

# Moving Memories: Oral Histories in a Global World



**Oral History Australia**  
(formerly the Oral History Association of Australia)



**Journal No. 39, 2017**

# **Moving Memories: Oral Histories in a Global World**

**Oral History Australia**

(formerly the Oral History Association of Australia)



**Journal No. 39, 2017**



**Oral History Australia (formerly Oral History Association of Australia) Journal**  
**No. 39, 2017**

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

The views expressed by contributors do not necessarily reflect the views of the Editor, the Editorial Board or the publisher of the Journal of Oral History Australia.

Editor: Dr Sue Anderson  
Sue.Anderson@unisa.edu.au

Editorial Board: Dr Ariella van Luyn, Chair  
avanluyn@une.edu.au  
Beth M Robertson, Dr Francesco Ricatti, Dr Sue Anderson

Reviews Editor: Dr Jayne Persian  
Jayne.Persian@usq.edu.au

Cover, content design and typesetting:  
LeighSet Design  
18 Hill Street, Plympton Park SA 5039  
Phone: 08-82974375  
igrunert@bigpond.net.au

ISSN: 2208 4541

Copyright of articles is held by individual authors. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted by the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part of this publication may be reproduced by any process without permission of the author/s. Please address any correspondence concerning copyright to the Editor.

The Editor of the Journal welcomes offers of material for possible publication in the 2018 issue, No. 40. See Call for Papers at the end of this Journal, or the Oral History Australia website, [www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au](http://www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au). Suitable items include papers for peer-review, un-refereed (such as project and conference reports) and book reviews.

Enquiries: Dr Sue Anderson

Sue.Anderson@unisa.edu.au



## Editor's notes

This is a momentous year for the Oral History Australia Journal as we go online. It may seem like a simple exercise to go digital these days, but there is more to it than meets the eye. Having hoped to achieve this last year, we found that there were issues to address with Informit, who provides past editions of the Journal to the public. Our contract with Informit meant that we had to consider implications for them and for Oral History Australia with this change. Fortunately, these have now been resolved and we can finally join the twenty-first century!

I hope everyone is happy with the arrangement of accessing the Journal this way once your membership is confirmed.

This Journal was very slow coming due to a lack of submissions by the due date. As a result, we decided to wait until the 2017 conference to invite further submissions. This was a good strategy, as we now have an interesting selection of articles and two terrific peer-reviewed papers.

For all these reasons it means that we are very late in issuing this edition of the Journal, and I hope you will all understand that the changes this year should now be well and truly ironed out and that we can look forward to reading about people's projects next year in a more timely manner.

I hope those who presented at the 2017 Sydney conference who have not already been published here will consider submitting for the 2018 edition of the Journal. Peer reviewed papers need to be in by 28 February 2018 and non-peer reviewed articles by 1 April. For further information, please see the Call for Papers at the end of this issue or online at [www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au](http://www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au).

I also look forward to receiving more exciting submissions from the 2018 International Oral History Association conference to be held in Finland in June next year. I know that there will be a significant Indigenous contingent attending, so perhaps we will have some lively papers forthcoming. Watch this space!

I wish you all the best for the festive season, the new year and oral history in 2018!

Sue Anderson

Editor

# Contents

## Articles

Stories of Indigenous Australians

*Deborah Wall* 3

Traveling for business behind the Iron Curtain (Czechoslovak business, seafarers, and aircraft crews in the 1970s and 1980s)

*Lenka Krátká* 9

Journeys through space and time: Interviewing the military

*Stephanie Boyle* 16

Little known South Australian History: Uncovering the truth behind the nuclear weapons project at Maralinga

*Mikalea Borg* 23

Following the Trail of ‘Happy Accidents’: the benefits of serendipity in oral history research

*Rena Henderson* 32

Reliving the memories: World War 1 Remembered

*Jane Britten, Joan Ruthven and Libby Watters* 37

Can historians capture refugees’ voices from the records of their applications for asylum?

*Richard Pennell* 43

‘Only the ends of your hair don’t hurt’: mothering and memories of touch

*Miranda Francis* 55

The Hazel de Berg Award for Excellence in Oral History 2017 awarded to Dr Karen George	63
<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	64
<b>OHA 2016/2017 Financial Report</b>	65
<b>Reviews and Book Notes</b>	69
<b>Membership information</b>	78
<b>Call for Papers</b>	79

# Movement across and within borders: Stories of Indigenous Australians of Filipino descent from Torres Strait and Broome

Deborah Wall

## Abstract

From the mid 1870s less than a decade after pearl shell was discovered in Torres Strait, Asian indentured divers were recruited from the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies. Some Filipino divers who were recruited stayed in Northern Australia and formed relationships with Indigenous Australians. My paper examines their descendants' narratives in terms of the consequences of their forebears' migration from a Spanish territory to a British colony. The subsequent movement of their forebears across and within borders, both culturally and geographically, embodies the personal and collective history of Indigenous Australians of Filipino descent.

Considering the challenges of oral history gathering such as the reliability of the narrators' memory and the re-construction and re-presentation of narratives, I have applied an approach for interpreting oral narratives for this project that include: 1) preserving the distinctiveness of voice drawn from lived experiences retrieved from the memories of narrators; 2) helping narrators tie in any loose ends in their stories through collaborative story gathering; 3) adding relevant material to their original stories through cumulative narrative that forms part of the building blocks of story re-construction. The stories of the descendants were gathered in Broome in 2008 and in Torres Strait in 2015.

## Introduction

Since 1846 due to a shortage of labour across Northern Australia, enterprising sea captains decided to recruit crews and general labourers from Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> After the discovery of commercial quantities of pearl shell from the 1870s, European captains brought into Torres Strait pearl divers who were indentured and paid about a third of the wages of whites. Prior to this time, pearling masters engaged in blackbirding or kidnapping Aboriginal people and Pacific and Torres Strait Islanders to work as labourers for the pearling industry.<sup>2</sup> This practice led to the introduction of a number of laws: *Polynesian Labourers Act*

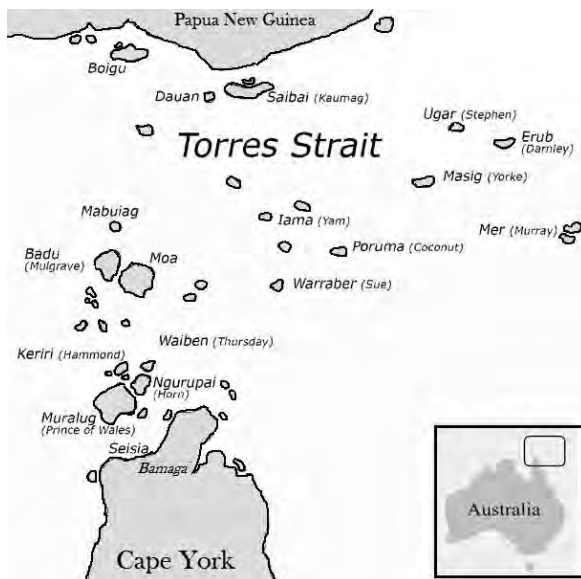
(*Queensland*) 1868 to curb the abuses of workers, the *Pearlshell Fishing Regulation Act (WA)* 1871 and the *Pearlshell Fishery Regulation Act (WA)* 1873 to stop Aboriginal people, particularly women, from boarding vessels and from being employed as divers. The shortage of labour supply paved the way for the importation of indentured labourers from the Asia Pacific region. Under the *Imported Labour Registry Act (WA)* 1874, ship masters were required to keep a detailed listing of 'natives of India, China, Africa, Islands of Indian and Pacific Oceans and Malays' who were brought to Western Australia as indentured workers.<sup>3</sup>

Some seafarers from the Spanish colony of the Philippines signed up to work in the pearling fields in the British colony of Queensland. In fact some of them were already working as 'swimming divers' and later as 'dress divers' as early as 1869 on the tip of Cape York.<sup>4</sup> Part of the push factor was the political turmoil in the Philippines after the execution in 1872 by the Spanish authorities of three local priests. The priests, Fathers Mariano Gomez, Jacinto Zamora and Jose Burgoz, were active in the movement for Filipinisation and secularization of the Catholic clergy.<sup>5</sup> They were implicated on a trumped-up charge in the mutiny of native workers in an arsenal in Cavite. The mutiny was sparked by a tribute imposed on workers previously exempt from it. The political tension motivated seafarers to escape to a more liberated environment to the British colonies of Singapore and Hong Kong for better prospects. Many Manila men<sup>6</sup> were recruited from these ports into Northern Australia. In Torres Strait, there were 49 Manila men divers and masters in 1895 and 66, in 1896.<sup>7</sup> In 1898, dissidents in the Philippines proclaimed Independence from Spain ending the 327-year long colonial rule of the Spaniards in the Philippines.<sup>8</sup> By 1899, 334 Filipinos were engaged in pearl shell, beche-de-mere, and tortoise shell fishing in Torres Strait. With hardly any Asian women around, the men formed relationships with Indigenous women. Malays and Filipinos tended to marry local Indigenous women unlike the Japanese, Chinese and Sri Lankans.<sup>9</sup> In 1901, some 320 Filipinos worked in the pearling industry in the northwest, around Broome.<sup>10</sup>





Map of Broome, the Dampier Peninsula in Western Australia  
Illustration courtesy of Dee Hunt and Rebecca Ruiz, May 2016



Map of Torres Strait, Illustration courtesy of Rebecca Ruiz, May 2016



Severo Corpus, Manilaman and Emma Ngobing, a Yawuru woman  
married in 1898, Courtesy of Elsta Foy

## Race relations

The stories that the descendants shared about their forebears' travel from a Spanish territory *across* to a British colony and *within* Australia's borders were set in times that marked Australia's emergence into nationhood. Some men who left the Philippines for Torres Strait and Broome were effectively political refugees. They left for political and economic reasons to escape the turbulence in their country. Within Australia, they faced internal borders of a different kind. Europeans involved in the pearling industry were hostile to competition from Asian or coloured entrepreneurs. The Sharks Bay Pearl Fishery Act (WA) 1886 precluded non-White pearlers from holding pearling licences and buying or leasing luggers to remove Chinese competition in the industry.<sup>11</sup> Just a few years after Heriberto Zarcal arrived on Thursday Island in 1892 from the Philippines, he was one of only five men on the island licensed to deal in pearls. For his own security, he took the step of becoming a British subject. His lawyer argued on his behalf that 'The Philippine Islands, the birthplace of Mr Heriberto Zarcal is a Spanish possession and as such might be said to be a portion of a European State, and entitles Mr Zarcal to receive a Certificate of Naturalisation under Section 5 of the Aliens Act of 1867 (Imperial)'<sup>12</sup> which states that '...Any alien being a native of an European or North American state and not being an alien enemy who shall attend before one of more justices of the peace in petty sessions assembled and take and subscribe the oath of allegiance to Her Majesty contained in the schedule to this Act annexed shall thenceforth be a naturalized British subject...' <sup>13</sup>

Zarcal was naturalized as a British subject in Queensland on 18 May 1897 when he was 33 years old. As a naturalised British subject, he could own luggers and schooners and was not restricted to being a diver or a member of an Asian crew. His business rivals on the island, however, accused him of using naturalisation as a way to circumvent immigration regulations against coloured people in the pearling industry.

Up until the introduction of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901, large numbers of indentured labourers, sojourners and immigrants came to Australia from various parts of Asia. The pearl shell industry was the only industry to be exempted from that Act, which prohibited the immigration of coloured labour. For the Australian government, the exemption was a pragmatic concession to the master pearlers who threatened to leave Australia if they could not have access to Japanese divers.

Hostility of some white settlers to coloured people also occurred in Broome. When it was found that Manilaman<sup>14</sup>, Donatello Costello was able to buy a

town lot in an exclusively white residential area,<sup>15</sup> a petition signed by 101 male residents and property owners as the 'white residents of Broome' wanted Broome town lots being sold or leased to Asiatics, Aborigines or half-castes stopped. This petition argued that 'the welfare of the Commonwealth can only be maintained by the absolute segregation of all Asiatics and Aboriginal natives and/or half-castes from the white community.'<sup>16</sup>

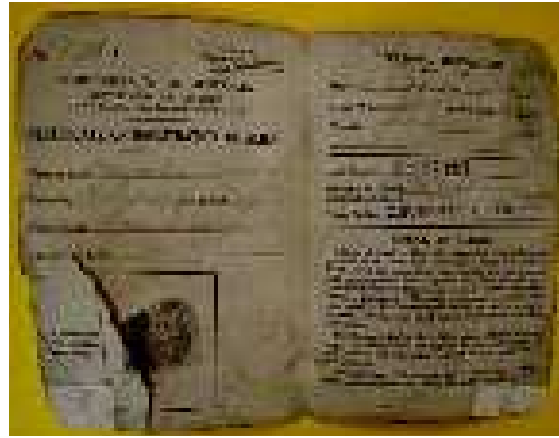
Inter-generational family stories passed down to the descendants disclosed the impact of government policy and legislation on families. Some of the Manilamen descendants' whose stories I gathered spoke of the challenges their families faced as a consequence of Australian naturalisation laws. Despite the prominence and acknowledged leadership in the Kimberley community of Thomas Puertollano (the great grandfather of Kevin Puertollano), his application for naturalization was denied because he was not eligible to apply as an 'Aboriginal native of Asia' under the Commonwealth.<sup>17</sup> Despite holding a considerable number of land leases and having lived in the country for fifty-three years, Thomas died an alien in 1942 in Beagle Bay unable to pass on inheritance to his children.<sup>18</sup>



*Thomas Puertollano's group photo, Courtesy of Kevin Puertollano*

Another descendant, Josephine Petero-David from Torres Strait showed me her paternal great grandfather, Agostin Cadawas' Certificate of Registration of Alien issued on 27 June 1917.<sup>19</sup> This certificate enabled authorities to track aliens' change of residence. The document warned that within seven days of changing their residence, the person concerned was required to obtain two copies of Form C from the police station nearest to their new place of abode, fill up the form and attend in person before the Aliens Registration Officer with their original certificate.<sup>20</sup>

These stories passed down from one generation to the next constituted their collective oral history based on the experiences of the families of Indigenous Australians of mixed Asian, European and other descent. These



*Certificate of Registration of Alien issued to Augustine Cadawas on 27 June 1917 on Thursday Island, Courtesy of Josephine Petero-David*

families are 'memory communities' witnessed to the way legislation had been employed as a tool of governance that categorised and defined sections of the community and their access to societal rights and economic privileges. Their stories typify 'oral history as witnessing'. The state's role of implementing citizenship restrictions and border control is integral to its assertion of sovereignty rooted in the imagining of Australia that emerged as a nation state with particular ideas related to race relations.

Magdalene Ybasco, of Filipino-Japanese descent, shared a story about her Manilaman father's experience of hardship in 1948 due to his standing as an alien. Telesforo realised that he could not hold a licence to fish for pearls and pearl shell. He believed, however, that he could enter into a partnership with Mary Dakas, a British subject who was eligible to hold a pearling licence. The two-year partnership turned sour and Ybasco took his business partners, Mary and Christopher Dakas to court. The Dakas couple denied that they were in a partnership with Ybasco but only that the money had been lent. Under the Pearling Act, 'an unnaturalised alien' could not engage in pearling operations so Mr Justice Walker of the Supreme Court dismissed the case for no other grounds could be considered for it to continue.<sup>21</sup>

Historical events can be narrated from diverse standpoints, for example, from the perspective of state records or from the experience of ordinary people. Elsta Foy and Sally Bin Demin's childhood recollection of a midwife, 'Aunty Esther', differed markedly from the state profile of Esther Corpus held by Welfare Department files. Sally described Aunty Esther as a 'character' who would 'get up and dance for us and do the hula...we were never bored' as 'she kept us well entertained.'<sup>22</sup> In the adult world, living conditions for Aboriginal people of mixed descent were constrained by how the authorities classified them and determined what rights they could access. Using Esther Corpus as a case study, an anthropology postgraduate student



(L-R): Clare Bargas, Esther Corpus-Mustafa, and Barbara Bargas, Broome 1969, Courtesy of Elsta Foy

in the 1960s, P. Dalton argued that a 'distorted image of an individual can be projected based on the kind of information lodged in government departments'.<sup>23</sup> He found community consensus depicting Esther as 'a hardworking woman' in contrast with department files that described her as 'notorious' in her 'sexual companionship with Asians'.

In 1920 through her solicitor, Esther applied for exemption from the provisions of the Aborigines Act (WA) 1905 on the grounds that her father was a Filipino and therefore, she did not consider herself 'a native'. Despite the police recommendation in Broome that Esther be granted exemption, the application was denied ostensibly because she mixed with other mixed blood girls and that her mother, an Aboriginal, was prosecuted on a number of occasions for receiving liquor. The Aborigines Act 1905 restricted Aboriginal people's access to towns between sunset and sunrise and forced them to live on reserves. The Chief Protector had the power to remove them to any district or institution. The Act also prohibited co-habitation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

After the 1934 Moseley Royal Commission into Aboriginal Affairs, the Aborigines Act 1905 was tightened with the introduction of the Native Administration Act 1905-1936 that included 'half-castes' and 'quadroons' in the definition of natives. It was not until 7 May 1947 that Esther Corpus obtained her citizenship rights under the *Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act (WA) 1944*. She sought these rights to put her in a position to marry an Asian, Mahomet Bin Mustafa of Broome. In December 1946, the Protector of Aborigines in Broome recommended that Esther's application be granted. He informed the Commissioner of Native Affairs that Esther had fulfilled the requirements under the law on the grounds that:

1. She had dissolved her native associations for two years, except with respect to lineal descendants or native relations of the first degree.

2. She had adopted the manner and habits of civilized life.
3. She did not consort with natives.
4. She did not visit the camps of native relatives, nor did the relatives visit her.
5. Her children did not consort with natives.
6. She occupied a dwelling house.
7. She was of good character, industrious habits and reasonably capable of looking after her own affairs.<sup>24</sup>

By adding material from Dalton's Master of Arts thesis concerning Esther Corpus' profile to the original narrative, I used collaborative story gathering and cumulative narrative approaches to oral history gathering. A fuller picture of Esther Corpus was obtained beyond Elsta Foy and Sally Bin Demin's childhood memories of Aunty Esther. Dalton's alternative state government profile of Esther Corpus enabled the documentation of how legal instruments were employed even after the Second World War to distinguish between the civil rights and privileges accessible to Asians, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in comparison with those available to white or European settlers.

The construct of citizenship, according to Professor Aguilar, is often associated with concepts of national belonging.<sup>25</sup> The institutional challenges faced by Aborigines and Asians and their progeny as outlined in their stories manifested a distinctiveness of voice drawn from lived experiences retrieved from memories. Their style of speaking and storytelling provides insights into their sense of place, belonging and identity within a particular cultural and historical context.

Filipino descendant, Mario Sabatino from Hammond Island spoke of the 'geographical uniqueness' of his place that will be 'static' while the 'population demographics will be dynamic enabling our kids to be free of the colonial hangover that continues to haunt us while we are identified as a distinct group of people in a distinct region. All peoples who make this place their home will be labelled Torres Strait Islanders.'<sup>26</sup> Mario's sense of belonging is place-based, that is, local rather than national in perspective. Realising that many young Torres Strait Islanders tended to go south to look for work, he sees the ones who stay will identify with the unique living environment of their island home that includes the group of neighbouring islands nearby.

Regina Turner from Thursday Island refers to the process of 'learning who she is' that she wants to pass on to her children. She gave the example of introducing herself as Bertie and Kailang's daughter when she

The Hazel de Berg Award for Excellence in Oral History 2017 awarded to <i>Dr Karen George</i>	63
<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	64
<b>OHA 2016/2017 Financial Report</b>	65
<b>Reviews and Book Notes</b>	69
<b>Membership information</b>	78
<b>Call for Papers</b>	79



went to Mer Island. Once they know her parents, she explains, they can place her background and will then be 'more welcoming, forthcoming... sharing more.'<sup>27</sup> Regina's sense of belonging is grounded on place and cultural group affiliation rather than on individual identification.

A narrator from Broome, Kevin Puertollano describes himself as an Aboriginal first 'because this is the country that I have been born in...my mother is a Bard, and they call me by a Bard name. And when I am in Broome, I am called Edarr boor which links me to Lake Eda region of Roebuck Plains station...I have a background of English from my mother's side, of Filipino from my father's side. Maybe Irish from my father's side.'<sup>28</sup> Kevin's sense of self engenders a kind of multiculturalism referenced not only to overseas backgrounds but also to his diverse Aboriginal ancestral roots.



*Reunion with Filipino relatives 127 years since the Puertollanos' forebear, Thomas Puertollano left for Australia. Kevin Puertollano (Front row, 5th from left), his sister, Roma Puertollano (4th from left) and cousin, Patricia Davidson (6th from left), Marinduque Island, Philippines 2016.*

## Conclusion

National belonging under the construct of citizenship is not reflected in the narrators' concept of self and collective identification that I have canvassed. Before Federation up to the twentieth century, naturalisation was race-based. The development of a state policy on naturalisation and border protection that will be regarded as fair and reasonable continues to evolve. The former Prime Minister, John Howard introduced testing as a way of granting citizenship.<sup>29</sup> The current Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull announced a tougher citizenship test that would assess the applicants' commitment to Australian values. Applicants for Australian citizenship are advised to read a booklet, *Australian citizenship: Our Common Bond* produced by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.<sup>30</sup> The government promotes this booklet as a comprehensive overview of Australia's history, government, values, traditions, geography,

and achievements. In 2017, it was discovered that some sitting members of Parliament held dual citizenship that, according to sec 44 of the Australian Constitution, would render them incapable of holding office as a Senator or as a member of the House of Representatives.<sup>31</sup>

In remote regions in Torres Strait and the Kimberley, the narrators' statements reveal a gap that exists between their sense of belonging more closely aligned with their local and cultural environment and the state's construct of citizenship aimed at cultivating national belonging or imagined national values. Citizenship remains an instrument that the state employs for inclusion or exclusion of people.

The photographs and documents shared by the descendants served not only as a memory trigger but also as a powerful validation of their stories including those passed down to them by their forebears. Oral history is not just a collection of stories. It requires interpretation and representation. Ariella Van Luyn lists the language of the narrative, content, narration, and listener, all of which provide a 'cumulative understanding of knowledge' in which who is talking and who is listening are implicated in the presentation of the narrative that provide a framework for interpretation.<sup>32</sup> Accessing information requires oral historians to establish trust and relationship building with the narrators so that collaborative work can occur. Leads and clues from the narratives may need following up to find further corroboration from other primary and secondary sources.

Historical events can be narrated from diverse standpoints such as from the state's perspective or from the experience of people on the ground. Juxtaposing voices from diverse standpoints helps provide a more holistic storytelling approach, as Professor Martin Nakata, a Torres Strait Islander referring to Yolngu testimonies in Arnhem Land, points out: 'the process of Indigenous narratives to contest white knowledge provides insights into Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories standpoints, and opens new avenues of collaborative history telling.'<sup>33</sup>

## (Endnotes)

- 1 Recruitment of indentured labour was often through ports in the British colony of Singapore and Hong Kong. See Renato Perdon, *Connecting Two Cultures*, Manila Prints, Sydney, 2014, p. 59; F. Aguilar, *Migration Revolution Philippine Nationhood & Class Relations in a Globalized Age*, p. 42.
- 2 R. Ganter, *The Pearl-Shell Shellers of Torres Strait Resource Use, Development and Decline, 1860s-1960s*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1994, p. 35.
- 3 See <https://www.slp.wa.gov.au/legislation/statutes.nsf/>

- [law\\_a2695.html](#).
- 4 R. Iletto and R. Sullivan (eds), *Discovering Australasia Essays on Philippine-Australian Interactions*, James Cook University, Townsville, 1993 citing 'Report by his Honour Judge Dashwood, Government Resident, Palmerston on the Pearl-Shelling Industry', [Dashwood Report] CPP, Vol 2, 1901-2, p. 9. Dress diving involved a mechanized air pump that enabled divers to work in deeper water.
  - 5 T. Agoncillo, *A Short History of the Philippines*, the New English Library, London, 1975, p. 69; D. Wall and C. Choo, *Re-imagining Australia: Voices of Indigenous Australians of Filipino descent*, Keeaira Press, Southport, 2016, p. 133.
  - 6 The term 'Manila man' referred to 'labor migrants from Spanish Philippines who worked on vessels that linked the Philippines to other parts of Asia and to Africa, Europe, the Americas, Australia, and other parts of Oceania,' See Aguilar, *Ibid*, p. 25. The term 'Filipino' during the colonial period applied to Spaniards born in the Philippines; natives from the Philippines were called 'indios'. See Aguilar, *Ibid* p. 51; Iletto and Sullivan, *Ibid*, p. 29.
  - 7 Aguilar, *Ibid* p. 43
  - 8 Agoncillo, *Ibid*, p. 37
  - 9 A. Shnukal, 'They don't know what went on underneath Three-little known Filipino/Malay communities of Torres Strait', in A. Shnukal, G. Ramsay and Y. Nagata (eds) *Navigating Boundaries The Asian Diaspora in Torres Strait*, Pandanus Books, Canberra, 2004, p. 88
  - 10 R. Iletto and R. Sullivan, *Ibid*, p. 27
  - 11 S. Sickert, *Beyond the Lattice Broome's early years*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2003, p. 83.
  - 12 A. Shnukal, *Ibid*, p. 83
  - 13 See The Aliens Act 1867, <[https://media.sclqld.org.au/documents/digitisation/v01\\_pp523-528\\_Aliens\\_Aliens%20Acts,%201867%20to%201958.pdf](https://media.sclqld.org.au/documents/digitisation/v01_pp523-528_Aliens_Aliens%20Acts,%201867%20to%201958.pdf)>, p. 526
  - 14 In Torres Strait, most 'Manila men' came from the coastal towns of Cebu, Leyte, Luzon, Masbate, Panay and Samar and others from the Marianas and Guam. See Shnukal, *Ibid*, p. 84
  - 15 S. Sickert, *Ibid*, p. 60 citing archival record, SROWA 1923, (a), p. 9.
  - 16 *Ibid*
  - 17 D. Wall and C. Choo, *Ibid*, p. 126.
  - 18 *Ibid*, p. 19.
  - 19 Josephine Petero-David Interviewed by author, July 2015, tape and transcript held by author.
  - 20 D. Wall and C. Choo, *Ibid*, p. 114.
  - 21 See 'Pearlyers sued Partnership Dispute', the *West Australian*, Perth, 28 September 1948.
  - 22 Sally Bin Demin Interviewed by author, September 2008, tape and transcript held by author.
  - 23 P. Dalton, *Broome: A Multicultural Community. A study of social and cultural relationships in a town in the West Kimberleys, Western Australia*. Thesis submitted as partial requirement of the Degree of Masters of Arts in Anthropology in the University of Western Australia.
  - 24 D. Wall and C. Choo, *Ibid*, p. 127.
  - 25 Aguilar, *Ibid*, p.17.
  - 26 Mario Sabatino, Interviewed by author, July 2015, tape and transcript held by author.
  - 27 Regina Turner, Interviewed by author, July 2015, tape and transcript held by author.
  - 28 Kevin Puertollano, Interviewed by author, September 2008, tape and transcript held by author.
  - 29 M. Chisari 2011. Testing Citizenship, Regulating History: The Fatal Impact. *M/C Journal*, A Journal of Media and Culture, Vol 14, No. 6, <<http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/409>>.
  - 30 Australian Citizenship Our Common bond <<https://www.border.gov.au/Citizenship/Documents/our-common-bond-2014.pdf>>.
  - 31 Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act – Sec 44 Disqualification <[http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/cth/consol\\_act/coaca430/s44.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/cth/consol_act/coaca430/s44.html)>.
  - 32 Ariella Van Luyn, 'Fictionalising oral history: narrative analysis, voice and identity', *Journal No. 32*, 2010, p. 69.
  - 33 N. Riseman, 'Contesting White Knowledge: Yolngu Stories from World War II', *The Oral History Review*, Journal of the Oral History Association, Vol 37, Issue 2, Summer/Fall 2010, p. 183.

# Traveling for business behind the Iron Curtain (Czechoslovak business, seafarers, and aircraft crews in the 1970s and 1980s)

Lenka Krátká

## Abstract

In Czechoslovakia prior to 1989, everything that was 'foreign' had a touch of something special, distant, attractive (especially when 'foreign' implied 'non-socialist'). However, chances for going abroad were limited for 'ordinary' people because of restrictions on the free movement behind the Iron Curtain imposed by the regime. Still, some occupations offered an opportunity to travel abroad. This paper describes such travels using three jobs as a 'model example', different not only in their job description but also regarding the length of their stay abroad: from weeks (air transport industry), through months (seafarers) to years (foreign trade businessmen). The business travel experience in these areas will be discussed for the period of the 1970s and 1980s, i.e. so-called normalization (which constituted a return to the situation before the reform achievements of 1968). The text reflects on both the main benefits of these jobs – traveling, obtaining foreign currency, the possibility of securing foreign goods, touristic activities – and negative sides – conformity towards the communist regime as a key condition for business travel, and the negative impacts on one's health and family life. The paper is based on archival sources and oral history interviews.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stipulates that 'everyone shall be free to leave any country, including his own'.<sup>1</sup> This basic right of free movement was considered exceptional in Czechoslovakia after the communist coup d'état in 1948. The chances to visit foreign countries (particularly Western, capitalist, democratic countries) varied during the period of people's democracy and later state socialism – with the toughest restrictions in the 1950s, a relatively considerable freedom to travel in the 1960s and new limits on this area in the 1970s and 1980s. During the whole 40-year period, traveling abroad was considered exceptional, and everything that was 'foreign' (mainly Western) had a touch of something special, distant, attractive. Because of this, people working in professions that enabled them to go abroad for business were in a prominent position.

In this article, I will trace some of the specificities of the work and life of these people. I will concentrate on three specific jobs ('model examples') which differ with respect to the length of one's stay abroad: pilots and air hostesses in air transport who spent only days or at most weeks abroad; seafarers,<sup>2</sup> who spent at least six months, but sometimes more than a year outside Czechoslovakia; and foreign trade workers who were sometimes permanently settled in a foreign country for several years.

In general, the topic of business travel remains an underexplored area. Foreign literature tends to focus on travel as part of the history of everyday life, leisure time, and consumerism.<sup>3</sup> These works simultaneously reveal how travel (co)constituted collective identities, created new forms of consumption and legitimized (or delegitimized) political regimes.<sup>4</sup> These studies deal with tourism and leisure travel from a variety of angles, and at times touch upon the possibilities and limitations of travel in certain socialist countries.<sup>5</sup> But this broad scope does not leave space for a more thorough examination of the topic of business travel, which constitutes a highly specific type of travel with its own dynamics that reflect a wider socio-historical context.

This article, prepared on the basis of ongoing wider research, tries to fill this gap at least partially. The paper is based on approximately seventy interviews which cover all three groups of workers. Beside this, I work with relevant archival sources and also with memoirs. I work with this type of literature critically and, I am aware of and reflect on possible personal biases, distortions, 'memory optimism' etc. Direct personal experiences collected via the oral history method serve as a primary knowledge source here; because of that I put the focus on the period after the 1968 Warsaw Pact armies' invasion of Czechoslovakia – there are more witnesses who can talk about this time when new restrictions on traveling abroad were imposed, mainly on travel to capitalist, democratic countries.<sup>6</sup>

The article begins with a description of various specificities of entering the studied professions, including small remarks on specialized education and

training. Then I will discuss the benefits linked to the opportunity of going abroad, including the possibility for one's (predominantly female) partner, and children to travel abroad as well. In the second part of the text, I will reflect on 'the price' for these benefits – the negative effect on both physical and mental health, and the influence and activities of the ruling communist regime with respect to the experiences of people traveling abroad.

## Career beginnings

In the area of trade, being admitted to a specialized study program, either at high school level or at university, was often the result of nepotism. This was because young people (and their parents) assumed that as graduates, they would have significant opportunities to travel abroad, to enjoy great prestige and other benefits of their jobs. After graduation, young men and women could be hired by a foreign trade enterprise. The first rung of their professional ladder was administrative work, university graduates could enter the profession at a higher position of a manager, especially when a person met not only professional but also cadre requirements (typically Communist Party membership). Loyalty to the governing regime was almost essential when someone wanted to travel abroad and work there for several years as a local sales representative.

So, the pressure [to enter the Communist Party] was there, but somehow I tried to defend them and I managed it. So, we had some functions in the trade unions and... It was not possible to be totally apolitical and totally inactive.<sup>7</sup>

Men<sup>8</sup> who decided to work on a ship were often inspired by someone from their surroundings, by their friends, or they were simply recruited through a newspaper advertisement. A minority of them yearned to be a seafarer since childhood, influenced by fiction, or by romantic visions. Working duties in machinery, in the kitchen, work as a steward or a doctor could be performed with a relevant professional qualification, and education obtained in Czechoslovakia was a sufficient prerequisite. During their practice on board, these men received the necessary skills and knowledge about the seafarer's work in a given position. In the deck department, a qualification from a vocational school specializing in river cruises in Czechoslovakia was sufficient to start working on a merchant ship. To be able to apply for an officer's position men had to graduate from high school and then study at a naval academy in another socialist country, most often in the Soviet Union (and also in Poland or Bulgaria).

