploring the boundary zones between 'fact' and 'fiction'. Correspondence regarding this article can be sent to meggkel@yahoo.com.

Associate Professor Michele Langfield

Until 2012, Associate Professor Michele Langfield, PhD, worked for 22 years in the Faculty of Arts and Education, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Burwood Campus, Melbourne, Australia. Her research interests include migration, ethnicity, identity and cultural heritage and she has published widely in these areas. Her books include *Welsh Patagonians: the Australian Connection* (with Peta Roberts) 2005, *More people imperative: immigration to Australia, 1901-39* (1999), and *Espresso bar to EMC: a thirty-year history of the Ecumenical Migration Centre* (1996). Much of her work utilises oral histories and videotestimonies, particularly in the field of Jewish and Holocaust studies, and she is joint editor of *Testifying to the Holocaust*, (with Pam Maclean and Dvir Abramovich), 2008. A further edited collection (with William Logan and Mairead Nic Craith) entitled *Cultural Diversity, Heritage and Human Rights: Intersections in Theory and Practice*, is now published (Routledge) 2010. Her record of journal articles is impressive.

Dr Susan Marsden

Susan Marsden is a professional historian who runs a consultancy business based in Adelaide. She is an honorary life member of the Oral History Association of Australia, and has recorded hundreds of interviews, including for her most recent books, *Business, charity and sentiment Part two: the South Australian Housing Trust, 1987-2011*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2011, and *My home in Onkaparinga*, City of Onkaparinga, Noarlunga, 2011.

Judy McKinty

Judy McKinty is a member of the OHAA (Victorian branch), an independent children's play researcher and cultural heritage interpreter based in Melbourne. She has been involved in several oral history projects

for the National Library of Australia, the University of Melbourne and Museum Victoria, including *Childhood, Tradition and Change*, a national survey of children's play (2007-2010) and *Aboriginal Children's Play*, a project recording some of the childhood play experiences of Aboriginal people living in Victoria (1990s and 2007-2008).

Christin Quirk

Christin Quirk completed her Master of Philosophy thesis at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) in Melbourne under the supervision of Professor Shurlee Swain. Her research into past adoption practices in relation to single women confined at Melbourne's Royal Women's Hospital in the period 1945-1975 was commissioned and funded by the hospital. A report on her findings was submitted to the Australian Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies by the hospital, and directly informed their January 2012 apology to mothers who lost a child to adoption. Christin's research interests include Australian women's history, suffrage, the family, post-war social movements and oral history. She is currently researching culturally contested conceptions of motherhood in post-war Australia, undertaking her PhD at Macquarie University under the supervision of Dr Rebecca Jennings and Associate Professor Robert Reynolds. Her proposed thesis will investigate the impact of mainstream cultural discourses of motherhood on lesbian women, not only on their choice to parent, but in their role as mothers. Christin has lectured at ACU in Australian Immigration History, Historical Perspectives on the Family, and Contemporary World History. She is also a member of the editorial collective of *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*.

Madeleine Regan

Madeleine Regan is a former secondary school teacher, and has had a freelance consultancy for nine years working in a range of education contexts. Madeleine is keenly interested in oral history and Italian migration. She has developed the oral history project, *From the Veneto to Frogmore and Findon Roads: Stories of Italian market gardeners 1920s – 1970s* over six years. She has recorded interviews with 20 first and second generation Italo-Australians, and formed a research group with five of the original interviewees. They support Madeleine to collect narratives of the sons and daughters of Italian market gardeners who emigrated from the same region of Italy in 1927 and developed their gardens in one of the western suburbs of Adelaide. She co-presented a paper on the project at the National Conference in 2011. This year Madeleine has had a contract with the Adelaide City Council to extend a long-term project of interviewing former Lord Mayors, elected members, residents and other people with a long association with the City of Adelaide. She

joined the Oral History Association in South Australia in 2009, and is a Committee member.

Beth Robertson

Beth M Robertson is manager of Preservation at the State Library of South Australia. She completed a History Honours degree at the University of Adelaide in 1979. From 1987 to 1999 she was the South Australian State Library's foundation Oral History Officer. She is author of the Oral History Association of Australia's *Oral History Handbook*, which is in its fifth edition and recognised as the definitive text for oral history practice in Australia and well regarded internationally. Her most recent publication is 'The Archival Imperative: Can Oral History Survive the Funding Crisis in Archival Institutions?' in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* edited by Donald A Ritchie, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011. The paperback edition is in print, 2012.

Lorraine Stevens

Lorraine Stevens joined the Fremantle City Library in November 1976 as a newly qualified Librarian. One of her duties was the development of a fledging Local History Collection. Within a few years the local history component took over her job and her title changed to reflect this. As Librarian: Local History she was employed until March 1998. Now semi-retired, she works on a casual basis as an oral historian and identifying/ describing photographs at the Fremantle City Library.