The process of entering the air transport field was in some respects similar to both of the sectors described above: a high level of nepotism on the one hand

(mainly in getting a chance to become an air hostess) and demanding training.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the previous two professions, two conditions for getting the job need to be highlighted in the case of air transport. The first one was excellent health. Even though seafarers had to meet relatively high health standards and their health was regularly examined, the criteria were incomparably stricter for pilots (it was not exceptional that about 80–90 per cent of applicants were excluded after the first round of health examination and psychological tests).<sup>10</sup> The other 'entrance conditions' were specific appearance requirements, which of course mainly concerned flight attendants.<sup>11</sup>

In all three jobs presented here, getting a chance to go to the West was a more or less complicated process of gradual promotion influenced by two main factors: one's qualifications/expertise and the company's need for particular workers on the one hand; and 'reliability' for the regime, namely loyalty, membership in the Communist Party, and other engagement in the socialist regime's activities on the other hand.

Gradually, with the deepening of the poor economic situation of the centrally managed economy, economic interests and the safety of operations (in airline and maritime navigation) were given precedence.<sup>12</sup> For example, I found a record from the late 1980s where a State Security officer complains to the Communist Party about an increasingly evident passive approach of the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping company's management, with their activities directed solely to fulfilling economic indicators, thus sidelining the state security's interests.<sup>13</sup>

When people from these professions underwent the necessary training and the whole circle of screening and promotions, they could finally go abroad. For seafarers, this happened when the company sent them on a seagoing ship; in other professions, this moment came after promotion from work in Czechoslovakia (or on domestic flights) to a position abroad (or on foreign flights). From then on, travel became an integral part of their everyday professional life.

## Traveling as a benefit

All three groups of workers perceived the chance to go abroad in a slightly different manner. Seafarers actually did not mention the issue of traveling as a sort of (great) benefit. It is mainly because I spoke with men who worked on ships for a long time and their priority was the profession itself, their love for the sea. Besides this, they had no guarantee that a ship would sail to places of interest; and they had to carry out duties in port, thus often having little time for travel. Still, there were also opposite cases – as a typical example I can mention visits to Cuba – where due to slow loading and unloading seafarers had time enough to travel, to



visit beautiful unspoiled beaches using lifeboats, etc.

Contrary to this, airplane crew abroad travelled very often after landing. They have colourful experiences of the Niagara Falls, Singapore, Mumbai, Tripoli, Baghdad, Sierra Leone, Dakar, Cairo, and Hanoi. Their narratives about visiting these places are basically similar to the ways in which today's travellers talk about traveling to distant and exotic destinations. This is because pilots and air hostesses carried out the work 'on the road' and after landing they had time for relaxing. Thus, their activities in a given place could be more touristic, especially when the stay lasted for one or more weeks.

The long-term stays of narrators/workers of foreign trade enterprises can be roughly divided into three geographical groups: 1) Moscow, Romania, Cuba, China; 2) Egypt, Libya, Ethiopia, Singapore, Burma, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Nigeria; 3) the United Kingdom, West Germany, Austria. The first group includes countries of the former Soviet bloc and Communist China; the second group is made up of the countries with 'friendly' regimes or developing countries; and the third group consists of Western/capitalist/democratic countries.

Although the sample of narrators is not necessarily representative, the territorial distribution of their long-term business stays indicates which foreign partners Czechoslovakia was focused on before 1989. This foreign trade territorial orientation corresponds with the foreign policy of the state, and of the Soviet bloc in general, as well as with the fact that Czechoslovak production (especially that of engineering, electronics, etc.<sup>14</sup>) became less and less competitive in Western markets.

People who resided in capitalist countries – the most desired destinations at the time – are inclined to speak about their experiences only minimally. All the foreign things they would have been able to talk about (democracy, an abundance of consumer goods, the neatness of towns and villages, as well as poverty or unemployment) can also be seen in the Czech Republic today.

Regarding the countries of the former socialist bloc, it is probably not surprising that the narrators residing in Moscow spoke mainly about cultural life: opera, ballet, and the fine arts. Stays in Cuba were described more like a vacation than a business trip. Romanian memories were not too colourful and China was perceived mainly through its exoticism.

The third group of countries where the narrators spent a longer time represent countries which also can be regarded as exotic – Egypt, Libya, Ethiopia, Singapore, Burma, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Nigeria. The set of interviews with this group revealed

attitudes of superiority towards the local population. This was because Czechoslovaks were considered (and considered themselves) inferior to the West because their mother country was undemocratic and, economically weak in comparison with capitalist economies. Some of them projected this feeling of inferiority onto others, onto different people they met with in developing/Third World countries.

Another great benefit of business trips abroad, key in terms of importance in the context of the 1970s and 1980s in Czechoslovakia, was money and shopping. Generally speaking, the basic salaries in the fields described here were often average in comparison with other workers in the sector, some even below average.<sup>15</sup> However, a great advantage was the fact that the salary was partially paid in foreign currency enabling workers to purchase Western goods – a sign of luxury, or even a higher living status, because these goods were accessible only with difficulty for the majority of the population in Czechoslovakia. Typically such goods included electronics, clothing, cosmetics, but also Western pop music recordings. For example in seafarers' memories, the chance to provide their family with money and Western goods is often used as a rationalizing strategy for their long-term absence from home.

A specific form of travel – and another benefit – was the possibility of travel for families, i.e. the chance to accompany a seafarer or businessman<sup>16</sup> abroad. In addition to getting a chance to visit various foreign countries, being on board during these stays could also be a source of trouble for a man or the crew:

The captain K. Z. was in similar situation. His wife is a USSR citizen and she used to meddle in his steering and commanding so badly that he was dismissed from his position five years ago, and they let him out on the sea only after he promised that he would not take her on board. Z. is one of those women who boast in society about the status of her husband.<sup>17</sup>

Some (but not frequent) cases of infidelity when a wife was on board were also recorded. Moreover, a wife had to leave her profession for a rather long period in order to go on such an extended stay abroad, and fully take care of any children, in often complicated, strange or inadequate circumstances.

When a man employed in a foreign trade enterprise wanted to be sent abroad for a long-term stay, it was strictly required that he was married. The wife and child or children were expected to travel abroad with him. This arrangement probably followed from certain gender stereotypes – the woman's task was to create a suitable environment for the man. The second reason is the role of the wife to prevent the man from engaging in contact with other women abroad, which could

cause problems, in some cases even at an international level. This situation was more common when wives for various reasons did not want to go abroad:

But somehow, it did not fit her, no. But I did not blame her. [...] It was a sort of stereotype; I was not surprised when she was gone.<sup>18</sup>

This was only one of all the possible problems that could be caused by the separation of partners, or by the need for one partner, predominantly the woman, to accommodate the man's job.

## Specific jobs, specific problems

A negative effect for seafarers and their families, was that women were not allowed to work on ships because of Labour Code restrictions. As a result, seamen's wives rarely accompanied their husbands and they had to learn to manage everything alone – not only everyday tasks and serious problems (typically children's illnesses) but also separation from their husband and neighbours envious of their apparently good life as the wife of a seaman. The seafarers had to cope with two different types of loneliness – when cruising they missed the family; when staying at home they missed the sea, the work. One of them even confessed he had been afraid of people when returning home, feeling alienated while walking around the town. Therefore, some seafarers solved these emotional and mental pressures with the help of alcohol.<sup>19</sup>

A different situation arose for those working in foreign trade enterprises (sales representatives working abroad), where the family was required to stay abroad with the man. The man's career was based on the expectation that the female partner would give up her work and become a housewife, often for several years. This often meant forfeiting her whole career.

Within the three professional groups, only aircraft crews' absence from home was not long-term. Here flight attendants, almost exclusively women, faced specific problems since they could not meet their expected gender roles whereby care for children and the household was dedicated to women. This problem was solved mainly by their mother, mother in law, or sister, performing these 'typically' female roles in their absence.

Infidelity, although not mentioned very often or explicitly, was an important issue in these occupations. Relationships of this sort were more frequent in air transport because air hostesses and pilots spent sometimes weeks together abroad at leisure, waiting for the next working leg of their journey. As a result, these affairs were called 'tropical marriages'.<sup>20</sup> For seafarers, despite the stereotype of having 'a woman in every port', long journeys at sea and the lack of money

in capitalist countries complicated such relationships. On the other hand, in poorer countries, men could afford the services of women and made use of this opportunity:

Mainly in those poor regions, in poor countries, in the Philippines or Brazil, or where they live in poverty. The dollar or five had a high value there. And when the seafarer had a good time for the whole evening and in the morning gave five dollars to the girl, it was a handsome sum of money for her. And she knew that she will get this money only from the seafarer.<sup>21</sup>

Other disadvantages closely linked to these professions were isolation, stress, noise, danger, the frequent crossing of time zones, sometimes bad food, and undertaking demanding work in extreme climates. Besides all these difficulties, people working abroad also had to cope with pressures imposed by the ruling communist regime – similarly to all other people in Czechoslovakia, but with some specificities.

## Working abroad under the communist regime's influence

The narrators were well aware that without a certain loyalty to the communist regime they would not be delegated either for business trips or for (long-term) stays abroad. They rather openly touched upon the topic of conformity to the pre-November 1989 regime as one of the most important conditions of going abroad (and the more to the West one went, the more important this condition was). An explicit requirement was membership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Some former Communist Party members hypothesized that if a non-member of the Party was allowed to stay abroad, they most likely had to be members of a much 'worse' organization, namely State Security.<sup>22</sup>

These people acted as informants for State Security on the loyalty of people working abroad. This repressive body collected all sorts of information on people and companies, not only those related to 'counterintelligence protection', which was defined as the body's main task. They gathered economic information, the professional curriculum of men and women they were interested in, information about their family members, their political opinions and activities. They also recorded data on offenses from black-marketeering, to bribery, to information about alcoholism, infidelity or homosexuality, to coerce them to cooperate with the secret police. Of particular interest to State Security were one's contacts abroad

(whether with foreigners or Czechoslovak emigrants). All the information collected could be used for the control and manipulation of citizens.

Generally, the ruling regime only allowed people sufficiently loyal to them to go abroad – partly in order to prevent emigration, which would mean an outflow of intellectual strength, and partly in order to ensure that people abroad would not damage ‘the good reputation’ of the State. Membership of the Communist Party served as a sort of guarantee of loyalty. Nevertheless, in the sample of narrators, non-members of the Communist Party were also identified, and these men could travel abroad. They stated that non-membership represented a professional handicap for them, which they had to counter with another sort of engagement (in trade unions, in the Union of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship, etc.). Still, the fact that a person was not engaged in the Communist Party represented a major obstacle in his/her career, so some succumbed to the pressure and joined the Communist Party for career reasons:

If you weren't in the Party, you could have passed the exams for a captain and have all the qualifications and still you wouldn't become a captain for years. You were not trustworthy. At most you could sail as the chief mate, the master's deputy.<sup>23</sup>

One's career was thus highly dependent on the interests of State authorities, which gained significant power over people. The threat of losing a good job was worse the more people loved the job; seafarers and pilots often perceived this as a sort of drug addiction. For example, even a rumour that somebody wanted to emigrate could mean the end of work in the field. This and other threats represented an omnipresent tool of control and discipline of people traveling abroad for business purposes, a crucial negative side of such jobs at that time.

### **Instead of a conclusion: remembering people with limited chances of going abroad**

When I compare the pros and cons of business trips abroad made by people from socialist Czechoslovakia – here depicted only briefly – it seems that the negative aspects they faced (conformity to the regime, danger, difficult working conditions, negative impact on family life) cannot be balanced with the consumer goods or traveling opportunities they received in exchange. To some extent, this is confirmed by a lack of skilled workers, mostly seafarers and pilots, especially in the 1980s, that the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping and Czechoslovak Airlines had to cope with.

However, those who stayed in the profession often did not emphasize either positive or negative sides of the job. Rather, they describe their daily routine, demanding and high-quality work performed under difficult conditions. Especially in the transport areas, there is evidence of one's devotion to work. The possibility to travel abroad, all around the world in some cases, is largely played down.

It seems that when people had (albeit limited) freedom to travel, they became less and less aware of it. Still, the possibility of free movement abroad is often seen as one of the defining features of the change between the period of the state socialism and the transformation and post-transformation period after 1989. Today some citizens of the Czech Republic consider the opportunity to travel a matter of course rather than an important freedom. Realizing that this freedom is not something to be taken for granted represents an important outcome of research about traveling in socialist times.

### **(Endnotes)**

- 1 Part III, Article 12/2. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In: United Nations Human Rights, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>, viewed 10.10.2017.
- 2 Despite being an inland country, Czechoslovakia ran its own merchant fleet. The basic conditions for all activities in the field of maritime transport were embedded in the Treaty of Versailles, the Covenant of the League of Nations (1919), and the Barcelona Convention (1921). Based on these arrangements, Czechoslovakia had the right to register and operate its own merchant ships (Prague was their place of registration). During the interwar period, there were some attempts to run a maritime business (for example, the company Baťa operated two vessels for a short time), but the field was significantly developed only after the communist takeover in 1948. At the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, Czechoslovak shipping was built primarily to provide a ‘cover’ for ships of the People's Republic of China affected by a vessel purchase embargo and naval blockade. These restrictions were a response to the communist takeover in China in 1949 and the founding of the People's Republic of China, its inclusion into the Soviet sphere of influence in the 1950s and finally, Communist China's involvement in the Korean War on the side of North Korea. The Czechoslovak-Chinese cooperation in the maritime area was terminated in the first half of the 1960s, mainly for political reasons. In the meantime, Czechoslovakia ascertained that the operation of a merchant fleet could be advantageous – especially when transporting ‘special’ cargo (weapons, military goods, explosives, dangerous chemicals, etc.) or when using the ships for the transport of Czechoslovak goods, which saved scarce foreign currency otherwise spent on transport costs. Later, Czechoslovak ships were successfully offered on the capitalist market as time charters. In the period between 1952 (the year

- when the first Czechoslovak ship *Republic* was bought) and 1989, Czechoslovakia operated 44 ships altogether. Market economy conditions, together with privatization and several bad management decisions led to selling off the fleet in 1998. Lenka Krátká, *A History of the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping Company, 1948–1989*, Verlag, Stuttgart, 2015.
- 3 Adam T. Rosenbaum, 'Leisure travel and real existing socialism: new research on tourism in the Soviet Union and communist Eastern Europe', *Journal of Tourism History*, vol. 7, no. 1–2, p. 174.
  - 4 Kathy Burrell – Kathrin Hörschelmann, *Mobilities in Socialist and Post-Socialist States: Societies on the Move*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
  - 5 Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, *Turizm: the Russian and East European tourist under capitalism and socialism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2006; Anne E. Gorsuch, *All this is your world: Soviet tourism at home and abroad after Stalin*, Oxford University Press, 2011. Discrepancies between individual wishes on the one hand and inadequate resources on the other hand are dealt with in a book on travel in communist Yugoslavia: Hannes Grandits and Karin Taylor, *Yugoslavia's sunny side: a history of tourism in socialism (1950s–1980s)*, Central European University Press, Budapest, 2010. The topic of leisure travel from the perspective of consumption is also dealt with in the collective monograph: Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger (eds), *Communism Unwrapped. Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, Oxford University Press, 2012.
  - 6 When people wanted to travel to a capitalist state for tourist purposes individually, they had to obtain consent from their employer (or from a relevant local committee if the applicant was not an employee – e.g. women on maternity leave, students, or pensioners); then they needed a recommendation from the trade union, and men also required consent from the military administration. With all these permissions in hand, they had to apply for foreign exchange at the National bank, which imposed yet another limitation and restriction on travel opportunities. Only one journey per year was allowed; excursions of groups from a factory or enterprise were preferred over individual journeys because it was possible to better execute control over such groups. In every phase of this process, State Security could intervene in the selection procedure. Pavel Mücke and Lenka Krátká, *Turistická Odysea. Krajinou soudobých dějin cestování a cestovního ruchu v Československu v letech 1945 až 1989*, Karolinum, Praha, 2018 (in press).
  - 7 Z. M., interviewed by Anna Přikrylová, May 2011, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny, Centrum orální historie, sbírka Rozhovory (Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Oral History Center, collection Interviews).
  - 8 Women's work on naval vessels was banned by the Labor Code which prohibited night work and work in continuous operation for women. 65/1965 Sb., Zákoník práce (Labor Code),  [- 9 While pilots had to graduate from a specialized training course in order to cope even with the most difficult situations and to ensure safe air transport, flight attendants, among other training, had to pass practical exams from various forms of serving – in luxury restaurants, serving banquets, working in a cocktail bar, etc. Eva Zárubová, \*Létavice. Příběhy o létání z pohledu letušky ČSA\*, Svět křidel, Cheb, 2016, p. 13–14.
  - 10 Miroslav Sedlák, \*Letecké příhody i nehody\*, Svět křidel, Cheb, 2003, p. 5.
  - 11 At the moment I do not have at my disposal sufficient relevant sources \(e.g. guidelines\) to describe these requirements in more detail. On the topic of gender stereotypes in this job see e.g. Kathleen Barry, \*Femininity in Flight: A History of Flight Attendants \(Radical Perspectives\)\*, Duke University Press Books, 2007.](http://aplikace.mvcr.cz/sbirka-zakonu/SearchResult.aspx?q=65/1965&typeLaw=zakon&what=Cislo_zakona_smlouvy; § 150 a 152, viewed 25.04 2015. In foreign trade enterprises, the situation was different: women were not excluded from work abroad directly but by means of the staff selection process. Women were disadvantaged mainly by the fact that maternity and parental duties were perceived as an insurmountable obstacle for them to execute a job abroad.</li>
</ol>
<p>Unfortunately, the gender dimension of the topic of (in)equality during the period of state socialism with respect to business travel is beyond the scope of this study.</p>
<ol style=)
- Concerning this topic, I can quote an illustrative example of gender-stereotyped self-perception as mentioned in the memoirs of one former flight attendant. She distinguishes her women colleagues as 1. Beautiful air hostesses who were the merit of the Czechoslovak airline's fame, right after well-chilled Pilsen beer. Their task on board was quite clear – being decorative. 2. The clever ones provided passengers with a feeling of perfect comfort on board. Their service was excellent. Eva Zárubová, *Létavice. Příběhy o létání z pohledu letušky ČSA*, Svět křidel, Cheb, 2016, p. 13.
- 12 In the field of foreign trade, the situation was a little bit different since it was still cheaper and easier to equip a businessman with all necessary skills than, for example, to get a highly qualified pilot or sea captain.
  - 13 Vyhodnocení operativní situace na m. a. s. Čsl. námořní plavba, 22. 9. 1989, (Assessment of the situation in the COS, 22 September 1989), Archiv bezpečnostních složek (The Security Services Archive, Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Prague), volume 4147, part 19.
  - 14 As the sample of narrators did not include men working for monopoly foreign trade enterprises specialized for example in food or toys, the statement about the low-quality of domestic production cannot be generalized to all Czechoslovak foreign trade.
  - 15 'For example, after the salary arrangements provided in 1972, the highest monthly salary (ship master) was assigned 7,790 Czechoslovak crowns and the lowest (junior sailor) was 1,650 crowns. ... The average monthly salary in Czechoslovakia in 1972 was 2,091 crowns.' Lenka Krátká, *A History of the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping Company, 1948–1989*, ibid., p. 180.
  - 16 Aircraft crews could also take a partner or a child abroad (though only one of them at a time, to avoid possible emigration of the entire family). It was a short-term trip, which had more of a tourist character, where family members could enjoy both cheap travel costs and accommodation capacities for crews. However, this type of travel of family members abroad did not cause problems that occurred with the two other types of family members' travel mentioned here.



- 17 Záznam – charakteristika kapitán Z., 22. 9. 1989 (Personal characteristics of the captain Z., 22 September 1989), Archiv bezpečnostních složek (The Security Services Archive, Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Prague), volume 4147, part 19.
- 18 V. B., interviewed by Anna Přikrylová, October 2011, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny, Centrum orální historie, sbírka Rozhovory (Institute for Contemporary Research in Prague, Oral History Centre, collection Interviews).
- 19 Lenka Krátká, *A History of the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping Company, 1948–1989*, *ibid.*, p.191. Women had to change roles from the independence they were accustomed to when being at home alone to a certain degree of dependence in life as a couple. For comparison see for example: Hana Hagmark-Cooper, ‘Being an Icon: The Perception of the Seafarer’s Wife as a National Character’, in IOHA Conference Collection *The Many Voices of Oral History* (Barcelona: International Congress of Oral History, 2014), <http://www.ub.edu/historiaoral.barcelona/2014/pdf/comunicaciones.pdf>, viewed 6 January 2015, 225–235.
- 20 M. Ž., interviewed by Lenka Krátká, February 2016, transcript held by the author.
- 21 J. J., interviewed by Lenka Krátká, March 2010, tape and transcript held by the author.
- 22 V. P., interviewed by Anna Přikrylová, February 2012, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny, Centrum orální historie, sbírka Rozhovory (Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Oral History Center, collection Interviews).
- 23 V. S., interviewed by Lenka Krátká, May 2010, tape and transcript held by the author.

# Journeys through space and time: Interviewing the military

Stephanie Boyle

## Abstract

Is it possible to predict an oral history ‘outcome’? Is it necessary to do so?

Recent oral history projects by the Australian War Memorial utilised sequential interviewing. Participants were interviewed three times each – before, during, and after their overseas deployments. These projects were deemed successful, in that the expectations, reflections and personal experiences of the interviewees were captured and the interviewers benefited by the experience. However, Memorial interviewers, as self-identified civilians, also observed how their own expectations were challenged. For example, in common with many civilians, we held the perception that deployment would be transformative on a life-changing level for interviewees. Interviews showed that it might be, but, it may not. Another expectation was that veterans would break down in interviews. They might – but they probably won’t on active duty. And they may well be counting the days to their return home, or dreading leaving the company of their mates – or both. Was that first interview stilted and awkward because the interviewee was shy, or was it because their commanding officer was nearby? Was the last interview really frank because the interview happened at home, or because the interviewer was now a familiar face? This paper looks at the experience of ‘serial interviewing’ in a contemporary military context, and the experience of the interviewer with regard to individual interviewees and more broadly, the project.

## Introduction

My role of curator at the Australian War Memorial increasingly involves the recording of oral histories with current serving military personnel – often on site at the Memorial, sometimes on a military base in Australia, overseas in Afghanistan and Iraq, and occasionally within the interviewee’s own home. Some individuals have been interviewed more than once, with the dual purpose of capturing a chapter within that individual’s life, and thereby build a bigger picture story of the



*Stephanie Boyle in Iraq, October/November 2016. Photo courtesy Danielle Cassar.*

deployment. Whether interviewing someone new, or a prior acquaintance, one aims to divest oneself of expectations and assumptions. By examining some of the interviews conducted in Iraq last year, this paper reflects on the relative success of that aim, and how assumptions made by interviewer, interviewee, and the wider community can affect how the military are seen and interpreted.

One relatively harmless assumption that might be made is that second and third-time interviewees will be more relaxed; further, that the location contributes to the mood or tenor of the interview. As suggested by Shopes, interviews conducted in the home tend to be more relaxed, whereas those occurring at the interviewee’s place of work – say, a military base – may be more inhibited.<sup>1</sup> Interviews conducted on deployment are still effectively ‘workplace’, but the interviewer can ask very specific questions based on her own observations of the environment. Importantly, interviewees often welcome the change in routine presented by an oral history interview, and can readily relax when the interviewer is already familiar. Nevertheless, the interviewee never forgets where they are, rarely reaching a ruminative state, as has been more often noted in studio based interviews. Indeed, the most reflective interviews, including those in which participants are more likely to become agitated or upset, occur in the Memorial’s recording studio. While the sterile space of the recording studio is not what one would ordinarily think of as a comfort zone, it could be thought of as a neutral zone – a place that’s neither



Stephanie Boyle in Iraq, October/November 2016. Photo courtesy Danielle Cassar.

work nor home, in which strong emotions might more readily surface. This has been the case whether prior acquaintance existed or not.

In Iraq last year, I conducted the second phase of an oral history project designed to capture the deployment experience of several members of an Australian infantry battalion. Rather than a combat mission, their task was to train Iraqi soldiers in the fight against Islamic State. I had already interviewed them at their Adelaide base prior to deployment, and I met with them a third time upon their return to Australia. The interviews in Australia were video recorded, and the ones in Iraq were audio only. The third interviews were conducted only about a month after the second one, so it was unreasonable to expect a profound variation between each set of interviews. Additionally, it seems rare to record a *dramatic* revelation - some starkly realised 'before and after' scenario of a type made familiar to us by cinema and media (such as the stereotype of the psychically wounded warrior in *The Deer Hunter* or *Born on the Fourth of July*). Yet there **were** differences between deployment and home-based interviews, and between pre- and post-deployment interviews. Some of these subtler variances can offer counterpoints to popular preconceptions, or stereotypes of, the military.

## Some observations

In my 2011 deployment to Afghanistan, interviewees were either at the beginning of or half way through their deployments. In Iraq however, most interviewees were within a month of two of returning home. This difference – the timing of the interview, relative to the individual's time on deployment – transpired to challenge previously established assumptions that personal familiarity, or location of the interview, were the major factors affecting its tenor. Some of the deployment-based interviews had a very different tenor to those conducted before and after deployment. Compared to first and third phase interviews, they were very frank, with interviewees expressing frustration, exasperation, fatigue and even anger. Some spoke of changing their Corp, or quitting the Army altogether.

There was unveiled criticism of the hierarchy and of coalition partners, the international militaries with whom they worked. In my experience of deployment-based interviews, this level of frankness was virtually unprecedented.

While the lack of the (potentially inhibiting) video camera surely contributed to this change, and the effect of previous acquaintance should not be discounted, it was surely the timing of the interview that made the difference. *They were near the end of their deployment.* This rationale is supported by the fact that when I interviewed some people for a third time, back in Australia, they appeared to 'revert' to the 'previous versions' of themselves; also, during the same trip, I interviewed several people also due to return home shortly who I'd *not* previously met, and their interviews had a similar air of discontent.

There is more than one set of assumptions at work: many interviewees believe the interviewer wishes to hear 'warries', their *war stories* - colourful tales from the front, stories of valour or horror. In no way is this alluded to or requested by the interviewer.

Linda Shopes says that 'by defining a particular community around a single dimension of identity ... we imply ... that all members of the community are more or less the same'.<sup>2</sup>

This could easily apply to the assumptions and stereotypes often applied to the military, by the wider community. Meanwhile James Brown, a former Australian soldier and veteran of Afghanistan, says:

Some veterans find themselves isolated upon homecoming when they realise that friends, families and acquaintances want yarns about the battlefield and killing because they have been preconditioned by the ANZAC myth to expect no less.<sup>3</sup>



Stephanie Boyle in Iraq, October/November 2016. Photo courtesy Danielle Cassar.



Many of my interviewees seemed concerned with these assumptions, making indirect, but unprompted, observations on the subject. In this context the interviewee might be expected to ‘valorise’ their narrative<sup>4</sup>, though I observed that interviewees tend to valorise not themselves, but rather, the achievements of their team. This dovetails neatly with pressure from within the military organisation to provide a positive or good news story, one which is impossible for the interviewer – an outsider with a recording device – to misrepresent in public fora. These factors combine to prevent an interviewee, particularly one interviewed while at work, from stepping outside the proscribed ‘code of conduct’ by voicing frank and personal opinions on the record.

## Some examples

These anonymised interview extracts help illustrate the ways in which some end-of- deployment interviewees exposed the assumptions made by the interviewer, and to some extent, society at large.

### WB

‘WB’ was a senior officer, with 20 years in the Army and many overseas deployments behind him. In his first interview he presented as an extremely busy individual with no time to spare, and his thoughts, like his sentences, moved quickly over the top of each other. It was soon made clear that even whilst away in Iraq, his responsibilities as battalion administrator in Australia would continue. His sense of rank hierarchy, and a need to prevent over-familiarity between ranks, was strong. In common with everyone interviewed for the first phase, he had clear expectations of this training mission, such as how Iraqi troops would be trained; that the middle-eastern summer would be intensely hot; that it was definitely not a combat mission. He was married, with two children of school age. He credited his wife of several years with having strength during his many absences over the course of his army career.<sup>5</sup>

When I saw WB again, he had been in Iraq for six months. His mannerisms hadn’t changed, but the substance of his conversation had, and he spoke exasperatedly of discipline issues within his own group. His team had every chance to do well, but preventable accidents (what’s known as ‘NDs’, or ‘negligent discharges’), were letting them down. This was possibly due to complacency, in turn stemming from a lack of explicit danger on the base:

... We always say, ‘Look, you’re not getting shot at; this is not a hard mission, get professional ... That’s the worst part ... just fucked up on discipline, on simple things they should have known better – ‘multiple multiple,



*Stephanie Boyle in Iraq, October/November 2016. Photo courtesy Danielle Cassar.*

multiple’, like one day we had three of them ... complacency, thinking you’re better than you are, bring it back down to earth, not as good as you are ... Just disappointing. [We] came in with high expectations ... Why can’t you do your drills? In Afghan – no NDs. [Complacency’s] crept into the Army ... My people are better. It’s just complacency. Slow down.<sup>6</sup>

I asked him a fairly routine question about working with the armies of other nationalities, to which he replied, ‘If you could take them out of this group it’d be much better’:

... They’re not team players. They don’t come with much. They’re pretty much where we were ten years ago, maybe further back ... Their training teams don’t do what we do, [it’s a] different approach ... [they’re] a bit more ‘houso’, more lazy ... They don’t say hello, very heads down and walk past you 100 times a day, it’s just the way they do it, really rude.<sup>7</sup>

When I asked another standard question, about how his family was going with him away, he replied:

I was on rocky ground with my wife anyway so that’s ended, got to go back and tidy that up ... but the kids are good; being able to Face Time, I can see the kids daily, they can ring me, talk to me ...<sup>8</sup>

He seemed to be in a very different headspace from that of his pre-deployment interview.

Back at the home base in Adelaide, we had a relaxed 35-minute interview, and he seemed more like his pre-deployment self: unruffled and steady, busy planning for the battalion’s year ahead. He didn’t volunteer more about his partner, but when I asked about the kids, he said they were good, and he was looking forward to seeing them.<sup>9</sup> He was relieved I think to be back home, but not so much for the sake of his personal life. It was a relief to be home so he could more closely manage his battalion.



## CB

An officer, CB comes from a supportive, non-military family in a rural area. She enlisted at age 18, as a way to access travel and educational opportunities. In her first interview she said that she'd become 'infatuated' with the military ideal of mental acuity and physical fitness. She knew from an early stage that she'd specialise in a job involving long hours at a desk rather than weeks patrolling out field. Iraq would be her first deployment and she was 'excited to go'.<sup>10</sup>

She aspired to building her professional skills, experiencing a different culture, and training and working with the Iraqis; she expected to be busy. I asked her whether her gender impacted on in her work in the Army, as only about 10% of the military are women. CB said it didn't: 'If a woman didn't get a job or pass a degree it's not cos she's a woman, it's cos she as an individual wasn't good enough'.<sup>11</sup>

When I met with her in Iraq, CB was very tired - more tired, probably, than even she had expected to be. She said something she wouldn't have said in her first interview: 'If you are enthusiastic, it can work against you'. Her day typically started at 6am, and discounting short meal times, she did not leave her work space before 10 or 11pm. She felt she'd learned something important about herself and the nature of profound fatigue on her work performance, particularly as a communicator and a team leader. Having been out among the Iraqi troops myself that week, I asked another gender-related question, and her response was very dry:

I did go out on the range once. [Pause]  
Everyone was very respectful. [Pause]  
Everyone stopped what they were doing!  
It wasn't conducive by any means.  
*Interviewer:* I went onto the range yesterday ...

CB: Yeah, and did it just stop? And everyone look? Yes, it's crazy; you feel like, sort of, like a bad dream - but I'm clothed - I don't know what's going on! <sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, CB's view of gender neutrality was not wholly supported by her Iraq experience, but she did not see it as contradicting her views, and true to her pragmatic outlook, she accepted it in her stride. She also praised the work of the Iraqi speaking interpreters, who, diplomatically, avoided verbatim translations of Iraqi soldiers' talk. Her work alongside Iraqi officers had been rewarding, and in common with other women in the army, she expressed a wish that her presence amongst Iraqi military would challenge their preconceptions of women.<sup>13</sup>

I'm sure there's a side there, that I don't really want to [consider] ... but I'm sure they're curious about seeing a chick, who's an officer, with a pistol - that opens their mind, maybe, if one person sees that and thinks, shit, maybe a woman can do that role - it's worth it.<sup>14</sup>

She affirmed that deployment had provided the developmental experience she'd been hoping to have:

Yeah, in every way possible, whether it was just personally, knowing yourself better, when you're just completely fatigued! But also, leadership-wise, when you see your guys completely fatigued ... how to communicate better ... forming a team that covers so many different backgrounds ... walking into a room and everyone's looking at you portray a professional aspect and win them over through competence, rather than resignate [sic] yourself to the role that they think you're in. It's been fascinating ...<sup>15</sup>

CB was emphatically proud about her team's achievements, avoiding, as all interviewees did, any implication of individual achievement. She recognised the implied contradiction between Australia's 'dominant narrative' of the military - the 'Legend of ANZAC' - and the reality of her currently non-combative mission. When I asked her about the challenge of explaining her largely desk-based work to others, she said that, 'We're not doing the most sexy job you could do on deployment, when you think of Remembrance Day'.

When I saw CB the third time, she seemed relaxed and well rested, despite it being only 24 hours since her arrival back in Australia. She could offer more self-analysis, now that the deployment was over: 'For me it was a huge learning point, to be used to who you are, in your own skin ... Yeah, growing up a bit',<sup>16</sup> thus exemplifying another of Shopes' observations that, 'Interviews frequently are plotted narratives, in which the narrator/hero overcomes obstacles, resolves difficulties and achieves either public success or private satisfaction'.<sup>17</sup> CB implied acknowledgement of her own pre-conceptions of the Middle East, which she'd not expressed in her pre-deployment interview. For example, while she hadn't explicitly expressed expecting sexism in Iraq, she clearly had suspected that she would:

I found it quite different to what I would have thought. Perhaps that's because they've got used to coalition forces and seeing a female in uniform ... I definitely realised the roles of males and females were different depending on the socioeconomic status.<sup>18</sup>

She also related how she was able to convert those differences to engaging conversation topics, for example by discussing her father's love of cooking, in a country where women cook the family meal.

## LB

An officer, married and without children as yet, LB is from a supportive family in a rural area. He applied to Army directly after high school, but decided instead to work for a while, which he felt had provided him valuable life experience. He was careful to emphasise that people just out of school also made good soldiers. In response to a question about enlistment he spoke of getting away from 'small town monotony and routine which can lead to a bleak path', as if he'd foreseen and decisively avoided such a fate himself.<sup>19</sup> LB presented as a thoughtful 'man of action', even making clear he hadn't relished the purely administrative posting he'd recently completed. Like other interviewees, he had experienced the preconceptions held by non-military friends and family, and appeared resigned to correcting peoples' understanding, even if it was futile to do so. I had asked him if it were difficult to explain to other people what he will be doing in Iraq, especially given that his mission was to train others to fight, rather than be in the fight himself. He said:

Well my wife understands, I talk to her every day, but friends at home - their automatic assumption is that you're going there to fight, to fire your gun.<sup>20</sup>

He appeared to accept that as a purely training mission, there would be no over-the-wire activity for him; indeed, as a junior commander, he was responsible for reminding others of this fact. He was confident what to expect in terms of culture, climate and daily routine, and he looked forward to being partnered with an Iraqi officer. He said:

... It'll be my job to ... establish that relationship ... You watch that development, I think that will be fantastic. Like any sort of teaching job, you help people grow and they come out the end of it as either a better individual or group.<sup>21</sup>

At the interview's end, he said he was 'looking forward to a good experience', but also that we would 'See what I say when I come back!'

In Iraq some six months later, LB expressed dissatisfaction with the deployment, despite his earlier acknowledgment of its limitations from a combat perspective. When I asked him his training team's impact on its Iraqi training audience, he said:

You can only do what you can do, never change their personalities in a great way, not unless you

live with them, every day, not unless you go in there like Lawrence of Arabia and decide you're gonna come back through with a rebellion ...<sup>22</sup>

Although LB had been prepared for constraints, he'd still hoped to assist the Iraqi military, particularly by working closely with Iraqi commanders. But when I asked him how it was going, he said:

You don't stop and talk to the Iraqi OC, you just keep pumping people through the range and get them shooting and shooting ... So didn't really experience what I thought we were going to set out to - that ideal model, this is you, your company, take them and train them.<sup>23</sup>

He would express frustration with one aspect of deployment, then offer a counterpoint, for example:

The job is pretty well strictly well outlined ... We go home all safe. You know. I think that's the number one thing ... and whilst I've been frustrated with this decision, that decision ... we stick to our lanes ... I've been frustrated with this or that, but that's just me. I'm sure you've heard about peoples' frustration, heard a lot of fury ...<sup>24</sup>

Very clearly, LB found the deployment incompatible with the traditional ANZAC narrative, but he leveraged off this, in crystalising his future plans:

Nah, [it is] not one of those experiences where you're watching your friends fighting and dying and crazy like that; you're not going to be changed by the fishbowl [here] ... If anything, it's strengthened my resolve to move into [another] realm of our armed forces ...<sup>25</sup>

We talked about life and conditions on the base:

... Not much you can't get from the Iraqi shops on base ... yeah, it's crazy. There's nothing to complain about. There's wifi. You can buy a satellite dish. War is hell. <sup>26</sup>

Due to time constraints LB was not interviewed a third time, but he, probably more than any other interviewee, expressed a sense of strain, and an underlying frustration with the stereotype of the battle-tempered hero, even as he planned a transfer to a more combative force element.

## Oral history to counter stereotypes

In common with Alistair Thompson's World War 1 interviewees, these contemporary veterans perceive a pressure, powered by 'the public field of

representations<sup>27</sup> of war, to conform one's military memories and identities to society's expectations of the ANZAC Legend.

However, unlike many community-based projects that aim to capture the history of a place, movement or organisation, this project simultaneously had a broader *and* a narrower focus. The interviewees aren't elderly veterans of long ago wars, or survivors of natural disaster, and yet the members of Australia's defence forces are a community, and find themselves subject to generalisations and assumptions as much as any group can be. To make assumptions about military personnel, particularly as interviewees, contradicts oral history's fundamentally non-judgemental spirit of inquiry. Indeed, one hopes that oral history will counter such assumptions: 'Can individual memories challenge dominant narratives, such as those of the nation state?'<sup>28</sup>

It is therefore arguable that 'Anzackery' - a term coined by historian Geoffrey Searle for a phenomenon endemic to Australian society<sup>29</sup> - stands almost in opposition to the ethical and moral heart of oral history. Many interviewees are themselves aware of societal pressure to fit their own experiences within an ANZAC model. Among other things, a dedicated project of sequential interviews demonstrates the importance of remaining open minded, going in to a project without preconceptions of how it will turn out, and identifying and relinquishing unhelpful concerns about the expectations of others.

In closing, is one last introduction. CB, who was interviewed during his Afghanistan (2013) and Iraq (2017) deployments<sup>30</sup>, was a junior ranking member of about five years' army experience. CB is an enthusiastic story teller who was happy to record another interview, though it should be noted that the established acquaintance led to the interview being fairly unstructured. One advantage of its informality was its insight to the minutiae of life on base, details upon which other interviewees, especially senior officers, were less likely to dwell. For example, CB cheerfully described the detrimental effect of middle-eastern summer heat on Australians' morale (Iraqi day-time temperatures commonly exceed 50 degrees). It is common for interviewees to want to be transparent about realities while emphasising positives; a typical response to a question about heat was to express pride in the fact there'd been no heat fatigue casualties. CB's perspective was different:

You're lucky you didn't come when it was 54 degrees! ... Everything is sticky, you are literally looking for the tiniest bit of shade you can stand into. You want to hop back in the car ... Everyone was grumpy. Everyone was yelling at everyone. You can see that since it's gotten

cooler, morale has just shot higher. And I'm from Cairns. I'm used to the humidity, used to the heat and I'd never felt anything like that.<sup>31</sup>

I know from previous interviews that one of CB's primary interests is physical fitness; access to the gym, and nutritious food, is important to him. We discussed the extensive variety of food on offer at the mess hall:

... The dessert bar. It's all right when you go up to a dessert bar somewhere and they've got one dessert, and go, 'oh I don't really fancy apples, so I'm not going to have an apple pie'. When there's TWENTY different desserts there, you're like, you're going to find one you like! And all else fails, go to the three different dessert bars, the three different ice cream bars, where ice cream is made in, by the way, and you can have other stuff than whipped cream. Ice cream is good. Then they've got all the toppings that go with it. Your fried bloody strawberries, your crushed peanuts that go on top. There's NO END TO IT.<sup>32</sup>

His tone was anecdotal and light hearted, yet was strongly reminiscent of LB's wry observation, when closing his comment on shops and satellite dishes: 'War is hell'. How hellish is it really, when you can't choose an ice cream?

## Conclusion

The divestment of assumptions and preconceptions is a challenge at many levels. Society at large views military veterans through a twin distorting lens of idealised history and psychological stereotypes, making assumptions and projecting stereotypes on to the army and its individual members, whilst the interviewer, however well-intentioned, carries assumptions regarding the outcome of the interview - especially so, if she is previously acquainted with the interviewee. Only through awareness of these challenges, gained through experience and knowledge sharing, can we hope to overcome them.

## Endnotes

1. Linda Shopes, *Making sense of oral history* <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/08/making-sense-of-oral-history/>.
2. Linda Shopes, 'Community Voices: Oral History on the ground', *The Oral History Noticeboard*, 2014, <https://oralhistorynoticeboard.wordpress.com/2014/09/12/community-voices-oral-history-on-the-ground/>.
3. James Brown, *Anzac's Long Shadow*, quoted by Paul Daley, 'Anzac's Long Shadow: the cost of our obsession', *The Guardian*, 21 March 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/21/anzacs->

4. Linda Shopes, *Making sense of oral history*, *op.cit.*
5. WB interviewed by author, 8 March 2016, recording held by Australian War Memorial.
6. WB interviewed by author, 30 October 2016, recording held by Australian War Memorial.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. WB interviewed by author, 15 December 2016, recording held by Australian War Memorial.
10. CB interviewed by author, 9 March 2016, recording held by Australian War Memorial.
11. *Ibid.*
12. CB interviewed by author, 10 November 2016, recording held by Australian War Memorial.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. CB interviewed by author, 16 December 2016, recording held by Australian War Memorial.
17. Shopes, L., 'Community Voices' *op.cit.*
18. CB interview, 16 December 2016, *op.cit.*
19. LB interviewed by author, 9 March 2016, recording held by Australian War Memorial.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. LB interviewed by author, 9 November 2016, recording held by Australian War Memorial.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Alistair Thompson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the legend*, Monash University 2013, p.12.
28. Anna Green, 'Individual Remembering and Collective Memory: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates', *Oral History*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Autumn, 2004, pp. 35-44.
29. Paul Daley, 'Crowdsourcing is our latest weapon against nationalism and Anzackery', *The Guardian*, 29 December 2014, accessed 20/8/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/29/crowdsourcing-is-our-latest-weapon-against-nationalism-and-anzackery>
30. CB, interviewed by author 25 October 2012 and 31 August 2014, recordings held by Australian War Memorial.
31. CB, interviewed by author, 10 November 2016, recording held by Australian War Memorial.
32. *Ibid.*



# Little known South Australian History: Uncovering the truth behind the nuclear weapons project at Maralinga

Mikalea Borg

## Abstract

Oral histories give a voice to those who have been silenced in our community. Minority groups, through sharing their stories, help to prevent a repeat of past injustices such as those described by my interviewees. This paper follows the journey of a university undergraduate as she endeavours to uncover what really happened at Maralinga during the nuclear bomb tests carried out in the mid-1900s. The focus of this project informs more recent debate and controversy surrounding the proposed nuclear waste dump and its impact on neighbouring Aboriginal communities. This paper focuses on the stories shared by two descendants of the Anangu community, Steve Harrison and Karina Lester. The final part of this paper will look specifically at the educational benefits of oral histories in the classroom. As a history teacher, I feel strongly about presenting an equal telling of the past, supported by the integration of oral histories. Beginning as a university assignment, this project quickly turned into a very important journey, supporting my work as an educator and the campaigning efforts of all those I spoke with along the way.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

History repeats itself time and time again. However, if we are taught from a young age to forget and never reflect on the past or taught about the past with gaps already missing, we start to reject the familiarity of present and future events. When we forget or deny the truth that is our past, we struggle to recognise the repetitive nature of our actions and how to act differently and perhaps more considerately towards others in the future. Current discussion about the proposed nuclear waste dump in South Australia has failed, on many occasions, to mention the Maralinga story, in particular the heartache and illness that was experienced by those implicated in this event. Without an understanding of the past, how are people expected to understand the severity of current issues and the impact they can have in shaping the future? The main

purpose of this paper is to bring about awareness, by understanding the past from the perspective of those who understand it best, namely descendants of the Anangu community, the Aboriginal people on whose traditional lands the tests were conducted.

## The Maralinga story: an overview

During the 1950s and 1960s, nuclear bomb tests were carried out by the British Government in South Australia's mid-north region.<sup>2</sup> The project was supported by the federal government, although Australian involvement in the project was minor, and any significant involvement was notably downgraded for reasons which will become apparent later in the paper. Nevertheless, access granted by the Australian Government to this land would prove a costly disaster for all those living and working in the area for many decades after the project's completion. The two main test sites were Emu and Maralinga (about 800 kilometres north-west of Adelaide). The name Maralinga was first used by Garik language speakers from the Cobourg Peninsula. The original meaning of the word, 'thunder' was fitting for military personnel and public servants who in a rapid search required an appropriate and appealing name for the area. Two major tests were conducted at the Maralinga site; however, the hundreds of minor trials (many of which were not documented) proved the most destructive, in terms of their long-term health effects. The radiation devastated Maralinga's previously beautiful, red landscapes, dotted with olive green shrubby saltbush.

Prior to this reckless period of atomic colonisation, the traditional owners, the Maralinga Tjarutja people lived a mostly peaceful existence on this land for tens of thousands of years carrying out their cultural practices and speaking their traditional languages.

Radioactive exposure from the fallout affected both military personnel and members of the Anangu community, who also suffered from a loss of culture and identity after being displaced from their traditional lands. Some communities witnessed the death of many of their elders, consequently leaving the younger generations to figure out their

cultural responsibilities on their own. Many cultural connections have also been lost due to the death of many young people caused by intergenerational radioactive poisoning. Project officials denied having caused their suffering, blaming the victims for their own negligent behaviour. Victims, however, fought to expose the truth, entering a lengthy battle with the British Government notably over agreement to compensation funds.

A Royal Commission was set up by the Australian Government to investigate measures taken to protect workers and residents and whether these measures were adequate for such purposes, and whether the health effects reported to the commission were a result of the tests. The evidence was clear, however, agreements to compensation were difficult to obtain due to the project being a mostly secretive mission. Such factors also impeded the processing of claims whereby the victim developed sickness as a result of access to contaminated sites after the bombings, for instance, working on clean-up projects carried out during the 1980s. The fight continues however, as descendants try through various means to make this story known to current and future generations. The above history will be explored in greater detail later in the paper and can be read comprehensively in Elizabeth Tynan's recently published novel *Atomic Thunder* (2016). Commencing the following section are the steps I took in the early stages of my project and the kinds of research processes I used to narrow my research focus.

## **What I learnt about planning a successful oral history project**

Embarking on an oral history project for the first time can be daunting, although exciting and potentially life-changing. My number one recommendation to those (like myself) new to the study and practice of oral histories is to base your research on a topic that inspires a sense of curiosity in you which you believe others might share. Finding someone who is as interested and hopefully more knowledgeable about your chosen subject is one of the most important first steps to carrying out a successful oral history project. I have always been interested in Aboriginal-related affairs and issues and so I was very interested to learn more about the Maralinga story. Another useful piece of advice I would give seems obvious although can require a great deal of self-control. Researching the subject matter and the background of your participants is important, however, too much research can actually limit the information you find out from your interviewees, leaving you with nothing but a retelling of your own research. The research I conducted gave

me a solid knowledge base about the topic from which I was able to ask the most relevant questions, while allowing my interviewees to respond in a way that they thought necessary. Narrowing your research focus and tracking down the ideal interviewees can be more of a challenging task as I quickly found out.

## **An unexpected journey**

The purpose of this project was to provide further validation of the injustices that took place during the Maralinga bomb tests by interviewing descendants of those who suffered as a result of these hidden truths. However, it was not until a month into this project that I realised the significance of what I was doing and the impact my findings could have on others. Through attending community events and exhibitions I also realised the power of these interviews in preventing future nuclear and/or land-based incidents from occurring elsewhere in the state. The events also facilitated my research processes and inspired a renewed focus and purpose for my project. During the initial stages of research, I used mostly digitalised archives, such as those from Trove or the State Library and written autobiographical accounts, helping me to identify significant individuals and places, and establish a rough timeline of key events. The archived resources, mostly newspaper articles and photographs, were useful for finding out what kind of information was reported at the time, therefore what was known by the wider public. However, these decontextualized interpretations drove me to find more reliable sources of information, such as the autobiographical works of Jessie Lennon, Yvonne Edwards and Yami Lester, providing context which other sources lacked and a range of in-depth accounts from different perspectives. Missing from my research now was information about what had occurred from when these accounts were written to the present day and how they were linked to more recent issues, such as the South Australian Government's recently proposed nuclear waste dump on the lands of the Adnyamathanha people in the Flinders Ranges. Each event that I attended or person I spoke with provided first-hand information about the topic and its continuing impact on the wider community, for instance, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descendants spoke at a panel meeting at Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute in Adelaide about the different ways in which the fallout had affected their families. After speaking to many people about my project I decided that the interviews could be used not only for archival purposes but for educating the next generation about the true history of Maralinga.

## Descendants and survivors of the Maralinga bombings

Many of the people affected by the bombings including their descendants live in the remote communities of Oak Valley and Yalata on the far west coast of South Australia after returning there during the 1980s. There are few Anangu descendants of those who endured the bomb tests living in Adelaide, and of those who are, many are busy leading campaigns in support of issues affecting their local communities, which also involves frequent trips to and from the various sites. I was fortunate enough to squeeze in an interview with Steve while in town for an art exhibition at Tandanya.

I also managed to organise an interview with Karina after finding out she was in Adelaide for a First Nations language conference.

The oral histories shared by Karina Lester and Steve Harrison reflect the broader historical experiences of their ancestors and of those communities affected by the bombings. Both participants spoke proudly about their family's achievements in exposing the secrets of the nuclear bomb tests, recognising that their discoveries would support future campaigns against nuclear and land-based issues. Karina is the Chairperson for the Yankunytjatjara Native Title Aboriginal Corporation and avid spokesperson for the No Dump Alliance. Ambassador of the organisation, Yami Lester (Karina's father), was a survivor of the bombings and one of many blinded by the radioactive fallout. Yami's story and campaign against the British Government features prominently in Karina's interview.

My second interviewee, Steve is also an anti-nuclear campaigner who expresses his contempt through a different although very important medium, the visual arts. Steve was awarded the 2015 Graham Smith Peace Foundation's annual arts grant for his Tree of Life sculpture presented early last year at the international Peace Park in Nagasaki which commemorates the Second World War United States' bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The sculpture also recognised his step-father's legacy, in particular, his contributions to the local community through building and construction-based projects. The oral testimonies presented by Karina and Steve, therefore represent a collective history and identity, including shared customs, values and beliefs.

The interviewing process not only unites the historical experiences of interviewees but builds relations between interviewers and interviewees. Brennon suggests that collaboration between oral history participants can facilitate the Reconciliation process between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups. However, only when these local histories are recognised as part of the nation's broader history can Reconciliation be achieved between the two groups.

Factors that may have influenced these relations and the various participants' understanding of the past will be explored in the following sections.



*Steve Harrison's sculpture gift for the Nagasaki Peace Park*

## The interviews

### Steve Harrison

Oral histories provide a more comprehensive understanding of past events and the time period during which these events took place, than can be ascertained from the written record. Interviewees, through sharing their stories reflect on key aspects of history that would otherwise not be discussed in a more structured interview-style meeting.

Steve, for instance, while reflecting on his childhood, spoke about his step-father's forced removal from his family, recognising that the bombings were not the only issues affecting Aboriginal people at the time. Steve was only a baby during the testing period, but recalls the suffering experienced by people like his step-father who were displaced from their traditional lands as a result of the bomb tests and/or forced child removal policies. Steve was fortunate in the sense that he and his siblings remained together with their mother but were told to leave nevertheless, and with no consultation given to ensure their family understood the dangers of the radioactive fallout or the hurdles associated with moving to new country. Steve watched as his step-father

and other members of his community struggled with this abrupt and unwarranted separation from country and community, and eventually a gradual separation from one's self. Steve's story, while sad at times, is anything but depressing; his community's fight for justice and the opportunity to reconnect with their country makes this story extremely uplifting, particularly as we venture further into the atomic age and encounter more nuclear-based threats from both local and international sources. Steve, aged 16 remembers his step-father fighting the British Government for recognition of past wrongs and compensation which, once achieved, enabled his people to rebuild their lives (not without obvious setbacks) and provide medical care for current and future generations carrying illnesses caused by the fallout. Many people returned to Oak Valley (northwest of the original Maralinga township) including Steve's step-father and eventually Steve, living and working in the community for 14 years carrying out his step-father's mission to rebuild the community. During this time, Steve led building and construction programs for young people interested in improving their employment opportunities in this area. Steve's journey therefore is a shared and ever-continuing one shaped by past and current events.

Steve, for the last two years has been involved in the campaign against the nuclear waste dump sharing his community's story through visual art and other multi-media devices. Steve together with a talented team of artists and digital experts created the recently showcased *Nuclear* exhibition, first opened to the public in Brisbane. The exhibition features Steve's peace sculpture (See *Steve Harrison's sculpture gift for the Nagasaki Peace Park*) and a range of other local artworks and sculptures. In November 2016, the exhibition moved to another sacred and historically-grounded space, Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute in Adelaide, once again sharing the stories of all those affected by the bombings. The public's response to the exhibition was a powerful reminder of Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology speech; locals and tourists cried while shaking Steve's hand apologising for the loss his community had experienced. Steve and the team plan to take the exhibition to Ceduna and then to Sydney and Melbourne. Steve also hopes to use this exhibition to educate international communities such as the British community (initially responsible for establishing the project) about this history and the dangers associated with nuclear-based activity. The Maralinga story can still be experienced locally in the areas where such testing sites were established. The original Maralinga village is open to the public and can be accessed through group bus tours offering suitable accommodation for over-night stayers. The realisation of Steve's step-father's vision, to 'open this country up and share it with the rest of the world' so that they can see what happened has been achieved, but only through the perseverance and commitment of all those involved in the anti-nuclear campaign.

The Maralinga story, therefore, is more than just a story about nuclear testing and the consequences of radioactive fallout, but the cultural genocide of Australia's Indigenous peoples. Unravelling one's memories in this way, in the form of a life history, can bring a greater level of structure and meaning to the historical event or topic being discussed. The advantages of this method of historical inquiry were clear to me from the onset; however, there were several limitations which may have influenced my overall research findings. My position as an 'outsider', in other words, someone outside of Steve's immediate family unit and the broader Anangu community may have influenced my perspective and final interpretation of the interview.

If I were a member of this community, I may have focused my attention on specific events or ventures in Steve's life, such his work to rebuild the Oak Valley community. Instead, I asked questions about events that I believed were important for creating a more comprehensive understanding for future listeners. My intention was to capture a broad picture of the past within a reasonable time period for both the interviewee and listener. Steve was aware of my intent and agreed to co-construct a historical account that would improve the community's awareness and understanding of the Maralinga story. While I may have been an 'outsider' in terms of group membership and group experience, I exhibited previous involvement in Aboriginal affairs and experience in Aboriginal education which simultaneously gave me an 'insider' perspective.

Nevertheless, this position may have prevented me from finding out specific kinds of information which the participant assumed I already knew and so did not provide further explanation. There were many perspectives, interests and motives at play during the construction of Steve's oral history further prompting me to check the reliability and validity of his account against other sources.

I assessed the reliability of my findings using various techniques including observations and interviews with other nuclear victims at the various meetings and rallies I attended throughout my project. The cross-referencing process occurred naturally as I spoke to more and more people and read more accounts published in both national and state archives. One of the key figures I spoke to was Avon Hudson or the 'Whistle-blower', acquiring this title after revealing information about Maralinga's secret past.

## Avon Hudson

Avon worked for the Royal Australian Air Force as a Leading Aircraftman during the Maralinga project, and witnessed the death of many nuclear-affected colleagues. Avon can also attest to Steve's account of





*Photograph of the “Whistle-blower” taken during his service for the Royal Australian Air Force*

the sickness that was brought to his community, and the lack of protective measures that were put in place for all those living in or around the testing sites. Steve, also acknowledges, in his interview, the important role that Avon played in blowing the whistle on the many secrets and cover-ups that were imposed on him and other service-men by the British Government. I spoke with Avon briefly while waiting for a conference to begin; the chat was unexpected and unplanned although his story can be read in detail in his co-written novel *Beyond Belief* (2005). Avon’s account and collection of artefacts provide crucial evidence for all those fighting the current nuclear waste dump. Watching the testimonies of all those who gathered at the steps of parliament house protesting for a nuclear-free future was an obvious sign-post for me that the accounts I collected were true. Attending these events was also important for me to assess my own interpretation of the accounts and whether my perception would enable other’s to develop a more inclusive understanding of South Australia’s past.

## **Karina Lester**

Many of the elders who experienced the fallout have now passed on, and those who survived struggle to have their claims to land and resources recognised by local industries and government agencies. Re-establishing connection to country has been an on-going issue for many Aboriginal groups since the development of traditional lands for agricultural and other business purposes. Native title claims, for instance, would be easier to process if greater community consultation had been carried out before such matters arrived



*Karina Lester speaking at a rally against the state government’s proposed nuclear waste dump*

in court. According to both interviewees, little if any consultation was undertaken with the Anangu community about the purpose of the project, what it was that was being tested and how they might be affected. One of the key responsibilities of the Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee (AWTSC) was to monitor the tests for potential harm to the Australian population and environment during and after the project.

However, harm was evidently brought to Karina’s family, living approximately 180 kilometres away from the initial testing site.

Karina grew up on a pastoral property managed by her father in a small community called Mimili located at the base of the Everard Ranges. Karina spent most of her childhood in Mimili before moving to Alice Springs with her siblings for education, finally settling in Adelaide where she currently leads campaigns against nuclear-related activities including the latest nuclear waste dump. The pastoral property was owned by Mr and Mrs Cullinan, a European couple who later gave their support to Yami and his wife during their overseas campaign against the British Government. Karina’s father always fought strongly and passionately for his family and community, successfully providing his three children a nurturing and culturally-grounded upbringing. Karina recalls always being surrounded by family and culture, learning about her cultural roles and responsibilities from a young age. Karina’s father continued to serve his community long after the bombings and throughout his battle with blindness which began as teenager – a consequence of the radioactive fallout. The property which Karina’s father worked on was north of the Emu Fields (a major testing site) located in a large community called Walatina. In October 1953, after Totem 1 (the first nuclear test in the series) was released Karina’s father recalls, the ‘ground shaking and the black mist rolling’ before the sickness came and stayed, killing many members of his community.

The blindness, however never prevented Karina’s father from supporting his family or fighting the government for recognition and compensation; the

darkness he endured was in effect a key source of strength along with the support he received from his partner and three children who all endured the effects of this terrible time. Yami Lester passed away in July this year, leaving behind an incredible legacy and line of activism to be continued by his youngest daughter and other nuclear-affected descendants.

The devastation caused by the radioactive fallout or 'black mist' as many Anangu people called it occurred despite meteorologists predicting that the smoke would not disperse and in fact settle over several communities.

The fallout effects were widespread and often immediately felt, although difficult to prove because of differences in medical treatment and documentation. The cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all those involved also prevented such connections from being made. The Royal Commission, through both local and international support was successful in establishing a direct link between the bombings and the kinds of sickness people claimed to develop shortly after the bombings. Nevertheless, these claims were only recognised after numerous court proceedings, all of which were based on 'white-man's' way of assessing the truth.

According to Karina, many of these processes including the distribution of compensation funds to nuclear victims arise from western ways of thinking, contradictory to the customs and beliefs of the people this money is meant to serve. Greater recognition of Aboriginal beliefs and practices is needed for more appropriate use of these funds, organised on a case-by-case basis. 'Every day is a struggle for aboriginal people until there is true recognition.'

Recognition of Aboriginal oral traditions as a valid means of establishing the truth is an on-going issue, as is the case with oral histories in proving a reliable account of the past.

Oral storytelling is a practice common to all cultures, although heavily criticized when used as a methodological approach to assessing the 'truth' of historical accounts.

When people talk about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a little, exaggerate, become confused, get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths ... the guiding principle ... could be that all autobiographical memory is true: it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, and for what purpose.

The interpreter, or in this case, the interviewer is responsible for establishing the truth, in the same way that those accessing written accounts are responsible for their own interpretations. The way in which people use their interpretations, for example, to manipulate and control the lives of an ethnic minority, or prevent the future oppression of

a minority group should be of more concern to critics than the form of the account.

The person responsible for constructing the historical account (whether a painter, writer or oral history participant) also has a certain degree of responsibility to uphold. *Maralinga: the Anangu Story* by Christobel Mattingley is a picture book which beautifully captures the story of Maralinga, based on the oral accounts of Oak Valley and Yalata community members. The history provided by Mattingley should compare equally with the oral accounts given in this project, and be awarded the same level of trust and reliability as more conventional forms of historical narrative. Furthermore, transcribing oral accounts into the written form or paraphrasing them as I have done in this paper does not make them any more or less legitimate - the interviewees' responses remain exactly the same. The transcription process is intended to make the accounts more accessible for others and to assist the researcher during the cross-referencing and data collation processes. Oral histories also give everyday people a chance to participate in the history-making process, an opportunity often awarded only to academics when using the written form. There will always be flaws in whichever mode is used to capture history; however, it is up the reader, listener or viewer to establish an interpretation which is true to the subject, person or idea of study.

## Collective memory uniting members of the Anangu community

Karina and Steve, through sharing their stories, contribute to the empowerment of their communities, unlike some historical accounts which victimise its characters, presenting them with little agency or lacking the ability to determine their own futures. The historical characters presented in this paper, reassert themselves as members of a resilient community, overcoming many threats to the survival of their language and culture as a result of white oppression.

Members of the present generation [Aboriginal peoples] are survivors of this process [white oppression] and are strongly reasserting their rights to be themselves and to claim restitution for what was done to their ancestors and ultimately to them. But the nuances and ambiguities of the past are lost beneath the rhetoric of a present that screens ambiguities of its own.

Karina and Steve, however, are addressing the ambiguities surrounding current issues such as the nuclear

waste dump, so as to resolve past ambiguities and substantiate Maralinga's position in the history books.

The past is open to interpretation, and as we, as humans change and develop so does this interpretation. Parents or those with considerable influence in the lives of children play an integral role in the version of history they come to understand.

Family myths and stories about the trials and tribulations of older generations have, for centuries, effectively instilled particular morals and beliefs in younger generations. The stories (whether fact or myth) we share with our children can have a significant impact on their future development, their identity and overall wellbeing. Steve and Karina, therefore chose to speak positively about the future while addressing the harsh realities of particular episodes in their lives. Steve, for instance, spoke about his step-father's addiction to alcohol as a result of being separated from his family and country. However, his step-father transformed his life after returning home where he rediscovered his identity; he is now a major driving force behind Steve's work as an artist, builder and educator. In a similar fashion, Karina spoke about her father's blindness as a source of strength during his fight against the British Government. The presentation of their family members in this way sends a positive message to others who are faced with similar adversity. The past, nevertheless, continues to play out in the minds of its victims; their memories too agonising to forget. Furthermore, compensation does little to make-up for the pain of the past, but does help with the re-development of communities after such tragedy. Steve continues his step-father's fight for recognition of the Maralinga story and its ability to shape the future. Transmitting the truth appeared to be a common goal for both interviewees

Both participants continued to speak briefly about their personal challenges, choosing to speak more about or from the perspective of a close relative or collectively as a community.<sup>51</sup> Karina summarises this point this beautifully:

I am a messenger. I am here to take my cultural responsibilities seriously to continue on South Australia's history and to be the voice for my people as well, for my family and for my own children.<sup>52</sup>

Carrying on the legacy of their ancestors was a comment made by both interviewees, suggesting that the telling of their stories through a collective experience serves more as a voice for the previously voiceless in their communities.<sup>53</sup> The interviewees shared their stories as spokespersons for their communities and leaders in their respected professions, whether that of land management, youth employment or the arts.