Lorraine has been a member of OHAA (W.A. branch) since its foundation and wrote a report on the Library's oral history program in Local history, family history and oral history (*Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, No.4, 1981-1982, pp. 96-98).

Margaret Tomkins

Margaret Tomkins is a member of Blind Citizens Australia and former student of the RVIB School for the Blind. In 1990 Margaret was awarded a Public Service Medal for her work as a Social Worker in Mental Health, Victorian Department of Health. The establishment of housing, rehabilitation and support for people leaving psychiatric hospitals was a major feature of her work. Since her retirement she has been an advocate for blind and vision-impaired people and was until November 2011 Honorary Treasurer of the Blind Citizens Australia Computer Users Group. In June 2012 she was awarded the Order of Australia medal for service to the community.

Ariella Van Luyn

Ariella Van Luyn's practice-led PhD is currently under examination. The PhD consists of a work of historical fiction based on oral histories and archival material, and an exegesis that explores the dialogue between

oral history and fiction. Ariella is the President of the Queensland branch of the OHAA, and has just spent the last six months travelling to rural areas in Queensland to facilitate oral history workshops, thanks to a Gambling Community Benefit Fund Grant awarded to the branch. She is currently chair of the *OHAA Journal's* editorial board, and on the OHAA Training Working Group. She has published peer-reviewed articles in the *OHAA Journal* and *Ejournalist*. Her works of short fiction have been published in *Voiceworks*, *The Lifted Brow* and *Rex*. Her short story, 'Evelyn on the Verandah,' which is based on an oral history interview she conducted, was published in the *One Book Many Brisbanes* anthology in 2009. The novel emerging from the PhD, *Hidden Objects*, has been shortlisted in the Queensland Literary Awards in the unpublished manuscript category.

Associate Professor Janis Wilton OAM

Janis Wilton is a public and oral historian based at the University of New England. A former President of the International Oral History Association and recipient of the 2009 Hazel de Berg Award for Excellence in Oral History, her teaching and research practice focus particularly on the place and role of oral history in local, community and family histories. Recent publications and projects include *Golden Threads: The Chinese in Regional NSW* (2004), *Different Sights: New England Immigrants* (2009) and *Maitland Jewish Cemetery: A Monument to Dreams and Deeds* (2010). Website: www.une.edu.au/staff/jwilton.php

Life memberships

Joyce Cribb



In addition to being Public Officer for the NSW Branch of the Association since 2001 and a very valuable long standing member of the Management Committee, Joyce has assisted with the editing and production of *Voiceprint*, the NSW Branch Newsletter, for the past 15 years. After two years assisting the editorial committee she then took on the role of Editor. Joyce is always actively searching out material for publication and encouraging members to write up information about their various projects. Her editorial skills can gently hone members' notes into interesting copy. Rising to the challenge and opportunities presented by digital technology she is currently in the process of developing *Voiceprint* as an e-newsletter.

Joyce's appreciation for the wealth of untold life stories and ways to help people retrieve their memories sprang from her work in aged persons homes. She found that for many frail older people their personal esteem was bound to the memories of past life experiences and successes. Allowing people to tell of their life story and reminisce about past experiences was a very valuable therapy for older people whose abilities were in the present very restricted. Joyce trained as a Diversional Therapist and then completed a Masters Degree in Leisure Studies at the University of Technology Sydney. She put her studies to good use as she lectured in the School of Occupational Therapy, Cumberland College of Health Sciences, University of Sydney. Joyce always encouraged her students to

listen to the life stories and respect and value the life experiences of their clients.

It was this emphasis and promotion of reminiscence and life stories that came to the notice the Oral History Association NSW. Joyce and a colleague from the University were invited by Rosie Block to speak at a seminar in 1993. There she was introduced to a number of oral historians who all promoted the Association including Beth Robertson, also a speaker on that day, who gave them a crash course on oral history over lunch. She found the members and their interest and activities so coincided with her own interests she decided to join the Association. From this time Joyce has always promoted Oral History and encouraged membership and the opportunity to attend OHAA training and seminars.

Joyce says that it is her background of knowing how rewarding it is for the individual to have their work, their history, valued and recorded that has inspired her to continue her role with *Voiceprint* and record and feature the work of oral historians. So the work continues and if there is work to be done, Joyce can always be relied upon to be there.

Diana Ritch



Encouraged and trained by her mother, oral history pioneer Hazel de Berg, Di began her work in earnest as an oral historian in 1983. Since then her passion for oral history has seen her involved in local history, Aboriginal history, Holocaust history, corporate history, school and family histories. As an accredited interviewer for the National Library of Australia she has conducted numerous interviews with notable Australians, including poets, writers, composers, religious leaders, social historians, publishers, singers and others. She was an interviewer for two of the National Library's major oral history projects namely The Australian Response to AIDS, and The Stolen Generation, Bringing Them Home Oral History Project. During the 1980s and 90s Di attended the Adelaide Writers' Week where she interviewed many of the contributors, and in Sydney she recorded the first 10 years of the Writers' Festival for the National Library.