However, the power of their stories to facilitate change may have been less effective if they were not united by the same 'spatial loci' or physical space existing outside the context of their stories.<sup>54</sup> While context is extremely important for the development of historical accounts, the physical context or geographical element is fundamental to the creation of Aboriginal stories and myths, and to the development of a collective memory.<sup>55</sup> Karina established connections across the country as a result of her travels as an adolescent and recently as a business woman. Steve's memories, in a similar nature, reflected his work on recent projects, which filled the space of the interview location. Steve's artwork has been instrumental, as previously mentioned in bringing awareness to local and international communities with similar nuclear pasts. While I was fortunate enough to be given access to their experiences, I must also consider what may have been left out of their accounts as a result of our cultural differences.

The oral histories recorded for this project will be archived at the State Library of South Australia but made accessible through their online site. The recordings will also be used as a teaching resource for all those interested in sharing the Maralinga story with their students.

## Oral history as an educational resource

There are many opportunities in the Australian Curriculum to explore the Maralinga story. The interviews, could (with the interviewees' permission) form the basis of a school project or production or simply guide classroom discussion about the topic. However these histories are incorporated into the curriculum, students should understand the importance of studying oral histories, as 'the point of studying history is to learn from the past with a view to building a better future'.<sup>56</sup> The timeless nature of oral histories also allows previously suppressed stories to reach more listeners in the present day. Oral histories, therefore, are an excellent resource, giving students access to perspectives which might otherwise be difficult to obtain. For example, there are few written accounts about what occurred at Maralinga from an Anangu perspective, and there even less about its on-going effects on current generations and descendants of the Anangu community involved. Furthermore, acquiring printed copies of these accounts, enough for a whole class, can be both timely and costly, considering the resource budget of most schools. The audio-visual format of oral histories not only makes them more accessible, but more engaging for twenty-first century learners.

In their daily lives, they [students] are far more used to visual and aural communication;

too many of them perceive print mainly as an arcane material used by educators to make their lives more difficult.<sup>57</sup>

Print resources, nevertheless are extremely useful for developing students' understanding, interpretation and application of historical information.<sup>58</sup> Printed material should be used together with oral histories so as to enhance students' understanding of the topic and alleviate any concerns they may have about working with the former medium.<sup>59</sup> This dual approach with the inclusion of a third element, digital technologies will support students' in completing the various stages of their own oral history project.

The processes involved, such as background research, conducting and transcribing or paraphrasing the interview, cross-referencing the data with other sources, analysing and presenting the findings in a final report can be challenging, although facilitated by scaffolding from the classroom teacher. Students, should be guided through this process and provided examples of what is expected at each stage of the project.<sup>60</sup> Throughout this exercise, students develop important interpretative and analytical skills significant to the study of any topic across a range of learning areas. Students are also made accountable for their own interpretations of the accounts they co-construct with their interviewees. This joint venture can be rewarding for students, knowing that they took part in creating history. Nevertheless, the potential for oral histories to transform the way students learn about the past is yet to be fully realised. Many high-school graduates (myself included), will struggle to recall a time where they felt responsible for the historical events they encountered in the classroom. As a student, I felt disconnected from my history studies, viewing myself, no more than an observer of the history-making process. I refuse to accept this position of students, as passive receivers of history. Instead, I support the use of oral histories, re-positioning students as active agents, capable of establishing their own connections between the historical point and present-day issues and events.

## Conclusion

This oral history project has given me the opportunity to speak with some of the most influential members of our community. After all the emails, phone calls and car trips between events, I finally secured two very important history recordings which I endeavour to share with my students and colleagues in the very near future. Karina and Steve have, in many ways, contributed to the fight for a cleaner and more democratic future for Australians. Their stories have given a voice to all those past and living who struggled to have their voice heard and their claims to sickness and suffering compensated. Their stories will not remain in the archives but be used to educate the next

generation about the Maralinga story, reaffirming the importance and urgency of present and future nuclear and land-based issues concerning those of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent. The next part of my journey will hopefully involve a trip, as suggested by Steve to the site of the bombings and to neighbouring communities who have re-established themselves, although still impacted by sickness and loss of cultural identity. I hope that by sharing their stories I will support this healing process and contribute to the broader Reconciliation process between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Finally, I would like to thank and encourage the on-going publication of Aboriginal oral histories so as to support teachers in providing a more inclusive telling of our nation's past.

## (Endnotes)

- 1 Anangu is a term meaning 'people' and includes the Pitjantjatjara, Yunkunytjatjara, and Antikirinya language groups.
- 2 Heather Goodall, 'Colonialism and catastrophe', in Darian-Smith, Kate & Hamilton, Paula (eds), *Memory and history in twentieth century Australia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1994, p. 55.
- 3 Ibid., p. 57.
- 4 Elizabeth Tynan 2016, *Atomic Thunder: The Maralinga Story*, New South Publishing, New South Wales, p. 2.
- 5 Christobel Mattingley 2016, *Maralinga's Long Shadow: Yvonne's Story*, Allen and Unwin, p. 43 & P N Grabosky, 'A toxic legacy: British nuclear weapons testing in Australia', *Australian studies in law, crime and justice series*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 1989, p. 236.
- 6 Elizabeth Tynan 2016, *Atomic Thunder: The Maralinga Story*, New South Publishing, New South Wales, p. 2.
- 7 Ibid., p. 14.
- 8 Steve Harrison interviewed by Mikalea Borg, Adelaide, 26/ 10/ 2016.
- 9 Heather Goodall, 'Colonialism and catastrophe', in Darian-Smith, Kate & Hamilton, Paula (eds), *Memory and history in twentieth century Australia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1994, p. 72.
- 10 Yami Lester, *Yami: The autobiography of Yami Lester*, IAD Press, 1993, p. 182.
- 11 Australian Government 1985, *The Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia*, volume 2, Australian Government Canberra Publishing Service, p. 1.
- 12 Heather Goodall, 'Colonialism and catastrophe', in Darian-Smith, Kate & Hamilton, Paula (eds), *Memory and history in twentieth century Australia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1994, p. 59.
- 13 Christobel Mattingley 2016, *Maralinga's Long Shadow: Yvonne's Story*, Allen and Unwin, p. 132.
- 14 Beth Robertson, *Oral history handbook*, Oral History Association of Australia, 2010, p. 8.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Lennon, J 2000, *I'm the one that knows this country!* Aboriginal



- Studies Press, Canberra; Lester, Y 1993, *Yami: The autobiography of Yami Lester*, IAD Press; Mattingley, C 2016, *Maralinga's Long Shadow: Yvonne's Story*, Allen and Unwin.
- 17 The Arts and Justice seminar was held at Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute on Wednesday 26 October. Artists, community representatives and other members of the community gathered to discuss the role of the arts in achieving a nuclear free future for South Australians, drawing on several accounts of the Maralinga bombings.
  - 18 The Nuclear exhibition was held at Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute from Saturday 17 September to Saturday 12 November in conjunction with the Arts and Justice Seminar. The exhibition featured artwork by members of the Anangu community as a visual unveiling of Maralinga's secret past.
  - 19 Lester, Y 1993, *Yami: The autobiography of Yami Lester*, IAD Press.
  - 20 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2016, *Nagasaki Peace Park unveils monument gifted by Australian Indigenous community and Mayors for Peace*, Australian Government, viewed 27 November 2017, <<http://dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/public-diplomacy/programs-activities/Pages/nagasaki-peace-park.aspx>>.
  - 21 Steve Harrison interviewed by Mikalea Borg, Adelaide, 26/ 10/ 2016.
  - 22 Anna Green, 'Individual remembering and 'collective memory': theoretical presuppositions and contemporary debates', *Oral History*, 2004, vol. 32, no.2, pp. 36-37.
  - 23 Marie Bresson, 'Behind the scenes of the national library of Australia's aboriginal oral history projects and the question of the value of aboriginal testimonies', *Cultures of Commonwealth*, 2007, no. 14, p. 133.
  - 24 Ibid., p. 133.
  - 25 Karina Lester interviewed by Mikalea Borg, Adelaide, 4/ 11/ 2016.
  - 26 Mikalea Borg, *Steve Harrison's sculpture gift for the Nagasaki Peace Park*, photograph taken at Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute on 26 October 2016.
  - 27 Akemi Kikumura, 'Family Life Histories: A Collaborative Venture', in *The Oral History Review*, Vol. 14, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 2.
  - 28 Mikalea Borg, *Steve Harrison's sculpture gift for the Nagasaki Peace Park*, photograph taken at Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute on 26 October 2016.
  - 29 Steve Harrison interviewed by Mikalea Borg, Adelaide, 26/ 10/ 2016.
  - 30 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
  - 31 Ibid., p. 3.
  - 32 Ibid., p. 3.
  - 33 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
  - 34 Mikalea Borg, *Photograph of the 'Whistle-blower', Avon Hudson taken during his service for the Royal Australian Air Force*, photograph taken at Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute on 26 October 2016.
  - 35 Special Broadcasting Service 2016, *Karina Lester weighs-in on SA nuclear dump referendum*, accessed 22/ 1/ 2016, <http://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/the-point-with-stan-grant/article/2016/11/15/karina-lester-weighs-sa-nuclear-dump-referendum>
  - 36 Karina Lester interviewed by Mikalea Borg, Adelaide, 4/ 11/ 2016.
  - 37 P N Grabosky, 'A toxic legacy: British nuclear weapons testing in Australia', *Australian studies in law, crime and justice series*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 1989, pp. 238.
  - 38 Karina Lester interviewed by Mikalea Borg, Adelaide, 4/ 11/ 2016.
  - 39 Heather Goodall, 'Colonialism and catastrophe', In Darian-Smith, Kate & Hamilton, Paula (eds), *Memory and history in twentieth century Australia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1994, p. 55.
  - 40 Karina Lester interviewed by Mikalea Borg, Adelaide, 4/ 11/ 2016.
  - 41 Ibid.
  - 42 Ibid.
  - 43 Personal Narrative Group, 'Truths', 1989, & Luisa Passerini, 'Women's personal narratives: myths, experiences, and emotions', in Personal Narratives Group (Eds) *Interpreting Women's Lives: feminist theory and personal narratives*, pp. 261, 197.
  - 44 Ibid.
  - 45 Paul Behrendt, 'The importance of oral history to Aboriginal society', in *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 16, 1994, p. 2.
  - 46 Christobel Mattingley 2016, *Maralinga's Long Shadow: Yvonne's Story*, Allen and Unwin, p. 132.
  - 47 Ibid.
  - 48 Michael G. Kenny, 'A Place for Memory: The Interface between Individual and Collective History', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1999, p. 426.
  - 49 Ibid.
  - 50 Paul Thompson, 'The power of family myths [John Byng-Hall interviewed by Paul Thompson]', in *The myths we live by*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, p. 220.
  - 51 Anna Green, 'Individual remembering and 'collective memory': theoretical presuppositions and contemporary debates', *Oral History*, vol. 32, no.2, pp. 36-37.
  - 52 Karina Lester interviewed by Mikalea Borg, Adelaide, 4/ 11/ 2016.
  - 53 Ibid.
  - 54 Michael G. Kenny, 'A Place for Memory: The Interface between Individual and Collective History', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1999, p. 421.
  - 55 Ibid.
  - 56 Marie Bresson, 'Behind the scenes of the national library of Australia's aboriginal oral history projects and the question of the value of aboriginal testimonies', *Cultures of Commonwealth*, 2007, no. 14, p. 133.
  - 57 Mary M. Schweitzer, 'Oral History in the Classroom', in *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, vol. 60, no. 4, p. 497.
  - 58 Ibid.
  - 59 Ibid.
  - 60 Ibid., p. 498.

# Following the Trail of ‘Happy Accidents’: the benefits of serendipity in oral history research

Rena Henderson

## Abstract

This article highlights the value of serendipity to oral historians in their research. It shows how such serendipitous occasions and opportunities assisted in the author’s research into her Tasmanian home, a school which had served her rural community for eighty years.

## Introduction

Serendipity is wondrous. Who amongst us cannot fail to remember the joy and excitement of a ‘happy accident’ in the pursuit and practice of history, and oral history in particular? My story here starts twenty years ago with the unplanned discovery of an empty, huge but unloved building, an old school, in the small village of Preston, about twenty kilometres from Ulverstone, in North West Tasmania, which would become our ‘escape to the country’ home. Little did we anticipate then that the drive to discover this building’s history for a new generation of our family would provide the impetus for my Master of Arts thesis and lead on to a PhD candidature. Serendipity played a part in that journey too, and I will argue that oral historians should stay alert for serendipitous opportunities presented and take full advantage of them. My project was to use the history of Preston School as a case study to explore local perceptions of a rural school as an important community asset and trace the ways in which it adapted to changes over time.<sup>1</sup> Schooling in Preston started in 1900 and ended in 1994. During this period it provided education for children from Preston and eventually for children from outlying areas at Lowana, Gunns Plains, Castra and South Preston as very small schools in those places were closed. By the 1990s, enrolments were falling below government thresholds in Preston as well as other areas of Tasmania and economic arguments held sway as decisions were made in the Department of Education in Hobart to close many rural primary schools.<sup>2</sup>

## Preston School

Situated just beyond the village centre of Preston, the building had been a school for eighty years until its closure in 1994, and had undergone many changes over those years, both to the building and to the area served. Also built in 1913 was an adjacent weatherboard three-bedroomed house provided for the principal and his family, and both buildings were set upon two acres of sloping land, surrounded by the farmland owned by the Peebles family who sold the plot in 1912 to the Education Department. The Peebles’ descendants are still operating the farm, continuing the pattern set over the generations of filling important roles in the life and social cohesion of the community. They supported my research and June Peebles provided treasured archives of the school’s Parents and Friends organisation and the Minute Book of the Cricket Club during the 1970s. Through informal conversations and oral history interviews, I learnt about the school working bees, the intertwining of social interactions between parents that centred on the school, the significance of the other community roles played by active head teachers/principals and staff who lived in the community, the sporting activities that joined community and school, and the cultural activities that engaged parents and children and enriched the lives of everyone in this farming district.

We knew the building was not the original one by its architecture, and I discovered at the Ulverstone History Museum that it had been completely burned down in 1947 as a result of a lightning strike during a huge storm. This created a minor issue and meant that there were few official archives for the early decades of the school life because official school journals and Observation Reports from school inspectors up till then had been kept in the school, as were student records and examples of their activities. My research for that period depended heavily upon newspaper records, which turned out to be surprisingly comprehensive and detailed. They were particularly interesting in exposing the fiery controversy over the siting of this new central school, aired through the ‘Letters to the Editor’ section, a very public forum. A new government

funded school would amalgamate the growing number of students from the two existing schools at each end of the Preston district, which, though financially supported by the government, had been instituted by two significant local community members who created a situation in which people were forced to take sides in this rural community where cooperation would have been more advantageous.



*Preston Primary School with 1963 addition of front steps/entrance and third classroom. Photograph by author 1996.*

## Oral Histories

It became increasingly obvious that my research should take advantage of access to people who had lived in Preston, attended the school themselves and then sent their own children there. There are people still living locally who were born in the 1930s, remember their grandparents' stories vividly, and their memories of their childhood and parents' lives are 'more easily remembered than what happened yesterday'.<sup>3</sup> They are my history's prime sources, one of the strongest justifications for oral testimony, not just because of their own life experience but also through enduring memories of their ancestors. The majority of the interviews and conversations I had with informants happened because of their strong identification with Preston, the place and the community, and an enduring sense of belonging. Whenever the subject of Preston comes up in my every-day interactions, casual reminiscences, particularly about connections with the school, are recalled, which I record in my ever-present notebook. I see this ready identification as reflecting not only the durability of the social capital embedded in this village community, but also a certain 'nostalgic feeling' for the place and past events.<sup>4</sup>

It was serendipity that the Gunns Plains Hall's 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebrations occurred in September 2015, providing me with an opportunity to harvest memories

of Preston School. Here I was able to informally interview fifteen people of all ages, born as early as 1928 and as recently as 1966, as well as parents of children born in the 1980s. The informants' stories evoked a wide variety of memories relating to their school experiences which were valuable, providing colour to the documentary sources available: mums helping with sewing, misbehaviour on the bus, punishment including the cane, sport and drama activities, playing tricks and having fun, were just a sample. What came through most clearly across every age group was that Preston School had been the focus for attachment to place, because it had provided the site of, or reason for, special days and functions that etched into people's fond memories and helped create a shared communal identity.<sup>5</sup> This was reinforced by the significance of close family ties over generations and through intermarriages.

Oral history interviews were important in examining the process of closing Preston School and its community's response. Here again, serendipity played its part and also illustrated the close ties of the teaching fraternity in North West Tasmania, where talking to one person frequently yielded contact information of one or two more people 'who you really should talk to as well', a fortunate experience shared by many oral historians. My conversations with teachers provided a counterpoint to the students' memories. I also encountered my first refusal owing to the person's sensitivity to the closure experience. However, I was pleased to interview Lee Cole, the final principal of Preston who had to deal with the closure. Later, I met the principal at the time of the Ulverstone Primary School that received the remaining Preston students, who shared his personal records of the closure process, documents detailing the efforts made to save the school, as well as financial incentives from the Education Department to assist in the process.<sup>6</sup>

## The Network Widens

Serendipity of listening on the day combined with curiosity about the origin of the name, Preston, caused me to phone in to ABC Local Radio one Saturday, to ask the contributing expert on Tasmanian place names about it, and this gave rise to several phone contacts with more information and a photograph of one of the original school buildings. Another listener, a retired teacher, arrived on my doorstep at the teacher's house one afternoon suggesting I contact one of his oldest friends about her connection to Preston School, and telling of his regular visits in the 1980s to provide orientation for the grade six students transitioning to high school where he was Assistant Principal.

That friend of his was, for me, the most special result of serendipity. Margaret Pearce, nee Archer, was an

interviewee who is unique in terms of her connection to Preston School. Born in 1937 in Tasmania, she was one of four children of Mr Edward (Ted) Archer and his wife. She lived in the head teacher's house at Preston School, while her father was the Head Teacher from 1944 to 1947, and she attended the school as a pupil from ages seven to 10 years. She returned in 1959 with their son a few months old, as wife of Mr Kevin Pearce who was appointed his first Head Teacher position. Their daughter was born there, and after a few years Margaret too became a teacher in the school, until they moved on at the end of 1966.

Margaret's memories of her adult life there revealed the amount of voluntary work by the teacher's wives living 'on the job' that was taken for granted in those days. For example, she was expected to provide morning tea for the teachers at recess while the pupils played, and to warm the children's milk for Milo in winter. She taught sewing and girls' sport voluntarily, and her children joined in whatever was happening with the pupils.<sup>7</sup> Although Margaret remembers feeling apprehensive at the high standard of cooking efforts by the local women when they helped at school functions, she received a lot of support and formed strong friendship bonds with the neighbouring Peebles family, particularly the only daughter, which remain today.<sup>8</sup> Susan Cole, the wife of the final principal, also remembered how isolated she felt when they moved there, with nowhere to walk her baby safely, and a long way from her friends in Ulverstone and family in Hobart, a five hour drive away. They stayed in the Preston School house for about two years until they decided to buy a house in Ulverstone where they still live.<sup>9</sup> By the 1980s, head teachers were paid various additional allowances to their salary to recompense them for the extra duties, one of which was the emptying of the toilet pan contents regularly, according to Susan's husband, Lee Cole.<sup>10</sup>

One of my conclusions in this study, drawing heavily on the insights offered through the oral history interviews and informal shared memories, was that the inter-dependence between a rural community and its school was relative to the willingness of the principal and his family to get involved in community institutions and to be alert to the impact of school activities on wider community interests. At Preston, this occurred consistently from the first head teacher, Harold Priestley, who began in 1913. He established the Preston School Band which played and raised funds in local halls in the district during the Great War.<sup>11</sup> In the 1970s, the principal provided school dancing lessons for debutante balls in the Gunns Plains Hall; another started an annual fancy dress ball in the 1980s that was popular.<sup>12</sup> Ted Archer was President of the Preston Football Club in 1947 when a new grandstand and memorial gates onto the playing field, honouring a player killed in World War II, were opened. Kevin

Pearce lobbied strongly for a bus to take the increasing number of older students with higher career aspirations to high school in Ulverstone, as well as lobbying the Department for a classroom extension in 1963, which brought the class size down from fifty to thirty-five students spread over six grades.<sup>13</sup>

## Social Capital

My research found that closure of the school represented a severe depletion in the social capital of the Preston community, in part because of the immediate effects of disagreement between differing groups, but more significantly, in the long term, because the social fabric of the community was intimately tied up with the children and particularly the women who were connected to them, whether mothers, aunts or grandmothers. The school as a haven and daytime social meeting place was lost completely and nothing replaced it because it was the last place left in Preston. Over the decades, there had been a general merchant store, a railway station, a bootmaker, two churches and two post offices where newspapers were collected, and gossip exchanged, but all those had gone by the mid-1990s. For the women, future social interactions would depend on planned meetings, rather than 'dropping in' to the school. The children eventually became catalysts for Ulverstone's own social capital formation. The men still had the Community Centre, which was like a working men's club, open just in the evenings serving alcohol, unless a football or cricket match was on.

I discovered that life in a rural community could feel isolated and lonely, especially for young women who 'marry in' as June Peebles did, or come as wives of young principals as Margaret Pearce and Susan Cole did.<sup>14</sup> But, as June Peebles told me:

Once you had children, you had a social life. It was busy at home but the opportunities to be sociable through the school and sport were what made the difference and made for a fuller life.<sup>15</sup>

Neighbourly links with the older generation of farming women helped to settle newer residents, drawing them into group networks with other women. Having been through adjustments themselves, they guided the young ones through what some found intimidating, the social norms of contributions at community functions – the protocol of 'bringing a plate' of home-cooking. In contrast to some rural schools' experiences, newly-trained young teachers were embraced by the Preston community, accommodated in the village and given lifts to Ulverstone for weekends or shopping.<sup>16</sup> As staff numbers grew, positions were often filled by locals who stayed many years, providing stability for pupils and parents as senior staff rotated, and making it easy to regard visiting the school like visiting family.<sup>17</sup>



Parents with hobbies or interests, which included craft, photography, cooking, music, history projects, and sport coaching, were regularly welcomed to assist in the school and they helped provide 'richness and variety of experiences'.<sup>18</sup> This was why some parents realised what would be lost as student numbers fell below the threshold of fifty with little predictable prospect of increase. Lee Cole remembers that one way to ease the situation was to call the process 'annexation' rather than closure, emphasising the benefits of the children going to the bigger school in Ulverstone; another strategy was to use 1994 as a transition year with Preston students bussed to Ulverstone three days a week, leaving only administrative staff in the school.<sup>19</sup> But the resistance from some parents, led by the president of the Preston Parents and Friends Association, was ultimately ineffectual in the political climate of the day, when many other small schools were closing throughout Tasmania.<sup>20</sup>

There were some issues that I experienced while undertaking my research. Perhaps the most important of these relatively minor things was how far to explore, discuss and expose the allusions I received concerning both the use of marihuana by some parents and its impact on the children's performance, and the incidence of domestic violence on women, which made the school a 'haven' for some. My decision not to act on these matters came from my motive for the work in the first place, which was to tell the story of my grandchildren's home and community for their future reference. I expect to live here in Preston 'till death do us part' and felt strongly that mine was a work of history not sociology, so expansion into these issues was not necessary to the integrity of the finished work.

## Conclusion

Now I have embarked on the next stage of historical research into the Preston district, expanding my interest in how rural communities adapted to change in the twentieth century and how farming families managed succession planning. I shall be looking out for more of those serendipitous connections that make history and, particularly, oral history so engrossing and fulfilling.

## (Endnotes)

- 1 Rena Henderson, 'Life and Death of a Rural School: The Case of Preston Primary School, Tasmania', unpublished Master of Arts thesis, University of New England, 2016.
- 2 Others in the North-west included Sisters Creek and Preolenna; in the South, Colebrook, Ellendale, Hamilton, Judbury and Rossarden were closed in this period, as noted by Daniel Smee, 'The impacts of school closures on rural communities in

Tasmania', unpublished Grad. Dip. Environment Studies (Honours) thesis, University of Tasmania, 1993, p. 3.

- 3 Amby 'Tas' Johnson, born 1933, pers. comm. face-to face, 1 May 2017.
- 4 Mary Ann Villareal, 'Finding our place', *Oral History Review*, vol. 33, iss. 2, Summer-Autumn 2006, pp. 47, 51.
- 5 *Ibid.* Villareal collected oral testimonies as an avenue to document cultural events centred on shared spaces. She showed that the idea of 'place' is a marker when communities die out or move on, which resonated with my interviewees' memories of the School, no longer there.
- 6 Unfortunately, Mr Brian Robertson and I met too late to incorporate this information fully into my work, due to his unavailability. I will use this in my PhD dissertation.
- 7 Margaret Pearce, interview by Rena Henderson, Launceston, 27 September 2015, recording and transcript held by author.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Susan Cole, wife of Lee Cole, Principal of Preston School 1984-94, interview by Rena Henderson, Ulverstone, 9 December 2015, recording and transcript held by author.
- 10 Lee Cole, interview by Rena Henderson, Ulverstone, 9 December 2015, recording and transcript held by author.
- 11 *North Western Advocate*, 3 May 1916.
- 12 Brenda Dobson, student 1971 – 1976, interviewed by Rena Henderson, 12 September 2015, recording and transcript held by author; June Peebles, pers. comm. face-to-face, 8 January 2016.
- 13 Margaret Pearce, interview with Rena Henderson, *op.cit.*
- 14 June Peebles, pers. comm. 8 January 2016, Susan Cole, pers. comm., 9 December 2015, and Margaret Pearce, interview by Rena Henderson.
- 15 June Peebles, pers. comm., 8 January 2016.
- 16 Margaret Pearce, interview by Rena Henderson, *op.cit.*
- 17 For example, Winston Robinson was groundsman from 1984 to 1994, Kathy Jones was Administrative Assistant for nine years, following Jenny Green who had held that position for eleven years.
- 18 Libby Prescott, pers. comm., 17 January 2016; Department of Education, *Report of the Committee*

*on the Educational Needs of Rural Areas*, Hobart, 1971; evidence from newsletters and oral history interviews.

- 19 Lee Cole, interview with Rena Henderson *op.cit.*
- 20 Others in the North-west included Sisters Creek and Preolenna; in the South, Colebrook, Ellendale, Hamilton, Judbury and Rossarden were closed in this period, as noted by Daniel Smee, 'The impacts of school closures on rural communities in Tasmania', unpublished Grad. Dip. Environment Studies (Honours) thesis, University of Tasmania, 1993, p. 3.

# Reliving the memories: World War 1 Remembered

Jane Britten, Joan Ruthven and Libby Watters

## Abstract

Woollahra Libraries was successful in obtaining a grant through the ANZAC Centenary National Program<sup>1</sup> for five oral history interviews to be held with family members of those who took part in World War 1 and who had a connection with the Woollahra area. This paper explores the five interviews together with the implementation of a new customised digital asset management system used to load the oral histories for public access and allow harvesting of these records by the National Library's TROVE system.

## Introduction

Woollahra Libraries has collected oral histories for the past 20 years, and have over 100 histories stored primarily in tape format. The Woollahra Libraries' recordings were not only not digitised, but were not catalogued; rather they were housed in a shoe box type of arrangement in the Local History compactus where library staff assistance was required to retrieve the item. As a result, they hardly saw the light of day. In acknowledgement that the day of the tape recorder has passed, and that community expectation is for information to be available 24 hours a day through the Internet, it was decided that a new digital asset management system was needed.

To this background was ushered in the World War 1 Oral History project, *Reliving the Memories*. The project was part of an initiative by Woollahra Libraries' Local History program to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of World War 1. The commemoration included the development of a website, *World War 1 Remembered*, which is dedicated to local champions who volunteered to serve in a war far from home and to those who remained offering their support from the home front. As well as the five oral histories, the website contains digitised images, ephemera and documents unique to the Local History collection and a *Share your Stories* section where the public was able to add their stories along with some treasured photographs or documents from this time. The *World War 1 Remembered* website was launched at a Mayoral

reception to commemorate the centenary of World War 1 in March 2015. Through the ANZAC Centenary National Program, the Australian government supported a number of initiatives and Woollahra Libraries submitted a grant application for five oral history interviews to be held with family members of those who took part in World War 1 and who had a connection with the Woollahra area. The aim of the interviews was to explore and capture the family's memories of these soldiers.

The submission was successful, and Woollahra Council contributed dollar for dollar to the Grant money received to employ a professional oral history interviewer, Frank Heimans from Cinetel Productions - film, video and oral history producers – who had been commissioned for oral history interviews previously by Woollahra Council. A brief was prepared for the oral history interviewer which included a request for both transcript as well as a CD version of the interviews and a conditions of use form for the participants to complete. The next step was to track down participants.

Local history staff checked books and the Internet for possible names, and visited local RSLs to look through their archives and advertised in the local newspaper. In addition, the professional oral historian used his own sources. This led to the identification of five World War 1 veterans who had a link to the Woollahra Government area. For each interview Local History staff discussed the questions to be asked with the oral historian.

The questions for each of the five oral histories were tailored to each interviewee, however common themes included memories as a child/adult, the subject's employment before and after the war, intellectual pursuits, the subject's recall of the war, areas of the war the subject did not speak about, return from war and whether the war had affected the health of the subject.

The following section provides background of the five subjects selected for the Oral History project, together with excerpts from the oral history interviews which explored the family member's memories of these soldiers and consequent investigations into their family tree. The full interviews are available on the Woollahra Library Local History website.

## Five oral histories about World War 1 veterans

### Lieutenant George Burrows MC and Bar, 31st Battalion AIF2



Lieutenant George Burrows, [https://www.google.com.au/search?q=lieutenant+george+burrows+images&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=w3vRZA5aKKg17M%253A%252CmBdP4IrYiSjVBM%252C\\_&usg=\\_\\_HwkbLE2G8LCZOrlXvyRG1JfeVX8%3D&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjP7JqrlYbYAhWmlpQKHZQpAWYQ9QEIMDAD#imgrc=tNKFdJTgBYuhzM](https://www.google.com.au/search?q=lieutenant+george+burrows+images&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=w3vRZA5aKKg17M%253A%252CmBdP4IrYiSjVBM%252C_&usg=__HwkbLE2G8LCZOrlXvyRG1JfeVX8%3D&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjP7JqrlYbYAhWmlpQKHZQpAWYQ9QEIMDAD#imgrc=tNKFdJTgBYuhzM):

George Burrows began the war as a 24-year-old freshly-trained engineer and ended it twice-decorated (Military Cross and Bar) for two separate instances of his courage and calm determination under fire.

During his time in active service, Burrows was the first on the scene when the infamous Red Baron was brought down, and he played a pivotal role in the capture of “Baby Bertha”, the Amiens gun, the loss of which had a hugely deflating effect on German morale.<sup>3</sup>

Undeterred by his wartime experiences, Burrows offered his services again in World War 2 and, while rejected for active combat abroad, served out his time training officers.

Three generations of George Burrows’ family recounted their knowledge of his service in WW1

– his daughter Jocelyn Black and grandson Stuart Black recalled their memories of George and great grandson Tom Wilkie-Black spoke about the effect these memories of his Great-Grandfather had on him and the power of the spoken word.

Jocelyn Black:

I was talking to my brother about that [George Burrows’ experience at Gallipoli] and he said that Dad quite often said it was hopeless. They always felt that what they were doing in Gallipoli was hopeless.

Stuart Black:

He [George Burrows] was from that generation ... who didn’t want to tell the world about his achievements. He was happy to let things be said by others, rather than be the one to blow his own trumpet. One of the things we had been chatting about more recently was his connection with the Red Baron which was interesting. His perspective was of never one of complaining about anything that he had experienced particularly, it was still a positive outlook, and this is what happened, and here are some of the facts, and so on. An extraordinarily resilient type of personality I think he had.

Even though he never met his Great-Grandfather, Tom Wilkie-Black was able to provide a child’s perspective:

In speaking with my Dad and Granny and reading about my Great-Grandfather it never seemed like he was immensely affected by the war in a mental sense; it didn’t seem like he had shellshock or anything like that but then for me to go out there [Villers – Bretonneux] and to see literally the ground where he was fighting and to see thousands of Australian graves there it was pretty tough because with one stray bullet here and there I wouldn’t exist. Knowing that he fought on that soil, I felt more connected to him than ever before.<sup>4</sup>

George Burrows settled at Bellevue Hill in the interwar years, and the Black family have been based in Sydney’s eastern suburbs ever since.

### Private Harold Emanuel Collins MSM5

Harold Collins was 22 years of age and living in Bent Street, Paddington with his family when war broke out. He volunteered for active service in September 1914 and was part of the landing at Gallipoli on 25th April 1915. Assigned to the 1st Field Ambulance, Australian



Medical Corps, Harold was a stretcher bearer ferrying the wounded from the trenches down to the beach then onto the hospital ships.<sup>6</sup>

Harold survived Gallipoli and went on to join the Australian Flying Corps. He was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal in 'recognition of valuable services rendered in connexion with the war', finally returning home on 15 December 1919.<sup>7</sup>

The Interview was held with Julie Edwards and Ben Eadie about their father and grandfather respectively. Julie Edwards and Ben Eadie describe - through memories of Harold's storytelling and excerpts from his diary - Harold's experiences during the war, and tell of a man whose optimistic and positive attitude helped him make a successful adjustment to life back home after the war's end. Harold lived to be 100 years old.

Julie recounted a story Harold Collins used to tell about a conversation he had with his mother:

[He said] 'I want to enlist, I want to go to war'. His mother said no you can't and he wouldn't do anything without his mothers' permission. However, Harold was persistent, and I can't imagine my Grandmother saying this: finally she said to him, 'Oh well, go to hell', and Harold Collins [later] said, 'I did' – he was sent to Gallipoli and then to the Somme.<sup>8</sup>

## Major-General William Holmes

Major-General William Holmes, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Holmes\\_\(Australian\\_general\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Holmes_(Australian_general)).

Born and raised at Victoria Barracks, and educated at Paddington Central School, William Holmes was a local lad marked for leadership, which surfaced both in his career in the New South Wales public service, and in his distinguished military record.

Holmes left for active war service in 1914 having been the CEO of the Metropolitan Water Board - and now in the commanding role of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force, despatched at British request to neutralise and occupy German territories in the Pacific.

Holmes's war service continued at Gallipoli and then on to the Western front. Here he would receive what would be his final promotion, to the rank of Major-General.<sup>10</sup>

The interview was held with Richard and Geoffrey Travers, the great-grandsons of General William Holmes. Beyond their family connection, Richard and Geoffrey are well-placed to tell his story, Richard being the author of *Diggers in France*<sup>11</sup> and Geoffrey currently involved in editing an earlier manuscript on Holmes for publication.



*Major-General William Holmes CMG, DSO, VD, Queen's Medal, Cross of St Anne<sup>9</sup>*

Richard Travers talked about his Grandfather's departure for the War:

The Australian, Naval and Military Expedition Force – which is the first force that ever left Australia – that was to conquer German New Guinea basically. Not conquer it, but militarily occupy it. The Force was raised in the showground and it was kind of a family thing – there is General Holmes, there is his son-in-law, our Grandfather, and there is General Holmes' son, Basil Holmes. Basil told the story of not being privy to any inside information – the first thing he knew where they might have been going was when they were outside the [Sydney] Heads and turned left.

General Holmes was killed by an exploding shell while escorting the NSW Premier, William Holman, on a tour of the Belgium battlefields near Hill 63 and was the highest-ranking Australian to die on the Western Front. Basil was wounded twice, he was once wounded while going for a swim and shrapnel hit him in the head and later again was hit by shrapnel in the head. Basil returned from the War and went on to marry three times – the last time was when he was in his nineties.<sup>12</sup>

## Lieutenant Leonard Keysor VC13



Lieutenant Leonard Keysor c. 1917, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard\\_Keysor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Keysor).

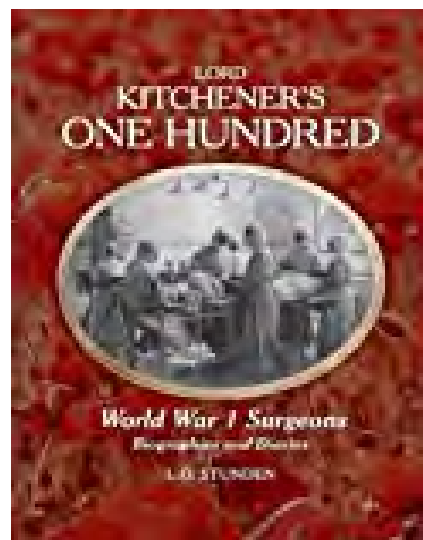
Leonard Keysor was a London-born lad with a spirit of adventure, working in Sydney and living in the eastern suburbs - when war broke out in August 1914. Joining up at Randwick when the call came, Keysor was within the first thousand men to enlist and took part in the famous landing at Gallipoli.

Once immersed in the trench warfare that followed, he showed incredible skill, nerve and endurance in lobbing back live bombs into the enemy lines, for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest award for bravery 'in the face of the enemy'.<sup>14</sup>

The interview was held with Keira Quinn Lockyer about her Great-uncle Leonard. Quinn Lockyer was writing up her family history when she discovered the full extent of her great-uncle's war story. In this interview, Keira draws on memories shared with her by Keysor's wife and daughter as well as her own research into his heroic actions and extraordinary achievements:

Leonard was very athletic and loved cricket at school. In fact, because he was a good cricketer, I think that was part of the reason he survived Gallipoli. Leonard was in a trench [in Gallipoli]

and he observed the fact that these bombs were landing and taking some seconds to actually go off. So being a very good cricketer he started catching these bombs and throwing them back, so that by the time he caught it and threw it back it was ready to explode – everyone was saying 'Wow, he's a great catcher and a good thrower'. Two others joined in; one was killed and the other had his hand blown off. Leonard got injured and they wanted to evacuate him and he said no, because there wasn't anyone who could catch the bombs the way he could and if he left they might lose the whole post so he stayed and continued on for two days without sleep. Awarded the Victoria Cross for this feat of courage, Keysor remarked, 'Everybody deserved the Victoria Cross - I just happened to be noticed.'<sup>15</sup>



## Kitchener's 100<sup>6</sup>

In 1915 Lord Kitchener sent an urgent request to Australia to send 100 doctors to boost the number of medical professionals treating the wounded on the battlefields of World War I. One hundred young men quickly answered the call and volunteered for active service. These doctors became known as 'Kitchener's 100' and six were associated with the Woollahra district.

Interviewee Lina Moffitt became interested in Kitchener's 100 while compiling her family tree. Turning her skills to compiling a list of people who had volunteered for World War I at Rylstone she uncovered one of Kitchener's 100, Dr John Farrar. Lina was inspired to investigate the story of all the 100 doctors and has written a book, '*Kitchener's one hundred World War I Surgeons*'<sup>17</sup> with detailed biographies on each.

In this interview Lina outlines the background of 'Kitchener's 100' and goes into further fascinating

detail about the experiences of the six doctors associated with Woollahra:

The War Office in England realised in early 1915 that a lot of doctors were being killed on the battlefields and also the British public were complaining because there were no GPs left to care for them due to the war effort, so the War Office sent a cable to the department of Defence in Australia which said, “could you urgently send us one hundred doctors?” There were specific criteria: they had to be under 40 – the younger the better – single and willing to sign a 12-month contract and they were offered first class travel on a cruise ship to their destination. The diaries from the doctors indicated that they thought the offer was quite lucrative and exciting. In retrospect one doctor said, ‘we weren’t heroes, what a lot of rubbish, we were just excited about the adventure’.<sup>18</sup>

Lina’s accounts provide a fascinating insight into the life of a doctor in the field, such as standing up to military orders when there were not enough medical supplies to assist any potential wounded, having medical opinions overridden regarding sending soldiers to hospital when there were not enough men left to fight (with the military returning these men to the war arena instead), to caring for returned soldiers with shellshock and mental illness after the war had ended.

## Quest for a new digital asset management system.

The five oral histories were loaded onto the Woollahra Libraries *World War 1 Remembered* commemorative website via a subscription to SoundCloud. SoundCloud is an audio hosting service that allows users to create, post and share sounds on the web as well as having the ability to embed these sounds on an external website. Individuals can access the SoundCloud platform both on computers and via most Android and iPhone devices via a mobile app. The *World War 1 Remembered* website was launched at a Mayoral reception to commemorate the centenary of World War 1 in March 2015.

As well as the launch of the *World War 1 Remembered* project, in 2015 testing also commenced on a new Digital Asset Management system called EMU (electronic museum) from K.E. Software. A business case was presented to Council for the purchase of the EMU digital asset management system for the Woollahra Library local history program.

While digitising assists in the preservation of original interviews, it was now a must for the Library as it was moving to a new location with less capacity to store hard copy. Some of the benefits of the EMU system include:

- It is able to cope with uploading a number of different formats, including archives, film and audio,
- It is cross-searchable, i.e. it is able to return oral histories, photographs and text from the database in a single search,
- It would meet current public expectation that information should be available for access around the clock,
- It would support the proposed changes to the service delivery model for Local History; previous to the introduction of EMU the emphasis of the Local History program was as a store of knowledge with clients as passive recipients, whereas this would enable the community to access information through self-service,
- It is easy to suppress material from home viewing for material with copyright restrictions, and
- It was a tried product - More than 400 institutions use EMU, including the Australian Museum, the Australian War Memorial, the NSW Powerhouse Museum and the British Museum.

The EMU system was adopted by Council and launched in May 2016 with the opening of the new Woollahra Library at Double Bay. The oral history for George Burrows was the test case for uploading to EMU and then, hopefully, to be harvested by Trove.<sup>19</sup> The test case was successful, and uploading has commenced with the remaining oral histories. The Local History webpage for Council has been one of the highest performers on the Council website with over 7000 hits per quarter. It is expected that EMU – renamed the Historical Digital Archive, housing photographs, manuscripts and now oral histories – will attract a similar response.

## (Endnotes)

- 1 Established in 2013, the program was designed to give all Australian access to funds for projects to celebrate the centenary of World War 1, <http://www.anzaccentenary.gov.au/get-involved/anzac-centenary-public-fund>.
- 2 Based on an interview with Jocelyn Black, Stuart Black and Tom Wilkie-Black, interviewed by Frank Heimans at Cremorne NSW, 30 January 2015, recording held by Woollahra Libraries, Remembrance Oral History Project, [http://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/library/local\\_history/world\\_war\\_1\\_remembered/reliving\\_the\\_memories](http://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/library/local_history/world_war_1_remembered/reliving_the_memories).
- 3 The effects of the capture of ‘Big Bertha’ are well recorded, in both the lifting of morale for the allies and the loss of hope for victory for the German troops. According to the Australian War Memorial website <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/amiens>, ‘In just over three hours ... the Allied forces captured 29,144 prisoners, 338 guns, and liberated 116 towns and villages. ... A particular trophy was the capture

- of the Amiens gun by the Australian 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Division.’ General Ludendorff, Chief of Staff to Field-Marshal Von Hindenburg, famously wrote of 8<sup>th</sup> August that it was “the black day of the German army”. See also John Grehan and Martin Mace (eds.), *An ANZAC on the Western Front: The Personal Reflections of an Australian Infantryman from 1915 to 1918*: H.R. Williams, London: Pen & Sword, 2012, for an account of George Burrows’ part in the capture of ‘Big Bertha’.
- 4 Jocelyn Black, Stuart Black and Tom Wilkie-Black interview, *op.cit.*
  - 5 Based on an interview with Julie Edwards and Ben Eadie, interviewed by Frank Heimans at Cremorne NSW, 11 March 2015, recording held by Woollahra Libraries, Remembrance Oral History Project, [http://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/library/local\\_history/world\\_war\\_1\\_remembered/reliving\\_the\\_memories](http://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/library/local_history/world_war_1_remembered/reliving_the_memories).
  - 6 Archive of the Australian War Memorial, <https://www.awm.gov.au/index.php/collection/C395207>.
  - 7 *Ibid.*
  - 8 *Op.cit.*
  - 9 Based on an interview with Richard and Geoffrey Travers, interviewed by Frank Heimans at Cremorne NSW, on 12 March 2015, recording held by Woollahra Libraries, Remembrance Oral History Project, [http://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/library/local\\_history/world\\_war\\_1\\_remembered/reliving\\_the\\_memories](http://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/library/local_history/world_war_1_remembered/reliving_the_memories).
  - 10 B. H. Travers, ‘Holmes, William (1862-1917)’, Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/holmes-william-6717/text11599>, published first in hardcopy 1983.
  - 11 Geoffrey C Travers, *Diggers in France: Australian Soldiers on the Western Front*, ABC Books, Sydney NSW, 2008.
  - 12 Interview with Richard and Geoffrey Travers, *op.cit.*
  - 13 Based on an interview with Keira Quinn Lockyer, interviewed by Frank Heimans at Cremorne NSW, 27 December 2014, recording held by Woollahra Libraries, Remembrance Oral History Project, [http://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/library/local\\_history/world\\_war\\_1\\_remembered/reliving\\_the\\_memories](http://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/library/local_history/world_war_1_remembered/reliving_the_memories).
  - 14 Dudley McCarthy, ‘Keysor, Leonard Maurice (1885-1951)’, Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/keysor-leonard-maurice-6946/text12061>, published first in hardcopy 1983.
  - 15 Keira Quinn Lockyer interview, *op.cit.*
  - 16 Based on an interview with Lina Moffitt, interviewed by Frank Heimans at Orange NSW, 13 February 2015, recording held by Woollahra Libraries, Remembrance Oral History Project, [http://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/library/local\\_history/world\\_war\\_1\\_remembered/reliving\\_the\\_memories](http://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/library/local_history/world_war_1_remembered/reliving_the_memories).
  - 17 Stunden, Lina O. *Lord Kitchener’s one hundred surgeons World War I*, Molong, NSW, Symphony of Peace, 2015.
  - 18 Lina Moffitt interview, *op.cit.*
  - 19 Trove is an Australian online library database aggregator; a free faceted-search engine hosted by the National Library of Australia.



# Can historians capture refugees' voices from the records of their applications for asylum?<sup>1</sup>

Richard Pennell

[This paper has been peer-reviewed]

## Abstract

This article examines how evidence given in refugee appeals tribunals is processed and transformed from an oral to a written form and then summarised and analysed for legal purposes. Its sources are the determinations of tribunals in New Zealand, Australia, Britain and Ireland which cite what refugees have said when they provide the reasoning for their decisions. This takes a summarised form, intended as an evidentiary basis for a legal decision, not to investigate the personal histories of the refugees themselves. Yet the enormous volume of this material available from the tribunal archives in Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Canada and some other European countries is a valuable historical source, with severe limitations on how it should be understood as a record of oral testimony. It is limited by the anonymising of the records, to a greater or lesser degree, and the by nature of the relationship between the refugees and the bureaucracy that collects their statements, but where the voice of refugees breaks through the legal editing of their testimony, it has a powerful resonance. It is important because it is part of the refugees' efforts to make their stories heard.

## Introduction

In describing the famous 'April 7 Case' in Italy, when leaders of the Brigade Rosse anarchist group were

tried for terrorism and murder, Portelli drew attention to the tendentious evidence that accumulated. Quite apart from the judges' bias, he asserted, the process of transferring oral evidence from the secret, inquisitory pre-trial into the documentary evidence that the public accusatory trial relied upon affected more than the outcome of the case. The huge volume of court records might become the erroneous basis for future historians to reconstruct Italian politics in the 1970s: legal truth 'has a tendency to become historical truth as well.'<sup>2</sup>

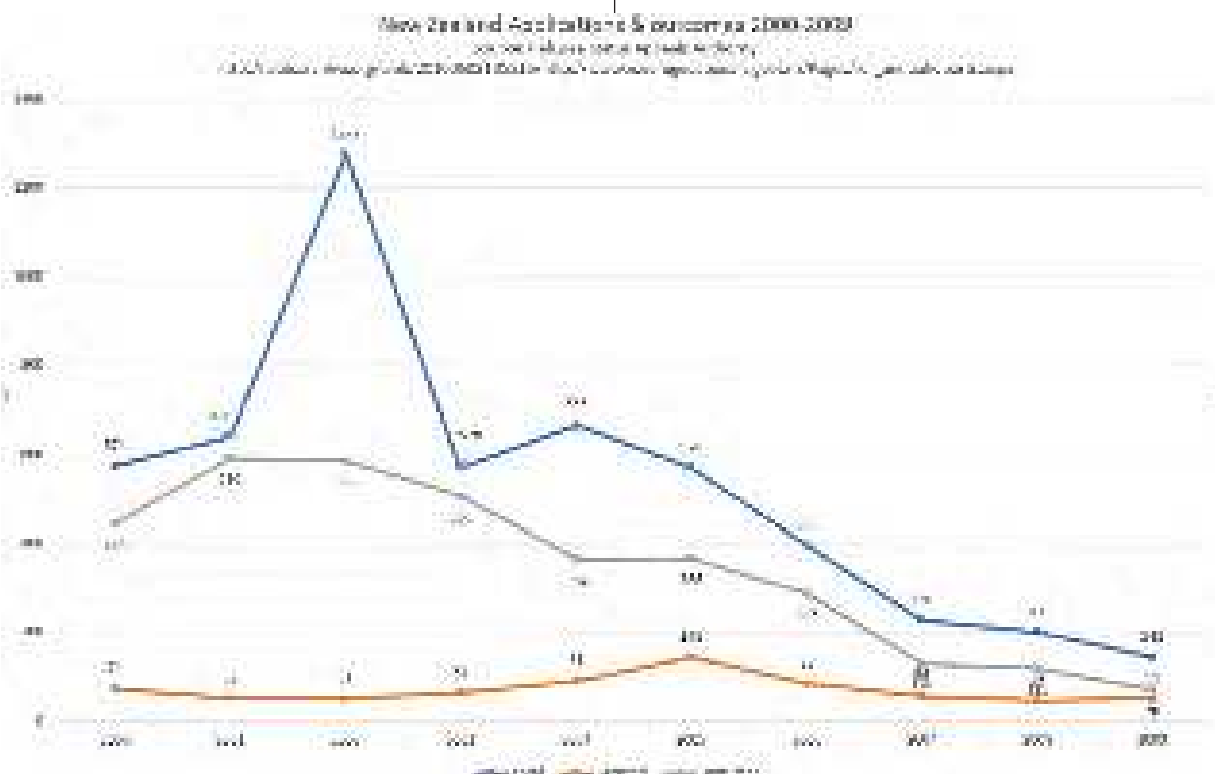
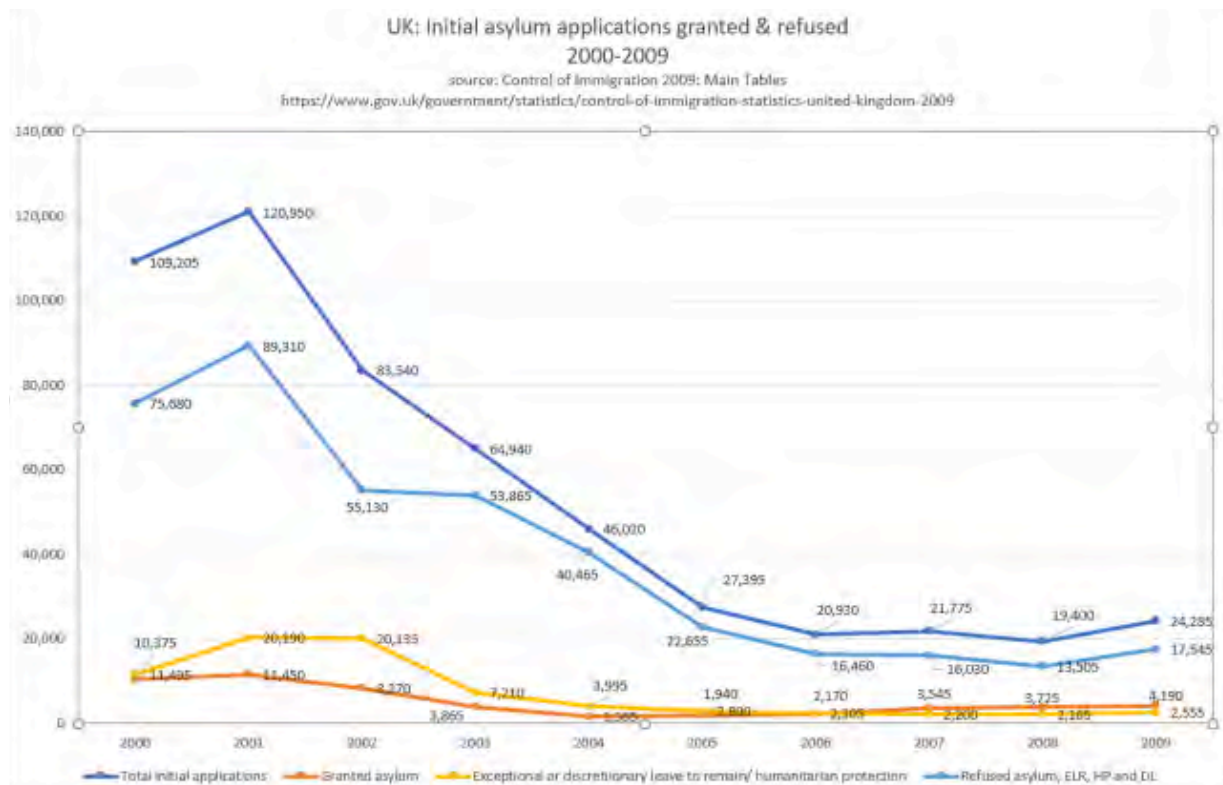
Portelli was describing a single micro-history. The agglomeration of the micro-histories in asylum appeals dwarfs his example. From the early 1990s, British, Australian, Irish and New Zealand refugee tribunals heard many tens of thousands of appeals. In these common-law jurisdictions, each case, whatever the final result, produced a paper trail culminating in a determination recording the facts and reasoning, in a way that other legal codes (such as those of France or Spain) did not. The number of cases differed considerably over time, highest in the early 2000s and declining thereafter, partly as the result of increasingly vigorous government policy and varying notably in terms of arrival in each country (see tables 1-4).

By no means every determination has been published, but the amount of data available electronically is overwhelming. Considerably more data would be available from material assembled at earlier stages

## Determinations of the NZ Refugee Status Appeals Authority 1991-2002

Appeals/Registered	Withdrawn/Out of time	Other Determinations	ANNUAL REPORT TO SO JUNE 2002 Determinations Published
6,787	1,154	52 (Historic)	4,781
Appeals Allowed	Appeals Declined	Determinations Outstanding	
842	3,949	770	

Table 1



of the asylum process, but most jurisdictions do not release it. This article seeks to untangle what the scrappy and partially recorded accounts of the official determinations include. This might seem largely useless to historians of flight (and probably to anyone else apart from those directly involved), but there is so much of it that it calls out to *be* used. Historians have largely stayed away from it, because it is hard to identify relevant material on poorly organised websites,

hard to understand, and the voices of the refugees are hard to hear.

There are (at least) six problems:

### 1. The evidence given by refugees who seek asylum is not freely given.

Asylum testimonies answer what Steedman calls an 'autobiographical injunction', an enforced memory

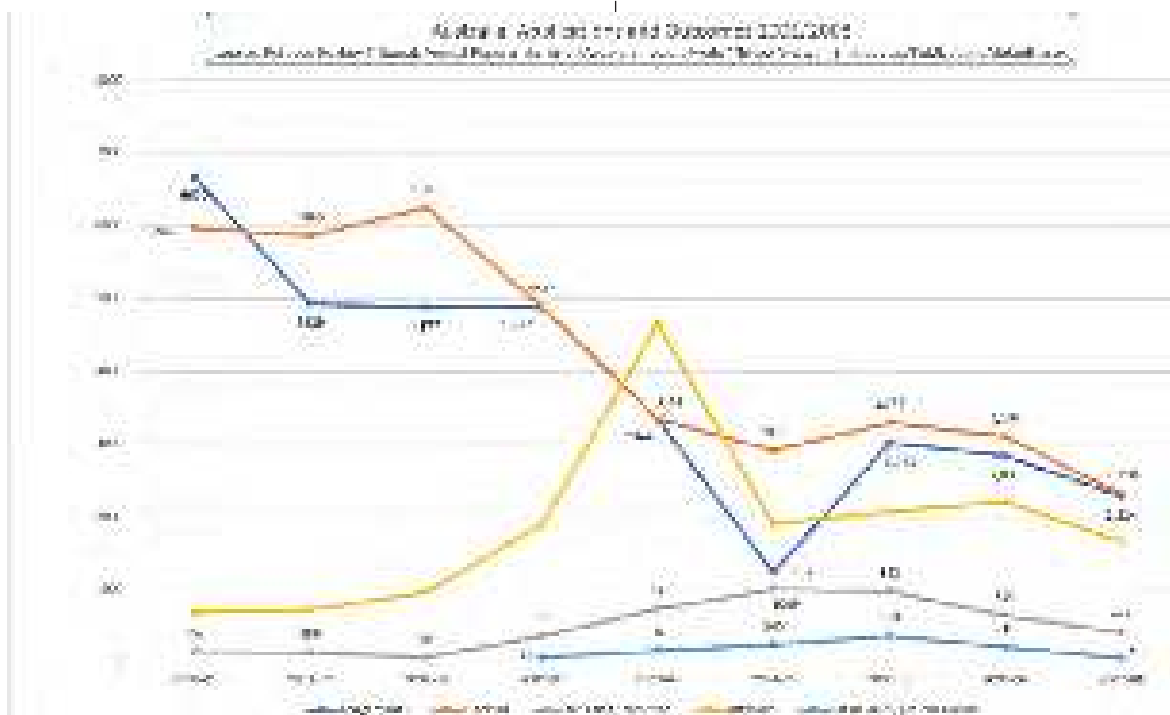


Table 4

of the powerless recounted to the powerful to explain events in a particular way.<sup>3</sup> This is typically a plural undertaking, producing a mass of testimony. Examples are the online records of the Old Bailey in London, or applications for poor relief in eighteenth and nineteenth-century English parishes.<sup>4</sup> Individuals' expressions of their stories became texts that amalgamated what they believed was important with the demands of the court or assessor.

Refugees' stories must satisfy a tribunal, aligning oral with documentary evidence, following the advice of lawyers and shaped by the audience, not the tellers. Refugees *must* construct their stories according to bureaucratic needs.<sup>5</sup> It is hard to imagine how else it could operate in a practical fashion, but it constrains the personal voices of refugees. Marita Eastmond, a Swedish anthropologist, writes that since all stories are constructions or interpretations of the past that the teller generates in 'specific contexts of the present', what a woman in a refugee camp tells another woman to share her burden will differ from what she tells an asylum hearing, where a more sceptical audience assesses it according to different criteria. That would require 'a more strategic presentation of self'.<sup>6</sup> Laura Smith-Khan, from the perspective of an Australian scholar of linguistics, denies the refugee much personal responsibility for the narrative at all:

While asylum-seekers may be held responsible for the final refugee narrative ... [d]ecision-makers control questioning and create the final record.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Transferring oral testimony to a standardised written form changes it fundamentally.

In the April 7 trial, the record moved between textuality and orality. Italian criminal processes begin with an inquisitory pre-trial, before an examining judge, which is private and examines documentary evidence; it is 'based on writing and secrecy'. The public, accusatory, trial that follows centres on 'orality, publicity, debate and cross-examination'. It must validate the documentary evidence, but in recent times the orality of this process has been compromised when witnesses are asked to confirm their earlier statements by reading the pre-trial record into the courtroom. Thus the 'writing and secrecy of the inquisitory model are carried over into the supposedly oral and public courtroom phase'.<sup>8</sup>

A pattern that privileges oral evidence but converts it to written text is not confined to Italy and its Napoleonic legal system or even to Europe. In early twentieth-century Yemen, written evidence was 'converted' to oral material by being read aloud, if possible by its author, and then converted back to documentary form in the court minutes.<sup>9</sup> For a celebrated murder case in early nineteenth-century Tunis, it is possible to observe this process by comparing two entirely independent sets of documentation.<sup>10</sup>

Tribunal systems do the same. The 'Practice Directions' for the British Immigration and Asylum Tribunals clearly indicate the primacy of documentary over oral evidence when a case reaches appeal:

[T]he Upper Tribunal will generally expect to proceed, without any further hearing, to re-

make the decision, where this can be undertaken without having to hear oral evidence.<sup>11</sup>

When the tribunals privilege written information and the oral testimony becomes a written text, the voice of the refugee is lost.

### **3. The voice of a refugee is lost as refugees repeatedly retell or elaborate their stories.**

Oral testimony underpins various stages of the refugee process. In Britain, there is first a 'screening interview,' when an official records basic 'bio-data' and a brief account of why the refugee is claiming asylum. This is taken by hand and cannot be audio-recorded, unlike the longer asylum interview that follows. Now, the refugee must explain why events and conditions at home were so frightening. All refugees (or their lawyers) have the right to request the interview is audio-recorded and receive a copy of the recording, and a transcript, afterwards. The lawyer prepares an asylum statement using these recordings or transcripts, and documents such as medical records, letters, and certificates.<sup>12</sup> In Australia, a refugee applies for asylum by lodging a written application, using prescribed forms, and attends an interview. A refugee who is rejected at this stage (as most are) can then appeal to Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT - a separate Refugee Review Tribunal was abolished in 2015). There, the refugee makes another submission and attends a hearing. This tribunal usually consists of one person, who questions the applicant and makes a decision. Beyond this, refugees have limited grounds to seek a judicial review, but any higher court will rely on the tribunal's determinations, which are issued publicly.<sup>13</sup> In either system, if transcripts or recordings are given to the refugee or legal officers, the account is aggregated and edited from narratives that have been formulated following the advice and demands of outsiders. A historian must rely on these determinations.

### **4. Tribunal systems put a high value on credibility and exclude the voices of individual refugees.**

The refugee tells a story many times, but tribunals often treat the consequent variations as a weakness that undermines the story rather than a distinctive quality that affirms its truth. Documentary historians sometimes mistrust the 'unreliability' of memory and the idea that oral testimony is unfinished and mutable until it is fixed on a page,<sup>14</sup> and legal officers seeking credibility share that scepticism.

In the Australian and British systems, both 'the tribunal' and 'the applicant' are defined by function although they act as singular individuals. Despite its multi-authorship, the applicant's story becomes a single final account, with the expectation that it should be a coherent linear tale.<sup>15</sup> In 1994, the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association in Britain advised its members that:

The history taken needs to be detailed so that a vivid and believable account can be presented to the Home Office which will make the claim credible. The Home Office does have facilities to check facts and so inaccuracies and falsehoods can be uncovered; if this happens this will seriously undermine your client's credibility.<sup>16</sup>

Contradictions or variations between different accounts often lead assessors to doubt their accuracy which provides grounds for tribunals to disbelieve a refugee's story. Many refugees find the struggle to be consistent the hardest part of the hearings.<sup>17</sup>

Forough Ramezankhah examined the case of two young Iranian refugees from very similar backgrounds and circumstances, who told their stories in quite different ways when she interviewed them outside the courtroom. One gave a chronological account, 'purposeful and to the point,' of the events that led to his flight from Iran. The other told a more discursive story beginning with apparently random information about his social and family background, and structured neither logically nor chronologically, before moving on to why he fled. The key events in the two accounts were almost the same, and the two men were even friends, yet their presentational skills were so different that the first conformed to the expectation of the tribunal and the second did not.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, refugees' stories, oral and written, are controlled, constructed and credibilised<sup>19</sup> by a process that divorces them from the accounts they have given. They are then reproduced in the published determinations that are subjected to vigorous editorial function. This is unavoidable as cases rise through the appeals structure.

### **5. The refugees' voices are not recorded in their own language and their behaviour is foreign.**

Any legal system places a barrier of communication between the court and those who appear before it. The most senior lawyers have long recognised its importance. Lord Bingham, once Lord Chief Justice of England (1996-2000), quoted with approval an earlier judge, Lord Justice Scrutton, who remarked in court in 1922, that: 'I have never yet seen a witness who was giving evidence through an interpreter as to whom I could decide whether he was telling the truth or not'.<sup>20</sup>

Bingham linked the obscurities of spoken language to the unspoken (and so unrecorded) bodily language, the general demeanour of the witness, which Bingham defined in the most wide-ranging terms as the 'conduct, manner, bearing, behaviour, delivery, inflexion; in short, anything which characterises his mode of giving evidence but does not appear in a transcript of what he actually said'. It is, he said, so thoroughly misleading that 'the current tendency is (I think) on the whole to distrust the demeanour of a witness as a reliable pointer to his honesty'.<sup>21</sup>



## 6. The refugees are anonymised.

Social scientists commonly anonymise oral accounts when they reproduce them in written text. They strip names, place names, job titles, and organisations from transcripts and subsequent analysis and replace them with pseudonyms, alterations of location and even gender changes, hiding the informants' identity to protect them from harm.<sup>22</sup> A key principle of ethical research outlined in the 'Framework for Research Ethics' of the British Economic and Social Research Council (2015) is that:

Individual research participant and group preferences regarding anonymity should be respected and participant requirements concerning the confidential nature of information and personal data should be respected.<sup>23</sup>

The Oral History Society (also British) takes a different position: anonymising interviews and transcripts effectively is so difficult that it should only be done if it really is necessary and only with a limit on how long identities should be hidden.<sup>24</sup> Mary Stewart, an oral history curator at the British Library, describes how the Library's policy shies away from 'a cast-iron guarantee of anonymity, because there will always be people close to the interviewee who could identify the voice or specific details in the interview'. Her concern is with 'the destiny of life story recordings' and whether a story can harm third parties;<sup>25</sup> it is the reaction of the audience to an informant's account that is crucial. In the British Library that can be exaggerated, but the final destiny of refugees' accounts might be very threatening indeed, putting at risk people fleeing from tyranny, or their families, if their oppressors knew who they were.