In 1987 Di became a member of the Oral History Association of Australia and has been an active member of the New South Wales Committee from 1992 to the current time. She has always given herself enthusiastically to the work of the Committee and has attended many of the OHAA National Conferences where her contribution is always valued. Di is very interested in promoting oral history, delivering talks on the subject to a diverse group of organisations and ensuring that she includes excerpts from recordings. As a traveller, she is constantly on the lookout for new and innovative ideas relating to oral history and shares them through the Voiceprint newsletter, and in her own time Di recorded the speakers at Bloomsday (the annual James Joyce 'Ulysses' Celebration).

In 1991 a unique oral history project, The Rona Tranby Trust, was started to encourage interaction between the Jewish and Aboriginal communities. Di was the inaugural Oral Historian and taught Aboriginal people to interview members of their own communities. The programme has now been running for 20 years and Di has created very strong bonds with senior members in the Aboriginal community, giving tirelessly of her time to help them record their lives. In the 1990s Di was

involved in the ground-breaking Project Heritage, an oral history project which taught students at Jewish day schools to conduct recorded interviews with senior members of the Jewish community, many of them Holocaust survivors. Di also worked with the Ethnic Communities Council to introduce the concept of interviewing members of different ethnic groups into State Schools.

Her experience with Holocaust survivors was then used when she became one of the interviewers for Steven Spielberg's Visual History of the Shoah Foundation. Many years later Di still keeps in touch with the interviewees, who she calls 'my survivors'.

In 2005 when the OHAA Hazel de Berg Award for Excellence in Oral History was created, Di arranged for the de Berg family to generously donate the awards. While still conducting interviews, Di is currently engaged in writing a biography of her mother whose over 1300 recordings form the foundation of the extensive oral history collection in the National Library.

The Hazel de Berg Award, 2011 for Excellence in Oral History



[Photo supplied by
Lena Volkova]

Franklin (Frank) Arthur Heimans' oral history activities began in the mid-1970s with documentary films for television, as writer, director, producer and interviewer. At that time there was little awareness of the value of oral history within the film and television community. Over the ensuing 35-year period Frank has produced twenty-five documentary and biographical films for television with a strong oral history component.

Frank's is an imposing record - he has conducted more than 850 audio interviews with a wide cross-section of the community, people in the arts, religion, literature, music, theatre, education, medicine, architecture, aviation, sports, economics, politics, science, engineering, broadcasting, law, business and administration. He has produced eight documentary films for television with a strong oral history component, and as originator of the first truly Australian archival interview series, Frank produced 32 programs in the *Australian Biography* series.

He deposited his material with the National Film and Sound Archive following its establishment in 1984, with footage of the *Australian Biography* series being transcribed, timed, documented and deposited with Australian Archives.

Frank has given many lectures and presentations to OHAA conferences, community groups and local

libraries and has presented at the IOHA international conference in Mexico. Since 2001 he has written on oral history topics for OHAA Journals and *Voiceprint* newsletter and he has often participated in OHAA workshops to bring knowledge, practices and skills to participants.

Frank was one of the first Australian filmmakers to carry out interviews on film and to then log, transcribe and archive the material. He also pioneered a prototype archive system for documenting video material which was subsequently adopted by the CSIRO and named 'Frank'.

Frank has been a valued mentor and for many who feared new recording technologies, has made good sound recording appear effortless.

As testament to the quality and significance of his work, Frank has won many awards.

National President

Oral History Association of Australia

Membership information

Oral History Association of Australia



The Oral History Association of Australia (OHAA) was established in 1978. The objectives of the Association are to:

- Promote the practice and methods of oral history
- Educate in the use of oral history methods
- Encourage discussion of all problems in oral history
- Foster the preservation of oral history records in Australia
- Share information about oral history projects.

Branch seminars and workshops are held regularly throughout the year, while a national conference is held every two years. Many of the papers from conferences appear in the OHAA Journal.

Members receive a copy of the annual OHAA Journal, and newsletters and publications from their individual branches. Among other publications, the South Australian Branch of the OHAA has published the Oral History Handbook by Beth Robertson, which is available to members at a discounted price.

(Note: **Australian Capital Territory** members join the New South Wales Branch and Northern Territory members join the South Australian Branch.)