In any event, a social scientist or historian who collects testimony and takes out identifying material before writing up the information or depositing it in a repository is still the first user, still has access to all the background information, and still knows the context and the personality of the informant. A subsequent researcher generally does not. Subsequent researchers can only use second-hand material - and a historian who uses the archives of the asylum tribunals is in much the same position.

It is also true that the primary audience for tribunal data is not historians. Lawyers may need to know the reasoning behind a decision and the facts and events that informed it, but names are not so important. Consequently, most determinations are anonymised before they are opened to public access, though the extent varies.

In Australia, the blunt terms of the *Migration Act 1958* are very restrictive: 'The Tribunal must not publish a statement ... which may identify an applicant or any relative or other dependant of an applicant'.<sup>26</sup> Some information is simply excluded,<sup>27</sup> and sometimes

details are blanked out: the summary of a Moroccan case involving domestic violence left out just the sort of evidence that a historian might like to know:

... applicant was born in Morocco. She states that she was educated for [number] years in the city she was born, and in [year] received a qualification. She worked for her husband's company from [year] until [year]. She is a [religion], and states that she separated from her husband in [location and year]. She has a son in Australia. He is an Australian citizen.<sup>28</sup>

New Zealand practice anonymises the appellant and participants but often reveals dates and events:

The appellant and A became interested in the JCO [Justice and Charity Organisation, an Islamist radical organisation] and began attending meetings at a local mosque. The appellant was suffering significant trauma as a result of his father's death and had been prescribed medication. A's mother, who was a friend of the appellant's mother, encouraged the two to attend the mosque to seek solace and support. By October 1995, the appellant and A had begun attending JCO lessons at the mosque ... The appellant and A attended classes of some 20 to 24 students at the mosque, under the tutelage of one B.<sup>29</sup>

British tribunals have discretion to release names. A 2012 Libyan case was labelled 'Anonymity direction not made', and gave the refugee's name in full.<sup>30</sup> This was unusual and perhaps resulted from the recent fall of Qaddafi; generally, determinations leave appellants' names blank. Appellants in important cases, earmarked to be cited as precedents later, are given letter codes, often the appellant's actual initials. In a determination promulgated in 2008, *HS (Terrorist Suspect – Risk) Algeria CG [2008] UKAIT 00048*,<sup>31</sup> the initials HS belonged to one of several Algerians arrested by the police anti-terrorist branch in 2004. The case was widely reported because the charge was conspiracy to defraud to raise funds for the armed rebellion in Algeria. When they were sentenced to two years' imprisonment, *The Daily Telegraph* identified each defendant, so HS's name appeared in full.<sup>32</sup> Not surprisingly, he did not want to return home and his appeal was allowed because of the danger his crime had put him in.

## Is it possible to hear voices from the past and reconstruct the dialogue?

The voices of refugees only survive in textualised versions of their oral testimony. This presents problems that also arise when dealing with the remoter past when recording a voice could only be done by writing it down.<sup>33</sup> Linguistic pragmatists who study language

use 'not as an abstract entity but as a means of communication that is being used by people interacting in specific situations, with specific intentions and goals and within specific contexts',<sup>34</sup> have turned their attention to teasing out the voices of the past.

The work of historical pragmatists to study how language use changes is not relevant here, but their efforts to understand how discourses were constructed certainly is. Their methodology focuses on written texts that purport to reproduce orality, analysing the micro elements in them. What is the function of discourse markers (now, well, then, well then, etc.) and interjections? How do people address each other? How do they speak to each other to obtain particular ends (apologise, issue requests, elicit information)? What are the forms of politeness? The answers can help explain relationships of power.<sup>35</sup> Pragmatists have found court transcripts remarkably useful. Even though they are institutionalised, formulaic and have rigid structures to determine who speaks and in what order, they are unrehearsed and assign great importance to what was said. So, they are recorded carefully enough to capture the verbal patterns of the past.<sup>36</sup> When Sir Walter Raleigh was tried for treason in 1618 - leading to the scaffold - he was berated by a prosecutor who used the form 'thou' to mark Raleigh's degradation.<sup>37</sup> In 1685, when Alice Lisle was arraigned for treason, Lord Chief Justice Jeffrey's speech exemplified his richly deserved reputation as a verbal abuser, a bully and a very partial judge.<sup>38</sup> How things were said in court had a deep historical significance. But have the asylum texts so transformed the orality of the original that it is hard to use the historical pragmatists' toolbox at all? The second part of this article examines some examples of testimony from a number of different jurisdictions to explore in more detail how these issues developed in practice.

## **PART 2 HOW IS ORAL TESTIMONY REPRODUCED?**

Different countries' tribunals reproduce oral and written evidence in different ways. As a generalisation, British determinations tend to reproduce more (though not much) of what the claimants said as direct speech, but give a less complete narrative, while the New Zealand determinations give the most complete narratives but as reported speech. There are two possible reasons for this.

The first is simply practical: the sheer number of cases in the British system. The second is methodological: British appeals hinge on points of law. A failure to deal properly with the facts of a case is frequently the basis of such a challenge, but facts are examined individually, rather than as a whole. The New Zealand system tends to examine the account as a whole, and

make a determination on its overall credibility.

### **1. New Zealand: muffling the refugee's voice**

In 2004 the New Zealand tribunal heard the appeal of an elderly Egyptian lady who, like her husband, had been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood all her adult life. After they married in 1958, the Egyptian authorities persecuted them almost continuously. The tribunal's determination produced a long and detailed account of that persecution. It described her husband's two periods of imprisonment in Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s when he was tortured, how she taught the Quran to children in a mosque, her activism in the women's section of the Muslim Brotherhood and her relationships with other Brotherhood wives. It told of the repression after the assassination of Sadat, their flight to Saudi Arabia in 1982, where her husband was twice assaulted before a fatal car accident in 1994, that she believed was contrived.

She returned to Egypt, but found no peace: the secret police repeatedly arrested and interrogated her very roughly, using bright lights that affected her eyesight, and denied her medicine. Medical evidence validated her claims of torture. Apparently, the authorities thought she would continue her activism and presumed she could provide them with information about the Brotherhood. Some of her children had moved to Australia and New Zealand and her New-Zealand based daughter agreed to care for her, if she was given asylum. This story of half a century of abuse provides detailed insights into political oppression in the Nasserist republic. It is more than 1800 words long, of which only four are direct quotations of her own words. She described her interrogators as using 'very dirty language', and said that when she was deprived of her blood pressure medication she would feel like her head was 'boiling'.<sup>39</sup>

### **2. Australia: moving between orality and textuality**

An Australian determination, in 2000, moved between the applicant's own words, when he wrote them down and reported speech when he spoke them aloud. He was a Palestinian man who had lived in Iraq but fled after the first war over Kuwait when conditions for Palestinians became difficult.<sup>40</sup>

The first section titled 'Information Provided by the Applicant During an Arrival Interview' uses reported speech:

The applicant stated his name, and place and date of birth ... The applicant stated that because he is a Palestinian he has been deprived of his rights such as ownership of property and because he is a Palestinian he has had difficulty finding work. The applicant had with him ... his Palestinian ID Card.

The next section, 'Written Claims and Information

Provided to the Department,' quotes extensively from his own written account, using the first person:

My only form of identification issued to me was a Palestinian identification card, which serves as a proof of identity. I have lived in Iraq all of my life; however I have experienced many forms of persecution and discrimination against me simply because I am a Palestinian ...

The third section relates 'Written Claims Made to the Tribunal', presumably before the final hearing granting asylum. This, too, was quoted in the first person:

I wish to add the following information to my application in order to clarify issues that arose in the decision of the delegate. I am Palestinian and it is not possible for me to get a passport.

A fourth section, 'Claims Made at Tribunal Hearing,' reproduces oral testimony entirely in reported speech, in the third person:

The applicant stated that he would be stopped at checkpoints staffed by Ba'ath Party members, police and army personnel and his ID would be checked ... the last time this happened was a few months before he left Iraq ... He was stopped and asked to produce his ID and when they saw he was Palestinian they asked him to get out of his car and took him to the office at the checkpoint and questioned the applicant. The applicant said he was Palestinian and the officer questioning him got angry and said that Yasser Arafat has signed accords and agreements with the enemies of Iraq such as Israel and Gulf countries. The applicant stated that he was then taken to a police station where he was kept for several days.

There are more than the bare bones of the story in this last section. The hectoring and intimidating police officer is easy to picture and it clearly impressed the tribunal, but it still reported his story in a way that seized control of his voice.

### 3. Ireland: controlling the voice of the refugee

In an irascible exchange in an Irish hearing, involving an Iraqi, lawyers struggled over who would control the applicant's voice. The presiding officer, who wrote in the first person, squabbled with the applicant's counsel, whom he quoted directly, over who asked questions and how the applicant should answer, before listing, as dot points, the applicant's replies, using the third person:

At the outset of the hearing, I outlined to the applicant and his legal advisors how the hearing was to be conducted, in that with the assistance of his barrister he was to explain to me why he was in Ireland and why he should be granted

refugee status. I explained that the presenting officer would then ask a number of questions. I indicated that I would ask questions at any stage of the hearing. I stressed the need to for [sic] him to understand the questions he was asked and for us to understand his answers (and therefore he was to allow time for them to be translated) and that if he needed a break for any reason that it would be provided.

He stated, inter alia:

- That he was Iraqi, from Baghdad.
- That his brother's death certificate was handed in.
- That his father and aunt were refugees in Ireland, though he did not know that when he arrived in the State.

Then came this:

He gave evidence as to an attempt on the life of the son of Sadham [sic] Hussein. I asked when this occurred. Counsel interjected to indicate that she would ask the questions. She then asked, 'In your interview you said this happened in 1998', at which point I intervened to object to counsel asking inappropriate questions and I requested her not to ask leading questions on material matters, not to give introductions to her questions and to keep her questions short (in order to assist their translation). I then asked him some questions in relation to the incident before asking counsel to resume with her questions.<sup>41</sup>

### 4. Britain: Demeanour and answering questions

Paradoxically, despite relying on the written word and the need to transform what was spoken into text, the Irish tribunal paid great attention to *how* the claimant spoke in determining his credibility. The Irish official gave a character assessment:

The applicant in his demeanour came across as a very sincere individual, that he was anxious to explain his difficulties, was helpful to the Tribunal in answering questions, even though some of them were of a difficult nature to him ... The applicant did not attempt to embellish his story. The manner in which he gave his evidence is entirely consistent with his medical report, which is before the Tribunal.<sup>42</sup>

The New Zealand Tribunal dealing was similarly impressed with another refugee's demeanour:

The appellant impressed as an open and sincere witness. His account has been highly consistent. Although the evidence concerning

the appellant's brother has taken time to emerge, the Authority does not consider that this should be held against the appellant given his otherwise highly credible account and demeanour. The Authority therefore accepts his account of events as outlined above.<sup>43</sup>

The Irish tribunal did not pay so much attention to the need to use an interpreter, frequently using a formulaic note that, 'A translator in the Arabic language was in attendance'. But in some of the British cases, interpreters' skills became an important issue. In one case, an appellant objected to how verbal evidence he had given at an early asylum interview was translated and then turned into text. In his own written submission to the tribunal he complained that:

At Paragraph Two of the Refusal letter, the Home Office say that I was a member of the Islamic Brotherhood. I should like to clarify that I did not say that I was a Member of the Islamic Brotherhood, I said that I belonged to the Muslim Brothers. By Muslim Brothers, I meant the Righteous Predecessors. Our ideology is different from the group called Islamic Brotherhood. It has been suggested to me that perhaps there was a confusion in the interpreting. The confusion is between the Arabic Word "Ikhuan" and "Ikhua". Both mean brother or brethren but "Ikhuan" may mean Party, where "Ikhua" does not necessarily mean Muslim Party. I use the Islamic word "Ikhua".<sup>44</sup>

How far demeanour and the way a claimant speaks is a crucial factor was strikingly demonstrated in a case the British tribunal decided in 2008. This involved a woman from Iraq, Mrs NA, whose Palestinian father and Egyptian mother had moved there in the 1950s. She was born in 1972, went to university and got a PhD. In 1982, she joined the Ba'ath Party and rose through its ranks to a medium level (Active 'Udw). She married a higher ranking Iraqi member. In the civil war after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, she lost everything including her husband, who was kidnapped and presumably murdered. In 2006, she fled to Britain and after a long journey through the tribunal and appeal system received asylum in 2008.<sup>45</sup>

The final documentation of her successful asylum hearing reported her case with different levels of exactitude and emphasis. Facts about her background, her educational level, her employment, are baldly stated. Dates that are external to her story, but fix it in time are given precisely ('the 'de-Ba'athification law, legislated on 5th May 2003'; 'the bombings in Samarra on 22nd February 2006'.) Dates of incidents in her own life are less precise ('progress from "sympathiser" in 1989 to "Active Udo" in 1999'). Only the story of her run to safety is precisely dated

('he [her husband] did maintain contact with her in the way she has described until his ambush and kidnap on 1st July 2006'.)

We only hear her voice when a point was greatly in dispute and she was questioned about the contentious aspects of her flight. Even when the documentation records a dialogue the questions are often in direct speech, while her replies are in reported speech. In the final asylum determination, the upper level tribunal quoted a passage from the resume of the lower tribunal:

She was asked next, 'Would you say you were well-known?' (Q34). Her response was to describe the distinction between the two branches within the Party. The branch to which she was recruited was primarily for Arabs and included many Palestinians, but they were not part of, and did not meet with, the Iraqi branch, which comprised of Iraqi nationals like her husband. As a result few members, if any, of the Iraq community knew of her status within the Party but many Palestinians did (Q34-38).<sup>46</sup>

This resume was a paraphrase, and elsewhere the determination reproduced the actual wording of her earlier response ('... very little of the Iraqis know I was a member'). Miss Graham, the Home Office's lawyer (Home Office Presenting Officer, or HOPO) challenged Mrs NA's credibility by alleging she had changed her story from her first 'screening' interview. The final determination also reproduced this wording as direct speech:

Therefore it was not well-known that I was a high ranking member of the Ba'ath Party as all my activities were carried out away from the Iraqi Ba'ath Party members and related only with Palestinian people.

How could she be a 'high ranking member,' Miss Graham asked, if very few Iraqis knew she was a member of the Ba'ath at all? Mrs NA explained there were two sections of the party, one political, where her husband worked, and the other 'national', which she had joined. The HOPO then asked her, 'But the tenor of your evidence in the papers is that you weren't well-known?' She answered, 'I said compared with my husband – he was well-known. I wasn't as well-known as my husband'.<sup>47</sup>

These exchanges capture the to-and-fro between orality and recorded speech. Miss Graham referred to 'the tenor of your evidence in the papers'. Mrs NA responded in terms of what 'I said'. When truth was at stake her own voice was reproduced, and the appeal judges accepted Mrs NA's version.

Miss Graham also interrogated Mrs NA regarding the attack on her temporary residence in Baghdad



in September 2006. Her husband, living in hiding elsewhere, had visited her secretly but afterwards militiamen, apparently Shi'is, had kidnapped him. The determination quoted the first screening interview, in the first person:

On 6th September 2006 an armed group attacked my house during the evening. They tried to break in however I was screaming and asking for help from the neighbours. The neighbours rushed to help me and the militia fled away. The next morning I went to stay at my friend's house in Al Ademia District.

At a second interview (the asylum interview), again in the first person, she gave more context and detail:

'My husband was kidnapped while he was coming to see us in July. In September 2006 they broke the door, entered the garden of the house, the neighbours started shooting in the sky to scare them and then the armed people they escaped and couldn't enter into the internal door'. Asked if it was the neighbours who scared them off she said 'Exactly'.<sup>48</sup>

When the HOPO tried to use the apparent inconsistencies between these accounts to cast doubt on Mrs NA's credibility, the judges simply dismissed it:

We would not expect someone in a frightening situation to be able to remember and repeat word perfect precisely what was said ... bearing in mind she was a lone woman with three small children in an area which was vulnerable to threats, attacks, kidnap etc, we do not find it implausible.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, her confusion over detail may have strengthened her plausibility in the tribunal's eyes, and the judges seemed to respect (almost admire?) her forthrightness. When Miss Graham asked why she had not reported the kidnapping to the authorities, Judge Storey reproduced her acerbic reply: 'Do you really think there is a government that will protect us?' and moved on, with the dry comment that, 'She was not pressed further on the point'.<sup>50</sup> She was resolute in defending her children. In her asylum interview, asked why she did not flee to Syria and Jordan, as others had done, she answered: 'They flee and stay on the border. I cannot do that with my children. They just stay in the street'.<sup>51</sup> Mrs NA's voice, when directly reported, was very clear, even though it was heard with the assistance of an Arabic interpreter. And it was her voice, not the HOPO's, that prevailed when the tribunal allowed the appeal.

## Conclusion

How a refugee tells a story affects the outcome. As Forough Ramezankhah demonstrated with the two Iranians: 'In determining refugee status, the credibility of an asylum seeker is significantly influenced by the way he or she presents the claim'. But can a historian who has no say in how oral depositions are textualised and edited capture the voices of individual asylum seekers at all? Is there historical value in the stories they tell?

Obviously, these accounts have great limitations, because claimants have only a restricted control over their voices and how they are reproduced. Their accounts are not freely given but must conform to the demands of lawyers; they are transferred to a standardised written form that changes it fundamentally; the stories are retold or elaborated within those constraints, and many times; the emphasis on credibility excludes the voices of individuals; what claimants want to say is translated into another language, sometimes very imperfectly; the refugees do not exist as people because they are anonymised. In the light of these limitations, it might be argued that this enormous body of material, containing a huge number of accounts, is only useful to elucidate itself and serves only to throw light on the refugee determination process. Certainly, it does that, but there is already an extensive literature in refugee studies about narratives in asylum adjudication procedure, some of which is discussed above.

Yet although these narratives are truncated, mediated and edited and a historian of flight would surely try to interview asylum seekers and refugees, even the most dedicated would find it hard to interview as many as the tribunals of western legal systems have processed. The huge mass of these aggregated records might become the erroneous basis for future historians to reconstruct the history of refugees, as Portelli feared might happen with his single Italian case in the 1970s, but they can also become a basis to understand the refugee experience and the conditions in their countries that led so many people to flee.

For all their limitations, these record series contain information not easily accessible elsewhere. This is almost a commonplace when modern scholars revisit evidence collected long ago as oral testimony. Re-examining the transcripts of accounts given by Tasmanian convicts to their gaolers in the early nineteenth century allows the often skimpy 'hidden transcripts' of the prisoners to break through the verbose official rendering. A modern reader can glimpse the personal circumstances of the oppressed and degraded prisoner.<sup>52</sup> Poor sampling techniques and

the biases of the interviewers skewed and distorted the testimonies of elderly former slaves, collected by the American Works Progress Administration in the late 1930s; nevertheless, they reveal much about the nature of slavery - slave childhood, the history of families, employment slave culture and music and genealogy.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, a refugee's evidence can provide details of life under Saddam that might otherwise be hard to grasp, or absent from the published literature. Mrs NA's account of the division between national (i.e. Arab) and political (i.e. Iraqi) sections in the Ba'ath party structure is apparently absent from the published literature.<sup>54</sup>

More generally, her account confirms others from the Saddam period and afterwards that the boundaries between individuals from different communities were less distinct than the civil war suggests. Mrs NA grew up in a socially mixed environment; her marriage to an Iraqi was one of many across communal lines at all social levels. Mark Kukis<sup>55</sup> interviewed several Iraqis from mixed marriages who described people helping each other, irrespective of sectarian or national background. They described searching the gaols and morgues of Baghdad looking for lost relatives much as Mrs NA's tours of the city morgues looking for her lost husband.<sup>56</sup> More widely still, the sheer mass of the records of several jurisdictions throws into relief patterns that affected whole countries, and even the region as a whole. Unsuspected themes emerge such as the role of kinship in both resisting and maintaining oppression that many refugees referred to.<sup>57</sup>

Apart from the factual evidence, a greater value in these accounts derives from the difficulty of hearing the refugees' voices at all. Like the Australian convicts, or American slaves though, their voices do break through, telling stories that only they can know, and answering questions that only they *can* answer.<sup>58</sup> Mrs NA's scornful reply to the HOPO 'Do you really think there is a government that will protect us?' was so acerbic that Judge Storey thought it worth quoting directly. Her hard-headed refusal to put her children at risk threw a withering light on the fate of families who did flee to the frontiers. The discourse markers of historical pragmatists help us think about the power relationships that underpin asylum hearings and hear the inflections of a hectoring Iraqi police officer. They explain how and why asylum seekers struggled to survive as they did. When only the most piercing phrases break through the textualisation that outsiders have imposed on the oral evidence, it has a powerful resonance. Tahir Zaman, a British sociologist who interviewed many Iraqi refugees in Syria and Turkey between 2010 and 2013, says that the 'hegemonic or master narratives' are also valuable sources of information because they are part of their tellers' wish to get their story across. He describes his informants' 'gritty determination' to make their stories heard. Asylum seekers do the same

in a tribunal and although their safety depends on following the rules, it does not diminish their stories.<sup>59</sup>

## (Endnotes)

- 1 This article was originally given as a paper at the Oral History Australia Conference, Sydney 2017. I would like to thank Miranda Francis for her great help and many suggestions. The two anonymous reviewers were also most helpful.
- 2 Alessandro Portelli, 'Oral Testimony, the Law and the Making of History: The "April 7" Murder Trial', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 20, 1985, pp. 8–9, 31.
- 3 Carolyn Steedman, 'Enforced Narratives: Stories of Another Self', in Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield (eds), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, Florence, KY: Routledge, 2000, pp. 25–39, reference to p. 30.
- 4 Tim Hitchcock, 'A New History from Below', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 57, 2004, pp. 294–298.
- 5 Donald Galloway, 'Proof and Narrative "Reproducing the Facts" in Refugee Claims', in Hester Lessard, Rebecca Johnson, and Jeremy Webber (eds), *Storied Communities: Narratives of Contact and Arrival in Constituting Political Community*, Vancouver: UBC Press, pp. 308–10; Nienke Doornbos, 'On Being Heard in Asylum Cases: Evidentiary Assessment Through Asylum Interviews', in Gregor Noll (ed), *Proof, Evidentiary Assessment and Credibility in Asylum Procedures*, New York: Martinus Nijhoff, 2005, pp. 103–22; Jan Blommaert, 'Investigating Narrative Inequality: African Asylum Seekers' Stories in Belgium,' *Discourse & Society*, vol. 12, 4, 2001, pp. 413–49.
- 6 Marita Eastmond, 'Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced Migration Research', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 20, 2, 2007, pp. 248–264, reference to p. 250.
- 7 Laura Smith-Khan, 'Telling Stories: Credibility and the Representation of Social Actors in Australian Asylum Appeals', *Discourse and Society*, vol. 28, 5, pp. 512–34, reference to p. 513.
- 8 Portelli, *op.cit.*, p. 8.
- 9 Brinkley Messick, 'Evidence: From Memory to Archive', *Islamic Law and Society*, vol. 9, 2, 2001, pp. 231–150, reference to p. 261.
- 10 C. R. Pennell, 'Words into Texts: Justice, Politics and the Written Record at a Trial in Tunis in 1844', *Islamic Law and Society*, vol. 22, 2015, pp. 375–412.
- 11 United Kingdom. Tribunals Judiciary, *Practice Directions: Immigration and Asylum Chambers of the First Tier Tribunal and the Upper Tribunal* (<https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/revised-pd-3112014.pdf>, accessed 23 July 2017, 2014), para 3.2.
- 12 This account of the process relies on a number of sources: Anthony Good, 'Tales of Suffering: Asylum Narratives in the Refugee Status Determination Process', *West Coast Line*, no. 68, 2001, pp. 78–87; Jane Coker, et al., *Making an Asylum Application: A Best Practice Guide* (London: Immigration Law Practitioners' Association, 2002); I also consulted the web-page

- of a British law firm, Legal Centre, <http://www.legalcentre.org>, accessed 21/01/2016, and the website of a British Human Rights organisation, Right to Remain, 'Asylum Interview', <http://righttoremain.org.uk/toolkit/asylumiv.html>, accessed 2 October 2017. I am grateful to Savitri Taylor of LaTrobe University, Melbourne, for this last reference.
- 13 Smith-Khan, *op.cit.*, p 513.
  - 14 Alistair Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', in Donald A. Ritchie, *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, London: Taylor and Francis, 2010, p. 24.
  - 15 Smith-Khan, *op.cit.*, pp 515, 516, 518.
  - 16 Fiona Lindsley, *Best Practice Guide to the Preparation of Asylum Applications from Arrival to First Substantive Decision*, London: Immigration Law Practitioners' Association, 1994, p. 2.
  - 17 Right to Remain, *op.cit.*
  - 18 Forough Ramezankhah, 'The Tale of Two Men: Testimonial Styles in the Presentation of Asylum Claims', *International Journal of Refugee Law*, vol. 29, 1, 2017, pp. 113–14, 124–128.
  - 19 Credibilised: this is a word that is semi-recognised. It does not appear in most standard dictionaries but is used in writing about media and politics. An example from the annual report of the News Broadcasters' Association of India positions it rather well: 'During the whole programme, the channel had used scary and horrifying clippings from Hollywood films on vampires. The broadcast also included a clipping of a couple living like vampires in real life by drinking the blood of each other by cutting their hand. In short, it was apparent that the object of the programme was to credibilise the existence of vampires and to promote blind faith in occult, vampirism and superstition. The visuals were also disturbing and revolting'. News Broadcasters Association (India), *Ninth Annual Report 2015–2016*, New Delhi: News Broadcasters Association, 2016, p. 80, [http://www.nbnewdelhi.com/assets/uploads/pdf/Annual\\_Report\\_2015-16.pdf](http://www.nbnewdelhi.com/assets/uploads/pdf/Annual_Report_2015-16.pdf), accessed 19 September 2017.
  - 20 Tom Bingham, 'The Judge as Juror: The Judicial Determination of Factual Issues', in *The Business of Judging: Selected Essays and Speeches*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 3–34, reference to p. 11.
  - 21 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
  - 22 Niamh Moore, 'The Politics and Ethics of Naming: Questioning Anonymisation in (Archival) Research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, vol. 15, 4, 2012, pp. 331–32.
  - 23 ESRC Framework for research ethics Updated January 2015, <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/files/funding/guidance-for-applicants/esrc-framework-for-research-ethics-2015/>, accessed 10 September 2017
  - 24 Oral History Society, 'Is Your Oral History Legal and Ethical?' <http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/ethical-and-legal/2/>, accessed 10 September 2017.
  - 25 Mary Stewart, 'Exploring Family Reactions to Life Story Recordings', *Oral History*, vol. 41, 1, 2013, pp. 51–62, reference to pp. 51, 55.
  - 26 Australian *Immigration Act 1958*, S. 431, Identifying information not to be published. Available at [http://www6.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/cth/consol\\_act/ma1958118/s431.html](http://www6.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/cth/consol_act/ma1958118/s431.html), accessed 11 September 2017.
  - 27 '[Details deleted in accordance with s431 of the *Migration Act 1958* as they may identify the Applicant]' is a common formulation.
  - 28 Australian Refugee Review Tribunal, *RRTA 142 Unnamed Applicant* (18 September 2006), 2006.
  - 29 New Zealand Refugee Status Appeals Authority, *Untitled Case*, [2002] RSAA 73251/02 (2002), paras 7–9.
  - 30 United Kingdom Upper Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber), *The Secretary of State for the Home Department Vs Mrs Sumia Ramadan Yahia Halsal*, [2011] Upper Tribunal AA/06087/2011 (2011).
  - 31 United Kingdom Asylum & Immigration Tribunal., *HS (Terrorist Suspect – Risk) Algeria CG [2008] UKAIT 00048* (2008).
  - 32 'Algerian gang's cheque fraud "funded terrorism"' *Daily Telegraph*, London, 25 November 2004 [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1477435/Algerian-gangs-cheque-fraud-funded-terrorism.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1477435/Algerian-gangs-cheque-fraud-funded-terrorism.html), accessed 17 August 2012.
  - 33 Barbara Kryk-Kastovsky, 'Representations of Orality in Early Modern English Trial Records', *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, vol. 1, 2, 2000, pp. 201–230.
  - 34 Andreas H. Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen, *English Historical Pragmatics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp. 1–2.
  - 35 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
  - 36 Kryk-Kastovsky, *op.cit.*, p. 202.
  - 37 Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2013, p. 1.
  - 38 Kryk-Kastovsky, *op.cit.*, p. 224.
  - 39 New Zealand Refugee Status Appeals Authority, *Untitled Case*, [2004] RSAA 75167 30 November 2004.
  - 40 Australia Refugee Review Tribunal, *RRTA 349 (21 March 2000): Unnamed Applicant* (2000).
  - 41 Ireland Refugee Appeals Tribunal, *69/1472/07 Unnamed Applicant* (2012), 2.
  - 42 *Ibid.*, pp 17–18.
  - 43 New Zealand Refugee Status Appeals Authority, *Untitled Case*, (2000) RSSA 72173/2000 (2000), p. 7.
  - 44 United Kingdom. Asylum & Immigration Tribunal, Upper Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber), *Unnamed Appellant v Secretary of State for the Home Department 2004 UKIAT HX/56874/2003*, 2004.
  - 45 United Kingdom Asylum & Immigration Tribunal, *NA (Palestinians - Risk) Iraq CG [2008] UKAIT 00046*, 2008, Para 7.
  - 46 *Ibid.*, para. 57.

- 47 *Ibid.*, para. 59.
- 48 *Ibid.*, paras. 75–78.
- 49 *Ibid.*, para. 79.
- 50 *Ibid.*, para. 74.
- 51 *Ibid.*, para. 13.
- 52 Ian Duffield, “‘Stated This Offence’: High-Density Convict Micro-Narratives’, in , Lucy Frost and Hamish Maxwell-Stuart (eds), *Chain Letters: Narrating Convict Lives*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001, pp. 124, 128, 133–35.
- 53 John Blassingame, ‘Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems’, *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 41, 4, 1975, pp. 473–492, especially pp. 488–90.
- 54 Amatzia Baram (who has written extensively about Saddam’s Iraq) told me that he had heard of it anecdotally, but had never found a written mention of it.
- 55 Kukis began reporting on Iraq for *Time Magazine* in late 2006.
- 56 Mark Kukis, *Voices from Iraq*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 54–55, 98–99, 104–5, 153, 191, 194–96.
- 57 N Belkiz and C.R. Pennell, ‘Family Loyalties and Oppression in Morocco & Libya’, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2017), forthcoming.
- 58 Duffield, *op.cit.*, p. 135.
- 59 Tahir Zaman, *Islamic Traditions of Refuge in the Crises of Iraq and Syria*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 2–3, 10.



# ‘Only the ends of your hair don’t hurt’: mothering and memories of touch

Miranda Francis

[This paper has been peer-reviewed]

## Abstract

This article uses interviews from my oral history project on parenting when women recalled aspects of mothering connected with touch. They remembered their experiences of childbirth, the transition to motherhood and parenting as physical labour, as practical care for their children, and as reactions to the demands of their children. These are often described in the literature as emotional calls, but I have examined them as tactile sensations, which is how many of my informants remembered them in the broader context of mothering. I emphasise one interview, with a Straits-Chinese woman who was born in Singapore in 1954 and migrated with her Anglo-Australian husband to Australia in the 1980s. Although she sought to escape the constraints of the extended family network in which she grew up and to parent according to her own ideas she found she could not cut herself off from those of her mother who gave her extensive advice and assistance. By contextualising this interview with the experiences of other informants, the article argues that the largely unexamined history of the sensation of touch elucidates both the experience of motherhood in suburban Melbourne in the 1970-80s and how memories are constructed and understood both by informants and researchers.

## Introduction –what does mothering feel like?

A few years ago, ‘literally’ was one of my daughter’s favourite words. And, like Humpty Dumpty talking to Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, it meant just what she ‘chose it to mean’.<sup>1</sup> Now she discriminates a little more, but still takes great delight in producing it whenever she has the opportunity. My children have been much in my mind over the last three years as I interviewed women about their memories of parenting. I am in the midst of early parenting myself, so my children make their appearances in the most unexpected places. Much as I have been trying to allow my participants to tell their life story in their own way, I have my own questions waiting quietly. As I re-listen

and begin the lengthy process of transcribing and analysing these interviews, an unspoken question has been emerging: ‘What does mothering *feel* like?’ Like my daughter, I mean this in the essential as well as the abstract sense. How are these feelings filtered through thought and language to become historical source material? What is the connection between experience, spoken and then written word?

Touch is one of the most nebulous aspects of history of the senses. Touch is what Constance Classen defines as ‘physical contact’ including ‘sensations of heat, pain, pleasure, and movement’.<sup>2</sup> She has written about the history of touch, especially in Early Modern Europe, and remarks that it, ‘remains unspoken... downplayed or disregarded’.<sup>3</sup> In the humanities over the last few decades, much has been written about the senses and memory.<sup>4</sup> However, the focus, even in oral history, seems to be on senses other than touch.<sup>5</sup>

Paula Hamilton, an oral historian who has worked a great deal with personal memories and the senses, noted in her article, ‘The Proust Effect: Oral History and the Senses’, she noted that her own oral history research had ‘thrown up a lot of material that related to sight, sound and smell’, but she ‘uncovered very little on taste and touch’.<sup>6</sup> This is true, even in oral histories of mothering, where one might expect to find it repeatedly mentioned, which is very surprising.<sup>7</sup> In Hamilton’s more recent study of the sensory environment of domestic servants in the first half of the twentieth century, she reiterated that touch is ‘rarely mentioned in interviews,’ but that when it was mentioned it was ‘central to the memories of servants in the homes where they worked’.<sup>8</sup> She showed how these illusive, but striking, personal touch memories illuminated the power relations between household members.

Touch is important to relationships – particularly in mothering. Elizabeth Harvey reminds us that touch is, ‘the sensory faculty that shapes our social connections; it is primarily through touch that we form and express our bonds with others’.<sup>9</sup> My own research shows that it is central to the remembered experience of mothers who founded and nurtured families in the 1970s-80s.

In this article, I analyse these tactile experiences linked to mothering and how they emerged in the interviews. I argue that paying attention to this under-explored area of touch memories in oral history elucidates both the experience of motherhood in suburban Melbourne and how memories are constructed and understood both by informants and researchers.

## **‘Sound is touch at a distance’**

Sensory scholar David Howes explains, there is a ‘complex web of relationships among the senses’.<sup>10</sup> As we rarely experience the world through one sense alone, perhaps the senses other than touch are simply easier to talk and write about. It may be a question of the inadequacy of language, but perhaps also, one of context and audience. Paul Fussell argues, in the context of warfare, that discussion of tactile sensations is silenced in the face of an ‘unreceptive audience’. He then quotes Louis Simpson: ‘To a foot-soldier, war is almost entirely physical. That is why some men, when they think about war, fall silent. Language seems to falsify physical life and to betray those who experienced it absolutely – the dead’.<sup>11</sup>

An oral history interview in someone’s home is an intimate environment which may sometimes allow tactile sensations, which are particularly difficult to describe, to emerge. Certainly, almost all of the twenty-seven women I have interviewed recalled clear memories of touch. Mothers spoke vividly about their experiences of childbirth, the transition to motherhood and parenting as physical memories: hands chapped from washing nappies, the pleasures and struggles of breastfeeding, the bone-deep exhaustion that comes with ongoing sleep deprivation, physical reactions to the cry of a young baby, the specific kinaesthetic memory of walking and joggling a screaming baby, the sensuality of a young child’s skin, as well as the pain of watching a young baby with severe eczema scratch their skin until it bleeds.

The role of maternal touch in infant development has been studied intensely by developmental psychologists such as Mary Ainsworth, John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott, during the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> However the focus of these studies has been largely the effect of maternal attachment or deprivation on the infant. In contrast, I am primarily concerned with the ways mothers remember and talk about touch and the effect of touch (or the absence of touch) on the mother.

Developmental child psychologist, Anne Fernald first noticed a connection between sound and touch when working in an obstetrics unit at the Max Planck Institute in Munich, Germany. She observed that when mothers put their babies down and no longer had physical contact with them, they began to use a sing-sing voice to remain in touch with their baby. She noticed the

rise and fall of these melodies is remarkably similar across languages and suggested that this ‘motherese’ is a powerful way for mothers to reach their children and to provide comfort by just using voice. On American radio, Anne Fernald explained that, in this context, ‘sound is more like touch – sound is actually touch at a distance’.<sup>13</sup>

The tactile world is so often about skin. As one interviewee explained evocatively:

When I think about mothering in the early days it is his skin that keeps coming up, his soft, vulnerable, pure, sweet-smelling skin. So soft and delicate, so dear and tender to gently nuzzle. Yes, skin brings up tenderness and bonding. And skin brings up his sweet baby breath. All so fragile, so delicate and vulnerable and so so precious. So the smell of his skin, the smell of his breath — all pure heaven.<sup>14</sup>

There is an intimate connection here between touch and smell. The softness and scent of the skin is not just about the sensation of touch but also about the vulnerability of the young baby, and the intimacy of the mother-child bond. The softness of the skin invites a particular maternal response – ‘tender to gently nuzzle’. I am intrigued that touch memories such as these have been most noticeable when interviewees talk about memories of their own mothers or mothering their own children. Maybe an intimate oral history environment and an interview focussed on family provide an opportunity for interviewees to evoke sense memories as words. Perhaps, as suggested by Fernald, there is also a particular connection between sound and touch.

The interviews used in this article are drawn from a larger research project examining the ways older women remember and talk about their experiences of mothering in suburban Melbourne in the second half of the twentieth century. The twenty-seven interviewees were primarily self-selecting and recruited through advertising, personal networks and snowball sampling. They were aged between sixty and eighty-five years of age at the time of interview (born between 1933 and 1955). These women were becoming mothers and bringing up young children between the late 1950s and early 1990s — with the majority clustered in the late 1960s and 1970s. I conducted the interviews in the women’s homes and usually over two separate interview sessions. The interviews tended to be long and deep, varying in length between two to five hours. I adopted a life history approach allowing the women to direct their interviews, although they all knew my research and this, of course, influenced the way they shaped their life stories. I did not specifically ask interviewees about sensory experiences but, after the first few interviews, I became more conscious of the interviewee’s sensory landscape and this would have

influenced the way I listened and followed up these topics.

## Introducing Ann

Ann was my second interviewee and, like several other participants, she told her parenting story through her relationship with her children's father. Six months prior to the interview, Ann had separated from her husband of thirty-two years. The divorce was clearly much in her mind as she reflected on her married life and the early years of parenting her two daughters: the first born in 1986 and the second in 1989. A sixty-year-old Straits-Chinese woman, Ann was born in 1954, grew up in Singapore and migrated to Australia in 1984 after marrying an Australian school teacher she had met at an evangelical student Christian meeting. Ann moved to Australia largely to escape the complications of living as part of an extended family network. She saw extended family influences as constraining and was wished to parent according to her own ideas. Frequently, she spoke of the freedom of being able to say to her mother: 'we are in Australia now'.<sup>15</sup>

Unexpectedly, later in the interview, Ann revealed that she suffered for most of her adult life from a serious mental illness that had only recently been diagnosed. She is now being treated and feels better than she has done for many years but largely attributes her marriage breakdown to her illness. Ann's descriptions of her mental illness also involved powerful touch memories:

I felt and I lived at both ends. I always think about Black Saturday, when I think that's what my head was like, so, you know, within fifteen seconds, everybody around me is normal, and they have no clue, but my *whole head's* on fire.

16

Ann's story was a personal story and her adult children, while clearly important to her, were on the sidelines as she struggled to regain her health and to make sense of her own life. Much of her interview focussed on her own difficult childhood in Singapore and the ways this influenced her own mothering in another time and place.

## Sensory memories and childhood

Childhood memories seem to be particularly connected to smell. The Dutch psychologist Douwe Draaisma, in his study of autobiographical memory, explains this connection: 'smells evoke not only incidents or scenes, but also the mood associated with them at the time, indeed the emotional colour of part of one's youth'.<sup>17</sup> But, more than smell and sound, it is touch which seems to figure more prominently in many of

my interviewee's memories of their mothers and caring for their own children. Women have spoken about mothering in terms of physical touch. In some ways, this is not surprising as parenting, at least in the first few years, is an intense physical experience. Babies force parents to engage with the material world: they need to be held, rocked and fed. So, it was probably not surprising that touch figured so prominently. But, I was intrigued to discover that these mothering memories were so often remembered, retold and *performed* in terms of touch.

The senses clearly play a complex role in relation to memories but, as Paula Hamilton notes, one that is still not fully understood by psychologists or scientists.<sup>18</sup> Discussions about the psychology of memory and the senses focus on the senses as triggers of memories. Smell is often identified as the primary trigger for memories. And, it seems impossible to talk about memory and smell without referring to Marcel Proust and his *petites madeleines*. So much so that the ability of smells to bring back early memories is known as the 'Proust phenomenon'. The sensation as described by Proust was really about taste. Of course, taste and smell are intricately connected. But, it was only when Proust's narrator tasted the madeleines that the illusive memory began to appear. And, even then, it was simply a strange feeling. The experiment was repeated ten times before the visual memory returned:

And, once I had recognized the taste of the crumb of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-flowers which my aunt used to give me...so in that moment all the flowers in our garden... and the whole of Combray and of its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.<sup>19</sup>

As I interviewed, I wondered whether the 'Proust phenomenon' also has something to do with touch as well as taste. Were the texture of the madeleine and the physical sensation of picking up the crumbling sponge cakes and dipping them into the lime-blossom tea also important? How is the sense of touch connected with memories and specifically with memories of parenting?

The memories of touch recalled by interviewees were not being triggered by a particular physical sensation, but the memory of the sensory perception was triggered by the questioning. Valerie Yow discusses the importance of this connection between physical sensation and memory: 'physical sensation coupled with the event's meaning reinforces memory'.<sup>20</sup>

When I asked Ann about her memories of childhood, her previously fluent conversation halted. Her speech slowed down considerably and she hesitated before recalling what seems to have been a fleeting moment of intimacy with her mother when Ann was a young girl, probably around six years old:

One of the happier memories was one evening. It was dusk — six, seven pm probably — in Singapore. I cannot remember what had happened, (pause) all I remember was my mother pulling me towards her (pause) and (long pause) and *loving* me (tears in her eyes). Mmm. So, I remember that. And, you know in my head I think I was six years old but I don't know. (pause) I didn't have a good upbringing.<sup>21</sup>

As with many aspects of oral history, it is difficult to convey the significance of this brief moment in a lengthy interview. The loving that Ann remembers is expressed in the physical pulling towards her. It is one short sentence. It would not be picked up with a word search for 'hug', 'cuddle' or 'kiss'. It is unlikely to even be noticed with complicated coding with qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo. It is not even really the word, 'loving'. It is the momentary pause, the short break in Ann's voice, the slight slowing down in her otherwise very rapid speech and the tears in her eyes.

Even looking at the spectrogram below, the pause (in bold) before Ann says *loving me*, is almost

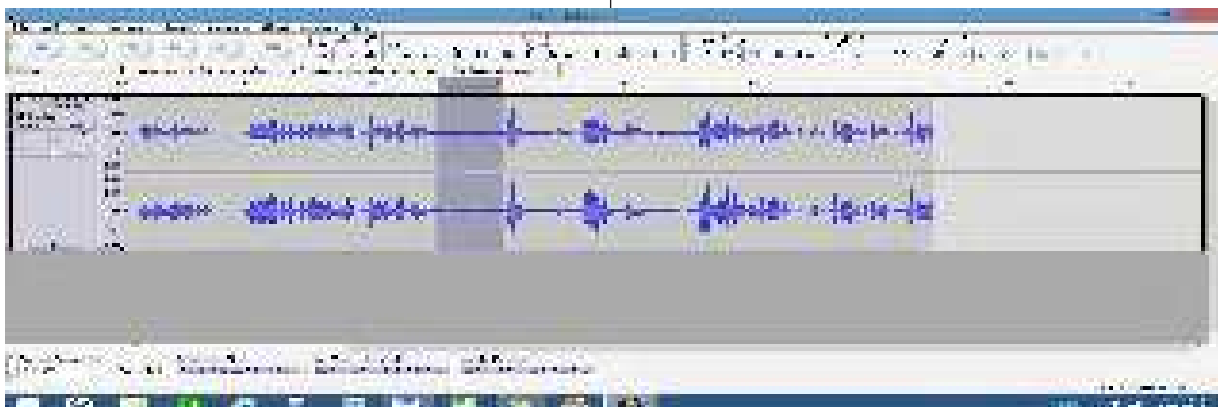
sigh, an upwelling of an indescribable emotion which is captured on audio recording but then reduced (quite literally) to one written word in a transcription — 'pause'.

## Mother and daughter — touch remembered

Ann recalled other sensory memories of her mother, but these were primarily associated with corporal punishment and a sense of shame: being caned or being made to kneel on cockle shells in front of the Chinese altar. In contrast, Ann's memories of caring for her two daughters in Australia were full of physical intimacy. And, it is this comparison between the lack of intimacy from her mother and her own attempts to be physically warm



Photograph of Ann's mother in the year Ann was born in 1954. Ann has no photographs with her mother.



Screenshot of Audacity spectrogram from Ann's interview

unnoticeable. Yet, this memory of touch, this physical memory of being *loved*, was clearly important to Ann. It is a moment that stayed in my own memory as an interviewer even after many subsequent interviews. It is a moment of quiet that stood out among the background of loud construction noise outside Ann's overwarm inner city apartment. A pause which carried a physical momentum that changed the emphasis of what went before and what was to come. But how is this touch memory significant? For Ann, it is a moment of feeling *loved* in a materially and emotionally deprived childhood. As Constance Classen explains, 'a world of meaning can lie within the simplest gesture, a kiss, or the touch of a hand'.<sup>22</sup> For Ann, the gesture and the way she felt about it, is almost indescribable. It is the equivalence of a colon - a pause and a change in the momentum of speech. A pause which is almost a

with her children which is so striking in her interview. It is through memories of touch that Ann seems to be making sense of her method of child-rearing and distinguishing it from that of her mother in 1950s Singapore where physical punishment of children was generally accepted.<sup>23</sup> She explained that she never caned her own children, but had completely different child-rearing ideals:

Yes. My aunty asked my mother, when the girls were very young, she said: 'Ah, does she *cane* them?' And my mother's response was: 'Cane? Even *scold* she doesn't scold them!' Ah, and I thought: 'Okay', you know, I thought: 'Of course I scold them, how can you say I don't scold them', I thought: 'Ah, all right, you know you're right, you know, I don't say things like, you know: 'You're naughty'. And you know, I



probably didn't say much, like: 'You can't do this'. I don't think I *ever* said: 'You can't do this', or: 'You shouldn't do this', it was always a case of: 'Well, if you want to do it, go ahead, you know, but if you get a tummy ache later on, then that's your problem, you know, you might not be very happy then', or something like that.<sup>24</sup>

Other interviewees made similar distinctions between their mother's ways of bringing up children and their own. Not all mothers' memories of touching their children were positive. Another interviewee, who I shall call Monique, recalled a particularly difficult incident with her first daughter when she was a single mother:

Apparently I was so nasty that day, I put her in the pusher, took her back home. I was so exasperated I couldn't have time for myself even in the library, half an hour, *let me choose my books* (pleading voice). And, I got home and I threw her in the bedroom apparently. I literally *threw* her. I remember being very upset and she says she knocked her head on the wall — and she never forgot that.<sup>25</sup>

For Monique, this memory was intimately connected with her memories of her own mother, who was not physically affectionate, but instead beat Monique until her 'bottom bled':

So in a way I replicated what my Mum did to me at least once, which is not very nice. But, I was so. You know when you are *always alone* with a child. No one is there to give you a bit of relief. (long pause) It's no excuse.<sup>26</sup>

## Performing touch memories

Monique continued to use touch to describe her experience of mothering. At the age of forty, she had an unplanned second pregnancy and spoke to me movingly of having a baby that her husband did not want and her deep desire to look after her. This fierce protection was described in terms of touch — 'a kiss, a cuddle and a hug':

She had hardly any hair, and those little ears that stuck out, so people were making fun of her, so I was feeling so devastated, and I was protecting her so much, so this is the time I *need* to give her a lot more love... it was really important for me, to protect her — for a long, long time. To kiss her. We had a thing, 'a kiss, a cuddle, and a hug'. Yes, 'a kiss, a cuddle, and a hug', she said that for years and years and years: 'Mum, a kiss, a cuddle, and a hug'.<sup>27</sup>

When Monique talked about settling her younger daughter by laying her on a 'piece of cheap sheep



Ann and her daughter in house in Clayton in 1990s.

skin', she held her arms out as if holding a baby and gently stroked the air. This is what Paula Hamilton terms the 'performative nature of sensory effects in interview'.<sup>28</sup>

Another interviewee, Irena, the daughter of Estonian refugees, who spent the first few years of her life in refugee camps across Europe, also moved her arms when talking about her mother and daughter. She frequently reached out to me across the table and touched me to emphasise this connection. This in turn helped engrain these moments in my own memory. Irena's family in Australia was small, but whenever she spoke of her mother and daughter she held her arms out as if hugging someone: 'As a refugee you don't have an extended family and I knew there was love and care around me'.<sup>29</sup> This performance of touch might be partly explained by the fact that touch is, as Paterson explains, 'centrally a form of non-verbal communication' and so extremely difficult to express in words. An oral history interview provides the opportunity for these fleeting, yet significant, touch moments.

## 'My mother is a seamstress'

Ann's description of learning to swaddle her first daughter clearly illustrated the performative nature of touch in her interview. Ann spoke in great detail of how her mother, a highly skilled seamstress, taught her how to swaddle her newborn baby like 'coconut rice wrapped in banana leaf':



Figure 4 Example of Ann's mother's embroidery.

Ann: I tell you something wonderful my mother taught me. So, you know initially when we brought the baby home, she put the baby cloth out on the bed, put the baby in the middle, and then she wrapped over right, you know, I'm using my hands to gesture idea, but you know she wrapped it over like covering a book, and then wrapped the other one, like covering a book, then she folded over the two top bits, at an angle, like a triangle, you know, and by that time, she tucked it all in, and the baby was like a, is the word 'papoose', or something like that? (Using hands to show wrapping baby) Yes, yes, yes, or a mummy! (laughter) 'Papoose' is a better word, I think. Yes, so you know, she wrapped it all, real snug and tight, that kind of thing, and then, you could pick the baby up, and it was literally like, it didn't really matter what you did with the baby, you know, but it was not going to go scrawling all over the place, and wriggling, and leaving you feeling unconfident, or whatever it was, it was like carrying a loaf of bread, you know, it was all compact and tight.

\*Interviewer: Like the old-fashioned swaddling?

Ann: Yes, it was a swaddle, it was a swaddle, but the way she did it, it was so, my mother's a seamstress, a perfectionist as well, mm. And that was one of the things, that was one of the *best* things. I mean at the back of my head, I kept thinking: 'Okay, this is how the baby felt when it was in the womb, you know, really snug and tight', and she made me do it, before we put the child to bed, ah, you know, and so she said: 'Slowly, when the child wakes up, then she will scratch, her hands, and her arms, and everything, and when she's got up off the swaddle, she's ready to wake up'.

The evocative image of a baby as 'coconut rice wrapped in banana leaf' is culturally specific to Ann's

Singaporean origins. A baby good enough to eat, delicious, but also swaddled, tightly captured against harm, contained womblike and the baby's waking analogous to a daily birth, an act of shedding a skin to enter the world afresh.

As Ann described the process of swaddling, she repeated it with a physical demonstration. She wrapped an imaginary baby in front of me as if becoming her mother thirty years ago. As she repeated these movements, her face lit up with the memory. Lynda Mannik has written about sensory memories evoked by photographs, but her ideas also resonate with moments like this where 'the physical performance of these memories expresses their powerful sensory impact, while alerting the listener to the innate visceral importance of this type of memory'.<sup>30</sup>

Ann remembered telling her mother that 'Mumma, we are in Australia now, so we just follow Australian way'. She described reading 'all the childhood books' and in particular Sheila Kitzinger's second book *The Complete Book of Pregnancy and Childbirth* (first published in 1980) and listened to the infant feeding ideas of Maureen Minchin, the Melbourne based author, who Ann knew socially. Both women encouraged mothers to understand and be in contact with their bodies. Maureen Minchin's book *Breastfeeding Matters*, first published in 1985 was a common sense guide to breastfeeding but Minchin also encouraged early skin to skin contact with babies and stressed that, for many women, breastfeeding 'strongly enhances their sense of their own bodies as fundamentally good and powerful and pleasurable'.<sup>31</sup> Sheila Kitzinger, the powerful British advocate for natural childbirth and women-centred care in pregnancy and childbirth advised women to listen and learn from other women. To her surprise, Ann did find herself seeking and following much of her mother's child-rearing advice. But, this was a mutual process of learning. Ann's mother was fascinated when she first saw her daughter breastfeeding and Ann explained that 'believe it or not, this woman, with six children, never breast fed a single one'. Instead, Ann and her five siblings, born in Singapore between 1947 and 1954, were fed on the 'most expensive sweetened condensed milk - Milkmaid brand'. Ann's mother was amazed at her granddaughter's innate ability to suckle and Ann explained that her mother, 'never knew babies were so clever. Mm. She never had that *experience*, so she never knew babies were so clever'.

For Ann, touching the 'little bloody mess' of her daughter straight after birth, was the beginning of a move towards what she described as a more pragmatic form of mothering:

I didn't really keep up with the literature either, I also became a *lot* more pragmatic, a lot more practical, yes, I also got fed up with, you know, women who sort of like thought there was only

one way to do things, so it, you know, I think I just became more flexible.

Ann wanted to parent according to her own ideas and not those of her mother. However, this changed after Ann became pregnant. She found herself asking her mother for child-rearing advice. Her mother even attended the birth of her first daughter in a Melbourne hospital. When describing this experience of childbirth to me in her interview more than three decades later, it is significant that Ann chose to use her mother's words and quoted a Chinese saying, 'only the ends of your hair don't hurt'. Ann's use of her mother's words hints at her shift in identity and mindset as she moves backwards and forwards between cultural and historical contexts, adrift, like many migrants, between worlds of understanding and justification. Ann was integrating her Australian life as a mother with her 'chequered' childhood in Singapore in the ebb of British colonialism.

## Conclusion: communicative power of touch

Though this article has focussed on the rich sensory memories in Ann's interviews, there was a thread of sensory memories interwoven through most of the other twenty-seven interviews. Pieced together, these memories suggest that touch is closely connected with the life course of mothering — from childbirth, through early child-rearing and to mothering adult children. Mothering is relational and touch is central to intimate relationships. As Stephen Thayer points out, the sense of touch is: 'the touchstone of all relationships. It is the gatekeeper of intimacy and remains the final bond between people, even after words fail'.<sup>32</sup> Touch has figured prominently in these women's mothering narratives in this period of the 1970s and 1980s. Ann mentioned Sheila Kitzinger several times in her interviews. In her 1978 study of motherhood, *Women as Mothers*, Kitzinger argued that maternal behaviour



Figure 5 Ann and her two daughters in the 1990s.

responds to the society the mother lives in and has a long-lasting psychological effect on the mother and infant: 'it is not just a matter of a mother performing an action, such as suckling a baby for example, but also of how she *feels* about what she does'.<sup>33</sup> For mothers such as Ann, her experiences of being mothered deeply affected the way she felt about mothering her own children. Ann's memory of how she felt loved when her mother pulled her towards her in the warmth of that Singaporean evening so many years earlier taught her the communicative power of touch — a feeling she tried to pass on to her daughters in Australia and then filtered through thought and language to me in her interviews. Once transcribed, these touch memories were given form through written rather than spoken word. Sometimes it may only be a trace — a sigh or a pause — but voice can 'touch at a distance'.

## Acknowledgements

This article was possible because Ann generously shared her home, her memories and photos with me. I would like to thank her. Thank you also to Katie Holmes, Richard Pennell, Ron Southern and Marilyn Bowler for their thoughtful reading and helpful suggestions.

The research underpinning this publication was undertaken while completing a PhD at La Trobe University, Melbourne, and approved by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee (ethics approval number 2088-14).

## (Endnotes)

- 1 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, Macmillan & Co., London, 1872.
- 2 Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2012), p.xiv.
- 3 Ibid., p.xi.
- 4 See for example Joy Damousi and Paula Hamilton, *A Cultural History of Sound, Memory and the Senses*, Routledge, New York; London, 2017; Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense : Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures*, Routledge, London ; New York, 1993; Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma : The Cultural History of Smell*, Routledge, London, New York, 1994; Steven Connor, 'Edison's Teeth: Touching Hearing,' in *Hearing Cultures : Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity*, ed. Veit Erlmann, Berg, Oxford, New York, 2004; Steven Connor, 'The Menagerie of the Senses.' *The Senses and Society* vol. 1, 2006, pp. 9-26. M.M. Smith, *Sensing the past: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching in history*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2007.
- 5 The exception is Constance Classen, but the focus of her work is pre-twentieth century. Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, op.cit.



- 6 Paula Hamilton, 'The Proust Effect: Oral History and the Senses' in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, p.224.
- 7 See for example Angela Davis, *Modern motherhood: women and family in England, 1945-2000*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012; Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and families: an oral history, 1940-1970*. Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA, 1995: Blackwell, 1995. Both these impressive studies draw heavily on oral histories but neither discusses the senses and mothering.
- 8 Paula Hamilton, 'Intimate Strangers: Multisensorial Memories of Working in the Home,' In Joy Damousi and Paula Hamilton, *A Cultural History of Sound, Memory and the Senses*, Routledge, New York; London, 2017, pp.194-211.
- 9 Elizabeth D. Harvey, 'The portal of touch', AHR Forum, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, No. 2, 2011, p.386.
- 10 David Howes, 'Can These Dry Bones Live? An Anthropological Approach to the History of the Senses,' *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2, 2008, p.448.
- 11 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford University Press, London, 1975, p.170.
- 12 John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth were pioneers in this field. Mary S. Ainsworth, 'Infant-Mother Attachment,' *American Psychologist* 34, no. 10, 1979; John Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health; a Report Prepared on Behalf of the World Health Organization as a Contribution to the United Nations Programme for the Welfare of Homeless Children*, 2d ed., World Health Organization Monograph Series, World Health Organization, Geneva, 1952.
- 13 Thanks to Siobhan McHugh for pointing out this podcast. *Sound as Touch*, podcast, Radiolab, <http://www.radiolab.org/story/91514-sound-as-touch/>  
Anne Fernald, 'Four-month-old infants prefer to listen to motherese'. *Infant Behavior and Development*, 8(2), 1985, pp.181-195.
- 14 Carla (pseudonym), interviewed by the author, Melbourne, June 2015, recording and transcript held by the author.
- 15 Ann Ng, interviewed by the author, Melbourne, January 2015, recording and transcript held by the author.
- 16 'Black Saturday' refers to a series of bushfires in Victoria on Saturday 7 February, 2009. The extreme weather conditions meant the fires spread at an unprecedented rate and sparked the worst firestorm in Australia's post-European history.
- 17 Douwe Draaisma, *Why Life Speeds up as You Get Older : How Memory Shapes Our Past*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p.35.
- 18 Hamilton, 'The Proust Effect: Oral History and the Senses', op.cit.
- 19 Marcel Proust and C. K. Scott-Moncrieff, *Swann's Way*, Penguin Twentieth-Century Classic, Penguin Books, London, New York, 1998, p.488.
- 20 Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3rd ed., Rohman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2015, p.47.
- 21 Ann Ng, interview.
- 22 Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, op.cit., p.xi.
- 23 Tick Ngee Sim and Lue Ping Ong, 'Parent Physical Punishment and Child Aggression in a Singapore Chinese Preschool Sample', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(1), 2005, pp.85-99.
- 24 Ann Ng, interview.
- 25 Monique, interview.
- 26 Monique, interview.
- 27 Monique, interview.
- 28 Paula Hamilton, 'The Proust Effect: Oral History and the Senses' in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010.
- 29 Irena (pseudonym), interviewed by the author, Coburg, January 2015, recording and transcript held by the author.
- 30 Lynda Mannik, 'Remembering, Forgetting, and Feeling with Photographs,' in *Oral History and Photography*, ed. Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011, p.92.
- 31 Maureen Minchin, *Breastfeeding matters: What we need to know about infant feeding* (Rev. ed.). Armadale, Vic: Alma Publications and George Allen & Unwin, 1989, p.169.
- 32 Stephen Thayer, 'History and Strategies of Research on Social Touch,' *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 10, no.1, Spring 1986, p.24.
- 33 Kitzinger, S. (1978). *Women as mothers*. London: Fontana, pp.19-20.



# The Hazel de Berg Award for Excellence in Oral History 2017 awarded to Dr Karen George

Dr Karen George's extensive career exemplifies all that is inspiring about working in oral history. She has spent many years amplifying the voices of those normally overlooked or forgotten by others and has participated as an oral historian in some of the most important national projects in Australia, such as the 'Bringing Them Home' Oral History project (1999-2002) and the 'Forgotten Australians and Child Migrants Oral History project' (2009-2012). These two projects underline her strong commitment over time to Indigenous people and children vulnerable to abuse in state institutions.

Karen developed important relationships working with Indigenous South Australians through her research for Link-Up SA on the history and records of homes into which members of the Stolen Generations were placed as children. As a measure of trust, she has also been employed by Nunkuwarrin Yunti of South Australia over the last few years and carried out 30 oral histories to write a history of their community centre. In relation to children, Karen has worked for the South Australian section of the Find and Connect Website where she was made a Research Fellow from 2011-2014. From 2005 to 2007 she worked as research historian and writer for the South Australian Government's Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry.

As a professional historian and researcher, Karen has given papers at national conferences, and published widely utilising oral history research for her many projects. She also worked as the Oral Historian for the City of Adelaide from 1993-2001. Finally, as a long-time volunteer member of OHA South Australia, she has served as president and committee member for over 20 years, regularly presented workshops on oral history ethics and practice, generously sharing her expertise and mentoring others.

Karen George has spent much of her working life and time volunteering over the last two decades, tirelessly promoting and building the profile of oral history both in South Australia and nationally.

Sue Anderson  
President (Outgoing)  
Oral History Australia



Karen George receiving the Hazel de Berg award from Di Ritch, September 2107. [Photo copyright Oral History Australia.]

# Notes on Contributors

**Mikalea Borg** is a teaching graduate with a history major from the University of South Australia. Her publication in this Journal is a product of her final assignment for the course 'Oral History Workshop: People and Place'. Mikalea's main area of research is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. Indigenous education and professional development for teachers working in this field has become Mikalea's current focus and passion for the future. Mikalea has ambitions to redevelop the way in which current and future generations study history, in particular Australian history so as to be more inclusive of different minority groups within contemporary records of Australia's past. Mikalea has taken her newly found interest in oral history with her into the workforce as a secondary school teacher.

**Stephanie Boyle** is a Senior Curator in the Photographs Film and Sound section at the Australian War Memorial, where she has worked for the last ten years. Prior to that she worked at the National Film and Sound Archive and National Archives. She has travelled to Afghanistan, the United Arab Emirates and Iraq, as well as around Australia, to interview current serving members of the Australian Defence Force for the War Memorial's Oral History collection.

**Jane Britten** is the Local History Librarian at Woollahra Libraries and is a member of the Woollahra Council Historic Plaques Committee. Jane has an interest in social history at a local level.

**Miranda Francis** is a history PhD candidate at La Trobe University's School of Humanities and Social Sciences. She is a recipient of a scholarship funded by the Transition to Contemporary Parenthood research program at La Trobe University's Judith Lumley Centre. Her research is an oral history of mothering in suburban Melbourne over the second part of the twentieth century. It involves life history style interviews with women over sixty focusing on their memories of mothering.

**Rena Henderson** graduated as a mature student from a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Central Queensland in 1994 and then became Associate Lecturer in History and Sociology at UCQ's campus in Bundaberg, Queensland for two years. It was after attending The Australian Sociological Association Conference in Hobart in 1996 that she found her Tasmanian future – a closed-down school with a view of Bass Strait in a small agricultural community called Preston. She returned to academic study in 2011, the same year she was appointed to the ABC Advisory Council for four years. In 2016, she completed a Master of Arts in History at the University of New England where she was introduced to oral history by Janis Wilton. Her dissertation related to the history

of the Preston School. In June 2017 she was accepted as a PhD candidate, to pursue further research into the Preston community from 1860 to the end of the twentieth century.

**Lenka Krátká** is a research associate at the Institute for Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences. She graduated from Charles University in Prague with a Master's degree in gender studies and oral history. In 2016, she completed her PhD (Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Arts, Institute of Economic and Social History) with a work dissertation about the history of Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping in the period 1945–1989. She also works as a part-time lecturer in oral history methodology at Charles University, Faculty of Humanities, Oral history – Contemporary history department.