OHAA website: www.ohaa.org.au

Enquiries should be directed to State branches at the following addresses:

National Executive

President, OHAA: Jill Adams

2 Leopold Street,

Glen Iris Vic 3759

Email: President@oralhistoryvictoria.org.au

Website: www.oralhistoryvictoria.org.au

ACT

Incorporated into the New South Wales Branch

New South Wales

President: Sandra Blamey

OHAA NSW Inc

PO Box 66,

Camperdown NSW 1450

Email: ohaansw@hotmail.com

Email: sblamey@ozemail.com.au

Phone 02 9997 4443

Website: www.ohaansw.org.au

Northern Territory

Incorporated into the South Australian Branch

Enquiries: Matthew Stephen, NT Archives Service

Email: matthew.stephen@nt.gov.au

Queensland

President: Ariella van Luyn

PO Box 12213 George Street,

Brisbane Qld 4003

Email: a1.vanluyn@qut.edu.au

Website: www.ohaaqld.org.au

South Australia

President: June Edwards

PO Box 3113,

Unley SA 5061

Email: ejune32@yahoo.com

Website: www.ohaa-sa.com.au

Tasmania

President: Jill Cassidy

c/- Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery,

PO Box 403,

Launceston Tas 7250

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Victoria

President: Jill Adams

2 Leopold Street,

Glen Iris Vic 3759

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Website: www.oralhistoryvictoria.org.au

Western Australia

President: Denise Cook

PO Box 1065,

Nedlands WA 6909

Email: info@ohaa-wa.com.au

Website: www.ohaa-wa.com.au/

CALL FOR PAPERS

Contributions are invited from Australia and overseas for publication in the
OHAA Journal No. 35, 2013

She said, he said: reading, writing and recording histories

Contributions are invited in the following three categories:

A Papers on the themes of, including those presented at, the OHAA's Biennial National Conference, held in conjunction with the Annual Conference of History SA, September 2013, Adelaide (*limit 5,500 words*). Themes include:

- Memory, history and the role of the senses
- Recording the history of disasters – and when is the right time to interview survivors
- History as therapy, including reminiscence and narrative therapy
- The uses of history, including oral history, in performance, plays, theatre, radio and film
- Technology and oral history, including websites, the ethical dimensions of accessibility, intellectual property and plagiarism
- Both sides of the microphone – understanding the experiences of oral history interviewers (including the issue of vicarious trauma), and interviewees (including creating positive experiences for interviewees)
- Activating cities and communities – making links between urban history and urban renewal
- The history of urban renewal
- New work in town and city histories
- Digital history in the age of web 3.0 and smartphones
- Digital sources as data and the place of interpretation
- Writing history for the web
- Citizen history? Making user-contributed content more meaningful
- New work in Indigenous history: in education and in the courtroom
- Aboriginal perspectives on South Australian history
- Public policy and private pain – recording and writing histories of past practices including the Stolen Generation, the Forgotten Generation and forced adoption
- Contested histories in the public realm
- Which history? History in public events: commemorations, festivals and re-enactments
- History-writing and social change
- Memoir and history – what's the difference?
- Speculative histories - and looking to the past to predict the future
- Involving Aboriginal communities in local history
- What happens to local history when history takes a transnational turn?
- Accessible local history in and out of the museum
- Community museums and education – from school age to the third age
- Material history: the materiality of everyday life and the interpretation of historical objects
- Historical images and their interpretation

Peer Review

If requested by authors, papers in Category A may be submitted to the OHAA Publication Committee for peer review.

However, note these important points:

- Papers for peer review must show a high standard of scholarship, and reflect a sound appreciation of current and historical issues on the topics discussed.
- Papers for peer review may be submitted at any time; however, if not received by the Editorial Board by the deadline for submissions of 28 February 2013, they may not be processed in time for publication in the 2013 issue of the *Journal*. Furthermore,

regardless of when offers are forwarded to the Committee, the review process may not necessarily be completed in time for publication in the next available *Journal* due to *time constraints of reviewers*.

- Before being submitted for peer review, papers will first be assessed for suitability by the OHAA Editorial Board (which comprises the Chair, the Journal Editor and two other panellists). Authors will be advised by the Chair of the outcome.

Deadline for submissions for peer review: 28 February 2013. Forward to: Ariella Van Luyn, Chair, OHAA Editorial Board, Email: a1.vanluyn@qut.edu.au, mobile: 0401925228.

B Articles/Project reports: articles describing specific projects or conference reports, the information gained through them, and principal outcomes or practice issues identified in the process (*limit: 4,000 words*).

C Reviews of books and other publications in Australia or elsewhere that are of interest to the oral history community (*limit: 1,500 words*). This may include reviews of static or internet available exhibitions, or any projects presented for a public audience.

Accompanying Materials

Photographs, drawings and other illustrations are particularly welcome, and may be offered for any of the above categories of contribution.

Deadline for submissions: 1 April 2013. Forward to: Dr Sue Anderson, General Editor, OHAA *Journal*, 2013, Email: Sue.Anderson@unisa.edu.au.