**Richard Pennell** is al-Tajir Lecturer in the History of Islam and the Middle East, University of Melbourne, Australia. He has published extensively on the history of North Africa and the Middle East, including *Morocco since 1830* (London & New York: C. Hurst and New York University Press 2000). He is currently researching the history of asylum seekers' accounts of oppression from the Middle East and North Africa.

**Joan Ruthven** is the Team Leader of Library Programs at Woollahra Libraries and is also a member of the Woollahra Council Historic Plaques Committee. Joan completed a Doctor of Information Management at Charles Sturt University and is currently implementing the digitisation of Local History materials for Woollahra Libraries.

**Deborah Ruiz Wall OAM** completed a number of oral history projects including Redfern Oral History (now part of an Aboriginal community website); Around the Dining Table, story sharing between Aboriginal elders and Filipino women from inner city Sydney (presented live at Customs House Library, Sydney); and story sharing between Filipino women and Aboriginal women from Western Sydney (the outcome was an exhibit of the narrator's photographs and their cultural artefacts). Wall's article that appears in this journal is based on her recording in 2008 of life stories in Broome, Western Australia and in 2015, in Torres Strait. She turned this collection of stories into a book, *Re-imagining Australia: Voices of Indigenous Australians of Filipino descent*, Southport, Keeaira Press, 2016.

**Libby Watters** was formerly employed by Woollahra Libraries and took a leading role in the research and writing for the *World War 1 Remembered* website.

**ORAL HISTORY AUSTRALIA INC**

**INCOME AND EXPENDITURE STATEMENT**  
**FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2017 AND 2016**

	Notes	2017 \$	2016 \$
<b>INCOME</b>			
Capitation Fee	4	8,265	7,215
Standing Orders		1,110	1,235
Royalties and Copyright Council	5	867	271
Conference		6,855	2,000
Journal		185	-
Interest Income		100	163
		<u>17,382</u>	<u>10,884</u>
<b>EXPENSES</b>			
<b>Direct Cost</b>			
Standing Orders Distribution	6	(900)	-
Journal Printing and Postage	7	(5,597)	(6,137)
Annual Conference		(2,000)	-
		<u>(8,497)</u>	<u>(6,137)</u>
<b>Operational Expense</b>			
Bookkeeping Fee		(330)	(330)
Website		(606)	(3,269)
Scholarship		(1,500)	-
Meeting Expense		(446)	(570)
Insurance		-	(1,105)
Legal Cost		(71)	(87)
Sundry		-	(218)
		<u>(2,953)</u>	<u>(5,579)</u>
<b>Total Expenses</b>		<u>(11,450)</u>	<u>(11,716)</u>
<b>Net Surplus / (Deficit) for the year</b>		<u><u>5,932</u></u>	<u><u>(832)</u></u>

The accompanying notes form part of these financial statements.

**ORAL HISTORY AUSTRALIA INC**

**BALANCE SHEET**

**AS AT 30 OF JUNE 2017 AND 2016**

	Notes	2017 \$	2016 \$
<hr/>			
<b>CURRENT ASSETS</b>			
Cash and Cash Equivalents	2	32,931	26,759
Sundry Debtors		233	-
<b>TOTAL CURRENT ASSETS</b>		<hr/> 33,164	<hr/> 26,759
<b>TOTAL ASSETS</b>		<hr/> 33,164	<hr/> 26,759
<b>CURRENT LIABILITIES</b>			
Trade Creditors	3	473	-
<b>TOTAL CURRENT LIABILITIES</b>		<hr/> 473	<hr/> -
<b>NET ASSETS</b>		<hr/> <b>32,691</b>	<hr/> <b>26,759</b>
<hr/>			
<b>EQUITY</b>			
Retain Earnings		26,759	27,591
Net Profit / (Loss)		5,932	(832)
<b>TOTAL EQUITY</b>		<hr/> <b>32,691</b>	<hr/> <b>26,759</b>

The accompanying notes form part of these financial statements.



**ORAL HISTORY AUSTRALIA INC**

**NOTES FOR THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS**  
**FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2017 AND 2016**

Notes	2017 \$	2016 \$
<b>NOTE 1: STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANT ACCOUNTING POLICIES</b>		
The Financial Report is prepared on an accruals basis and is based on historic costs and does not take into account changing money values or current valuations of non-current assets.		
<b>NOTE 2: CASH AND CASH EQUIVALENTS</b>		
CBA Cheque Account	16,811	10,727
CBA Term Deposit	16,120	16,032
	<b>32,931</b>	<b>26,759</b>
<b>NOTE 3: TRADE CREDITORS</b>		
Standing Orders Distribution - June 2017	450	-
Website - Reimburse to Sandra	23	-
	<b>473</b>	-
<b>NOTE 4: CAPITATION FEES</b>		
OHA New South Wales	2,895	2,835
OHA Queensland	1,155	1,305
OHA Tasmania	465	465
OHA South Australia	690	-
OHA Victoria	1,875	1,635
OHA Western Australia	1,185	975
	<b>8,265</b>	<b>7,215</b>
<b>NOTE 5: ROYALTIES AND COPYRIGHT COUNCIL</b>		
Royalties	867	117
Copyright Council	-	154
	<b>867</b>	<b>271</b>

The accompanying notes form part of these financial statements.

**NOTE 6: STANDING ORDERS DISTRIBUTION**

	<b>2017</b>	<b>2016</b>
	<b>\$</b>	<b>\$</b>
OHA New South Wales	525	-
OHA Queensland	-	-
OHA Tasmania	100	-
OHA South Australia	175	-
OHA Victoria	100	-
OHA Western Australia	-	-
	<b>900</b>	<b>-</b>

The total distribution for the Year Ended on 30 June 2017 includes the distribution of \$450 corresponding to Financial Year 2016.

**NOTE 7: JOURNAL PRINTING AND POSTAGE**

Journal Printing	3,201	5,123
Journal Postage	2,396	1,014
	<b>5,597</b>	<b>6,137</b>

The accompanying notes form part of these financial statements.

# Reviews and book notes

## Review

### **'The many faces of a maternity hospital'**

**Judith Godden, *Crown Street Women's Hospital: A History 1893-1983*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 2016. 400 pages. ISBN (pbk) 9781743318409.**

Judith Godden's latest work traces the ninety-year history of Crown Street Women's Hospital, a Sydney institution from 1893 to 1983. There are few hospitals that inspire the same devotion as Crown Street, and many in Sydney mourned its closure. Though aged, run-down and crowded, it maintained its reputation for obstetric excellence, impressively low maternal death rates, and devoted care of Sydney's poor. *Crown Street* is a book that will be enjoyed by historians of nursing, medicine and midwifery, but also by those intrigued by social change in Australia over the century.

The strength of Godden's history is in its skillful navigation of both the major trends in health care and maternity, and the micro-analysis of everyday life in the hospital. The book is filled with individuals: doctors, nurses, allied professionals, hospital workers, wealthy fundraisers, and not least the patients. Throughout, Godden always retains a human touch. We learn of pronatalism, an important national trend at the start of the twentieth century, encouraging women to have more white babies for the good of the country and Empire. Yet we also learn of the woman who in 1912 came into Crown Street with her twentieth pregnancy, or another in 1913 who was pregnant for the 25th time. Similarly, Godden shows the tight discipline expected of nurses, especially trainees, but we also glimpse a softer side, for example the dedication shown to a small number of orphaned children who lived in the Hospital, cared for lovingly by nursing staff. The careful juxtaposition of social trends, hospital politics and stories of the individual women make *Crown Street* a fascinating read.

This was an institution strongly influenced by domestic and even international events. During the two World Wars, for instance, funding was slashed. Falling income was not just due to a decline in government contributions, but charity work and private donations fell too. Similarly,

in the Great Depression, there were fewer donations and fewer paying patients, and pregnancy and childbirth itself could be complicated by malnutrition and poverty.

The postwar "baby boom" saw increasing pressure on Crown Street, as numbers of patients surged. At the same time, the war had seen significant advances in medicine, some of which flowed on to obstetrics and gynaecology. Penicillin was the most obvious, but there were a raft of other changes too, including better wound care, increased use of blood transfusions, improved method with caesarean, physiotherapy, incubators for premature babies and more rigorous charting by nursing staff. These were marvelous improvements. But there was a flip side for Crown Street: combined with rising staff costs and the closure of many private maternity hospitals, medical innovations put intense pressure on the already struggling Hospital.

Indeed sometimes Crown Street seemed to survive by the skin of its teeth. Due to chronic over-crowding, management had been forced to rent a Darling Point mansion to house recovering patients. Then, unexpectedly, in 1947, the building was to be sold. The hospital could not afford to buy the premises, and the New South Wales state government decided to focus funding on suburban and country hospitals. The situation looked dire. At a time when the average annual male wage was under a thousand pounds, the businessman Stanley Fox donated 60,000 pounds, and the hospital was able to purchase the building. Community goodwill was ever-present for Crown Street.

Godden also charts the raft of technological changes that occurred over the century, in nursing and hospital care more broadly. But we also know that technology was not always the complete answer. It is clear that skilled nursing was critical to the survival of many newborns. Godden recaptures the intensive nursing required in complicated cases - premature babies who were literally wrapped in cotton wool, placed in an oxygen tent and fed with eye-droppers. We view a hospital that required scientific and industrial knowledge but also deep care by individual workers.

Though the book is largely a positivist story of Crown Street, Godden is not afraid to examine the darker sides of a maternity hospital. The chapter on the adoption ward was deeply moving. Crown Street ran its adoption protocols in line with best practice in most Western nations. Yet as Godden suggests, “From the early 1950s to the late 1960s, adoption practices reflected social norms that now appear cruel and misguided” (p.261). This is a particularly evocative chapter that does not shy away from the dehumanisation suffered by young single pregnant women, before, during and after childbirth.

There are of course horror stories – including the Hospital’s involvement in the use of thalidomide in the 1960s. Yet there are also many joyous tales of women helped by Crown Street. In 1904, a 25-year-old married woman had lost five previous pregnancies. As first an outpatient and later as an inpatient, the care she received at Crown Street saw her deliver a large and healthy baby boy, to the delight of the new mother and her husband.

Crown Street also bought dedicated medical care to women who could not pay, and for most of the century it was a core aspect of their duties. This meant the Hospital served many women marginalized in Sydney society, including migrant women in the postwar years. Crown Street was also critical to indigenous women in the state, and many travelled from regional areas to Sydney for childbirth. It was, after all, the first Hospital to offer formal training to an indigenous midwife, May Yarrowick in 1907. As local elder Mum Shirl noted, the Hospital was of great importance to her community:

Not just 90 percent of Aboriginal women – every Aboriginal woman I know from the country to the city went to Crown Street ... I was told I was an epileptic and could not have babies – because of the care they gave me in 1941, I had two beautiful children (p.338)

Though the book is rightly a celebration of Crown Street Women’s Hospital, and carefully documents its many victories for mothers and babies, the stories told herein also provide a potent reminder of the continued importance of adequate government funding for health services. We do not want to return to the times when mothers were left in bloodied linens because the hospital had no clean sheets; when new mothers recovered from childbirth in the corridors, waiting for a bed; or when matron’s only choice was to admit a woman in labour to an already dangerously overcrowded ward, or have her deliver in the street. Godden’s history evocatively shows just how crucial it is to have a well-funded, caring space for women at childbirth – and after.

Lisa Featherstone, University of Queensland,  
l.featherstone@uq.edu.au

## Review

**Melanie Ilic and Dalia Leinarte (eds), *The Soviet Past in the Post-Socialist Present: Methodology and Ethics in Russian, Baltic and Central European Oral History and Memory Studies*, Routledge Approaches to History, Routledge, 2016. 257 pages. ISBN (hbk) 9781138933453.**

This edited collection is an important addition to thinking through oral history methodology in former communist states. In her introduction, Melanie Ilic sets out the standard ethnic guidelines for oral history practitioners, and notes that the book’s contributors had to move beyond, and sometimes even question, basic principles of good practice. In post-Soviet and post-socialist contexts, one of the key issues is the perceived gap between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ knowledge, with ‘insiders’ seen to speak the same language as their respondents. This can moreover be complicated by complaints of ‘insider’ bias, and set against superior ‘outsider’ historical research. These questions are inherent in many oral history projects, as are issues of consent, anonymity and disclosure. The case studies presented here are not only pertinent to respondents living in post-Soviet and post-socialist societies, but to any oral history practitioner grappling with ethical and methodological issues that arise during the research process.

In her introductory chapter on ‘silence and amnesia’ inherent in testimony from people who lived through the Soviet and communist eras, Dalia Leinarte notes that ‘many people rejected Soviet ideology on a political level and in their public lives but internalized the regime’s propaganda in their own private and everyday lives’ (15). She argues that in the majority of post-communist countries, many aspects of social and private life did not become part of public discourse or a collective memory. This can be methodologically and ethically challenging for researchers when conducting oral history interviews, and Leinarte reminds us then of the ‘conscious position of the scholar’.

While not evident from its title, the focus of this collection is on women’s memories. Many of these memories are intimate rememberings of social and private life: courtship, marriage, family life, abortion, housing, trauma, and criminality. The contributors are adding to feminist research, as well as to our understandings of ‘good practice’ in feminist oral history methodology. This includes an appreciation of the power dynamics involved in interviewing a respondent, and a recognition that the interview process is, as described by Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, ‘emotional work’ that can involve painful remembering. Most of the contributors are women, and many are native to Central and Eastern Europe; there is a good mix of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ knowledge here.



After the two introductory chapters, the book is divided into three sections: Russia, Baltic States, and East-Central Europe. The first chapter in the 'Russia' section is a transcript of a reflexive interview conducted between Barbara Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck after the completion of their oral history interviews in the mid-1990s focusing on the voices of women in Soviet history. Yulia Gradszkova then reflects upon the process of collecting and analyzing women's life stories, paying attention to silences and nostalgia. The last chapter in this section, by Laura J. Olsen, examines agency and self-construction in interviews, where 'interviews are two-way dialogues in which each participant is trying to understand the other's motivations and desires' (53).

The second section on the Baltic States is the largest section, with six chapters. Ingrid Gečienė focuses on resistance and adaptation within the family unit after the collapse of the Soviet regime. Sigita Kraniuskienė and Laima Žilinskienė discuss research ethics in Soviet memory studies. Leena Kurvet-Käosaar considers the idea of love in Estonian women's life stories, making visible the 'affective economies' inherent in their everyday lives in the Soviet Union (124). Andrejs Plakans' examines Latvian post-Soviet historiography, and showcases an 'interdisciplinary style' methodology incorporating oral histories and memory studies, with an eye to the future creation of a new 'master narrative' (144). Maija Runcis writes about the use and re-use of archival and oral history sources in relation to housing in Soviet Latvia, and Aurimas Švedas takes us through three (un)successful oral history interview projects.

The third section, East-Central Europe, begins with a chapter by Ildikó Asztalos Morell on the trauma of self-sacrificing motherhood apparent in Hungarian collectivization stories. Kelly Hignett examines 'petty illegalities' in late socialist Central Europe (the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland). This 'richly textured discourse' was found from research that initially focused on criminal networks (200). The last chapter, in both this section and the book (there is no conclusion), is by Karolina Koziura and Olena Lytovka, with Melanie Ilic, which reviews the authors' involvement in two separate oral history projects of women who had experienced or witnessed post-war forced displacements in Polish and Ukrainian villages.

Throughout this collection, all contributors speak to ethical concerns arising during fieldwork and analysis. Beyond the gendered, geographical and political specificity of women's memories in post-Soviet and post-socialist countries, this collection is a valuable methodological and ethical handbook for oral history practitioners everywhere.

Jayne Persian, University of Southern Queensland, jayne.persian@usq.edu.au

## Review

**Review of Paul Thompson with Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past, Oral History*, fourth edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017 (paperback ISBN 978-0-19-933546-6, 484pp, UK £29.99).**

Across four editions, Paul Thompson's pioneering *The Voice of the Past* has both reflected and shaped the development of our field for half a century. The first edition in 1978 was written in part as a defence of oral history against its critics amongst conservative documentary historians; it explained the long and distinguished history of oral history before tape recorders, demonstrated how memory could be used with care as an invaluable historical source, and issued a clarion call for 'shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry [and] challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgements of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored' (7). Subsequent editions (in 1988 and 2000) drew upon and examined the increasingly sophisticated theories and methodologies of oral historians and a range of oral history practice from around the world. In this new edition Thompson is joined by co-author and long-time British collaborator Joanna Bornat, and together they have retained much of value from the previous editions whilst adding recent developments, examples and debates.

The first eight chapters give 'broad overviews of the key features of oral history and life stories'. Chapter one, 'History and the Community' is largely unchanged from the 1970s manifesto for the community and social purposes of oral history, drawing mostly on the British examples Thompson knew best at the time. Chapter two, 'Historians and Oral History' retains most of the earlier history of oral history but adds an overview of recent developments in the English-speaking world, including Australia and New Zealand. Chapters three and four are new. 'Reaching Out: Other Cultures' surveys the history and practice of oral history in the non-English speaking world, and 'Parallel Strands' explores a range of fields and activities that overlap with oral history, including memory studies, visual media, public history, sociological life history and narrative studies. Chapter five on 'Transforming Oral History Through Theory' by British women's historian Lynn Abrams draws upon her important book *Oral History Theory* (2010) and provides a succinct precis of key theories now used by oral historians to make best sense of the interview and the evidence it provides. Chapter six on 'The Achievements of Oral History' has expanded to include new material from around the world and offers a wonderful introduction (and

reference list) to the range of subjects to which oral history has made significant contributions, from migrant history to women's history, political history to war history. Chapters seven and eight review and update the research on 'Evidence' and 'Memory', with a particular concern for psychological theories about memory and the self.

Chapters nine to twelve are more practical. 'Projects' reviews oral history work in education, communities, health and development, and theatre, and considers the range of media used for the presentation of oral history, with a particular interest in recent uses of the internet and audio walks. 'The Interview' provides advice and considers debates about interviewing. 'After the Interview' examines documentation and archival best-practice, including the impacts of digitisation, and the final chapter explores old and new approaches to 'Interpretation' of interviews.

New features in the fourth edition include a series of 'boxed' sections with vivid extracts from oral history books and interviews that illustrate the arguments in each chapter (these will be an invaluable teaching resource), an international bibliography of significant works in oral history, and a list of some of the best oral history websites from around the world (with [www.stolengenerationtestimonies.com](http://www.stolengenerationtestimonies.com) representing Australia).

There is some disconcerting repetition in this new edition, most notably in the 'Projects' and 'Interpretation' chapters (which both cover different media for producing oral histories), and between the revised chapters on 'Memory' and 'Evidence' and Abrams' new chapter on 'Transforming Oral History Through Theory'. Thompson should be praised for bringing new voices into his classic text, yet a reader might have been better served had they integrated these different chapters and perspectives.

If you are new to oral history there is no better book to introduce you to the history, aims, approaches, issues and impacts of oral history, illustrated with a wealth of international examples and debates. If you're an experienced oral historian this new edition offers an invaluable review of recent developments and, via a helpful index and numerous references, you can quickly read your way into just about any imaginable topic in oral history, from projects in Russia or on family history, to transcription or interpretation, radio history or museums.

Alistair Thomson, Monash University

## Review

***Hot Metal: Material Culture and Tangible Labour*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016. 232 pages. ISBN (hbk) 9781784994341.**

As a heritage studies scholar and practitioner, I found *Hot Metal* to be an exemplar of social value documentation. While this is not the book's primary intent, it demonstrates the complex entanglements between architectural spaces, material culture, lived experience and the ways in which people value their in-place, working lives. Such in-depth documentation of social value is rare in Australian heritage practice, where historical, architectural and archaeological values are typically privileged over 'social or spiritual' significance - for both pragmatic and financial reasons. I return to this point at the end of the review.

The book's author, Jesse Adams Stein, is an interdisciplinary design researcher specialising in the relationship between technological change, labour and gender, in both historical and contemporary contexts. Stein researched and wrote *Hot Metal* whilst a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Design at the University of Technology, Sydney. The study is based on the use and integrated analysis of oral history interviews, material culture items (e.g., machines, tools, mementos), built environment spatial relationships and documentary archival sources, including historic photographs. Chapter 2 on the topic of combining oral history sources and institutional photographs is a revised and amended version of a paper published in 2013 in *Oral History Australia*.

The book is a social/technological narrative of late twentieth century deindustrialisation. The case study is the NSW Government Printing Office (the 'Gov'), primarily during the period it occupied the seven-storey, modernist, reinforced pre-cast concrete structure in Harris Street, Ultimo, from late 1958 until the organisation's abolition in July 1989. The book is not so much a history of that organisation as "a history following particular paths" (193); and an exploration of the ways in which specific local factors played out in relation to global Western market forces, neoliberal ideology and economic rationalism.

The book is above all a scholarly enterprise. The particular narrative paths are foregrounded by and intertwined with references to scholarly literature. Thus, for example, the tale of illicitly printed Christmas cards (for personal use) (168-169) is set within a broader literature on resisting routine and utilising high-level skills by making things 'on the side' (termed 'foreign orders' at the Gov, 160-167). Similarly, specific instances of the relationships between workers and printing machinery are contextualised in relation

to scholarly writings on craft skill, masculinities and technological mastery (Ch. 4). I found this aspect of the book a strength since it enabled a local story to be told within a wider global (primarily Western) context. Though readers with a knowledge of and/or passion for printing history might have been satisfied with only the local story, I found the intertwined local-global deindustrialisation narrative approach compelling.

As someone who has worked on and off within government for almost four decades, I found myself relating to broader organisational themes explored in *Hot Metal*. For example, workplace cultures, technological change (as when the first Macintosh computers hit the office where I worked with the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service in the late-1980s), gender regimes, shifts in organisational cultures from valuing technical skill to privileging 'management', implementation of 'change management' (Ch. 8 describes how badly handled this can be), expanding ideas of customer service, etc. In this regard, I suspect this book will cause most readers to reflect on their workplace heritage and identity by comparing and contrasting their histories with those experiences of individuals and collectives described and analysed by Stein.

The book is minimalist in its explicit use of theory. This is not a bad thing for a book seeking to achieve broad popular appeal and satisfy a scholarly audience. Nevertheless, I was pleased to see the influence of Jane Bennett's ideas of 'material agency' and Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (85) as well as passing nods to French philosophers – Pierre Bordieu and Michel de Certeau. These linkages are particularly relevant because so much contemporary scholarship is concerned with the material dimensions of attachment and identity.

In this study, oral history is writ large. It draws on 30 interviews (xiii-viv), with most participants identified, though some retaining confidentiality. Five (17%) or of the interviewees are female, a figure that in itself speaks to the dominance of males employed by the Gov. The excerpts from individual transcripts are aptly woven into the text and work well to personalise the points being made by Stein. Additionally, I found the analysis of seemingly straight forward commentary to be skilfully unpicked. For example, this is evident in press-machinist Ray Utick's description of the different machinery he was assigned too during his apprenticeship (85). Here Stein teases out the modes by which materiality and operating skills are active agents in the construction of professional identity and masculinity. Equally, the excerpts from stories connected with the introduction and proliferation of pot plants in the women's bathroom (between 1974 and 1979), while told with warmth and humour, are also deftly explored in relation to 'quiet resistance' (142)

and notions of respite from a male dominated domain arising out of women's marginal status at the Gov at the time (140-142). Thus readers of *Oral History Australia Journal* can be well satisfied that their interests in the methods, practice and explorations enabled via oral history are present throughout Stein's book.

*Hot Metal* is arranged in three parts. Part I, titled 'Image, space, voice', establishes the methodological and conceptual use of oral history, photography and spatial analysis. It comprises two chapters, the first (Ch. 2) "explores the possibilities that open up for historical analysis when workers' oral histories are paired with institutional photographs" (15). Chapter 3 is "an architectural and spatial exploration of workers' embodied and mnemonic experience of their factory" (17). It explores ways in which spatial memory (and I would add 'material memory' as articulated by French archaeologist Laurent Olivier) can be a strong component of oral history, as illustrated by the use of sketches drawn by interviewees. At the end of Chapter 3, Stein presents a "mnemonic architectural drawing ... a speculative representation of the factory Building in section" (64-67), which serves to construct a two-dimensional visual narrative of place and events from the author's perspective. I found this a fascinating and useful self-reflective rendering of the experience and understanding of the author (though the figure itself would have benefited from reproduction at a larger scale).

Part II, 'Technological transitions', comprises two chapters concerned with how workers responded to technological change; and in particular "the shift from letterpress to offset-lithography and the transition from hot-metal typesetting to computer phototypesetting. 'Hot-metal typesetting', the phrase from which the book's title is drawn, refers to a "method of type composition that involved casting molten metal into type forms and assembling it into pages and formes" (199). Some of the material in these chapters is necessarily complex because of the technology being described, but benefits from being linked to the active and changing relations between gender and labour on the workforce of the Gov. In some situations there was technological change and a continuity of dominant male gender regimes, while in other instances new technologies resulted in a rupture of traditional gender relations.

Part III, 'Challenges and creative resistance', is concerned with workplace culture and in particular the "creative, resourceful and sometimes resistant tactics that workers employed as a way of coping with institutional sexism, the drudgery of work and job insecurity." (17) Chapter 6 considers the experiences of women at the Gov, including in relation to the politics of lifting heavy objects. Chapter 8 explores the unofficial practices of making things 'on the side', including the

“very classy” Christmas cards, but also examples of illustrated, printed stories satirising workplace relations and institutional decline. Again Stein moves skilfully between the humour of individual stories and the socio-political meanings of broader sets of illicit and playful industrial practices. The concluding chapter is, in movie parlance, a tear jerker. It tells a story of loss, organisational closure and personal impacts. While the level of pilfering and theft that took place in the four weeks before the Gov’s closure is quite shocking (187-188), the worker’s actions are understandable (not excused) in the context of the swift and ruthless termination of the organisation. Worker disorientation, anger and resentment is palpable in the text.

To conclude, I return to the point made in the opening paragraph of this review. The Australian cultural heritage system is one based on the documentation and assessment of heritage values – historic, aesthetic, scientific, social and spiritual. While the first three of these values are associated with specific disciplines (history, architecture and archaeology respectively), social value has no such disciplinary champion (though in theory it is ‘the community’). In practice this latter value is seldom investigated or assessed in any meaningful or effective way. Thus, for example, the 1998 heritage assessment of the Government Printing Office building found low degrees of significance in relational to historical value and aesthetic quality (50). Absent in the heritage assessment is commentary on social value and the collective meanings that the place has engendered to those whose lives played out within the building. Stein’s book is redemptive in this regard. It demonstrates the powerful attachments that past workers felt for the building’s internal spaces, for the revolving door of material culture items associated with printing, and the camaraderie and contestation between workers. It is a persuasive and moving study of human feelings and workplace meanings. A challenge for heritage studies lies in producing such in-depth and insightful studies as *Hot Metal* and to link personal/collective stories, many derived from oral testimony, into the work of heritage conservation.

Steve Brown, University of Sydney, [steve.brown@sydney.edu.au](mailto:steve.brown@sydney.edu.au)

## Review

***From Glory Boxes to Grindr: Dating In Australia 1945-2015*, online oral history exhibition produced by Alistair Thomson and Anisa Puri, <https://gloryboxtoindr.com/about/>.**

The chance to listen to someone other than ourselves recount and reflect on the intimate and often transformative details of everyday life – from falling love, to pursuing sex, getting married, breaking up,

and feeling heartbroken – is one of the great privileges of doing oral history research. Currently, Australian historical scholarship is expanding to consider such intimacies in more detail, utilising oral history evidence in particular to trace Australian sexualities and relationships across different generations, locations and contexts. The online exhibition *From Glory Boxes to Grindr: Dating in Australia: 1945-2015*, produced by Alistair Thomson and Anisa Puri, is part of this exciting contemporary trend and is particularly useful for historians of sexuality. The exhibition provides public access to sixteen intimate life narratives from men and women of different generations over a 70 year period, focussing on their different experiences of dating, love, and/or sexual encounters. Collectively they highlight how shifting sexual and social mores were experienced at a more intimate and everyday level for some Australians.

The sixteen interviews in *From Glory Boxes to Grindr* were selected from a collection of 300 recorded for the Australian Generations Oral History Project – an initiative of Monash University, and supported by the National Library of Australia and ABC Radio National. They are to frame a chapter about ‘First Loves’ in the forthcoming book, *Australian Lives: An intimate history*, authored by Thompson and Puri. The broader project originally set out to question how and why generational change has manifested across historically significant periods in Australian history. It was also interested in whether the often generalised and vague generational categories such as ‘Builders’, ‘Baby Boomers’, ‘Gen X’, and ‘Gen Y’ might be challenged by the individual anecdotes and recollections of people who lived in these decades, and whose experiences vary widely according to their class, gender, sexuality, religion, race, ethnicity and location (and especially where these intersect). Indeed, the value and importance of this exhibition is in its challenge to mine, and surely others’, understandings of how dating, romance and sex was negotiated amidst different time periods and cultural backgrounds.

At first glance, the exhibition is easy to navigate and presents a clear and innovative example of how oral history research can be creatively repurposed and made meaningful to a broader public. The website consists of three core pages: the initial page is where you are introduced to the research participants; the ‘About’ tab takes you to an outline of the overall aim of the project – to “canvas the range of Australian youthful experiences of dating, love and sex” -which includes a rather broad mix of topics from sex education, sexual discrimination, interracial marriage to coming out; finally, there is a ‘Contact’ page in which to get in touch with the exhibitions’ authors.

Upon entering the homepage, you are greeted with photographed portraits of the sixteen participants



arranged in a grid, and their full name appears as you hover over each one. It struck me, and this is perhaps indicative of a generational characteristic, that the graphic layout seemed quite similar to the grid you would find if using a contemporary online dating application such as Wapa or Grindr, the latter being an important tool for one interviewee's dating experience as a younger gay man in Sydney in the 2000s.

The selected participants span different racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, sexualities and locations, including rural and regional Australia. For example, Rhonda King, born in 1965 in Canberra; Ginette Matolon, born in 1936 in Cairo and arriving in Sydney in 1958; and from my own generation, Arthur Hunter, born in 1989 in Wyndham in Western Australia, whose grandmother is a member of the stolen generation. This is a diverse sample, however in choosing only sixteen participants to canvass, the experiences and perspectives of people who are not present or less represented are more obvious. For example, more indigenous voices, younger women, younger same-sex attracted women, and other sex and gender diverse people across the generations who no doubt have compelling accounts of dating, love and sex to speak to.

Clicking on each portrait in the exhibition takes you to a page with the participant's name, date of birth, and a brief explanation of the experience you will hear them discussing. The recording of the interview plays from a Soundcloud file, and a brief transcript is provided below for following along. As I listened to the audio recordings – which are samples from the longer interviews conducted for the Generations Oral History Project – I was immediately drawn into sixteen very different, though equally absorbing, personal stories. There was audible tension and shifts in expression as experiences of joy, desire, trauma, confusion, heartache and loss were recounted and remembered across all interviews.

Below each edited transcript is a link to the whole interview (including the entire transcript and summary log). I was glad about this access, as the sample was often intriguing yet limiting – I wanted further detail about a particular experience of dating, love and/or sex and how this impacted later life. Indeed, without being able to explore the entire transcript and recording, the broader context of these deeply personal experiences would have been overlooked, as would the further insight we could gain from hearing how a particular memory of an event was situated within a broader life narrative. Furthermore, some of the presumptions I made about the identities, self-definitions and experiences of each person after listening to the brief sound file may never been challenged or corrected if I had not listened or read the transcript in full. For example, Donald Grey-Watson's contribution focuses on his first homosexual experience with a man when

he was seventeen or eighteen in the late 1940s, and being forced to see a psychiatrist by his parents as a result. Delving into his full interview we learn that he engaged with the homosexual scene in Melbourne at this time, but also found his sexuality to conflict heavily with his belief in the teachings of the Anglican Church. In 1964, he was ordained as a Deacon and married a woman, Else, but has always been open about his homosexuality in the church, in his marriage and in his family: "I believe that my sexuality is a gift from God, and it has more than one facet to it ... I no longer feel sinful about this part of my life".

Indeed, although the theme of this exhibition is 'Dating', the oral histories speak to a much broader range of romantic and sexual experiences that do not easily fit with common perceptions of 'dating', a term which is arguably a modern North American import anyway. For some, formative experiences of dating, love and sex extended to brief sexual encounters, separation, pregnancy, as well as abortion at an early age. For Greer Bland, born in Melbourne in 1944, it is the absence of dating, love or sex that is most pertinent. In the sample on the website, Greer discusses marriage restrictions during her employment in the Air Force, which she said made it difficult for her to pursue both a career and relationship. In the broader interview she in fact reveals never having had any significant romantic relationship throughout her life time. What was more significant in her life narration was her upbringing, connection to family, her agricultural training, and being socially isolated.

*From Glory Boxes to Grindr* offers an accessible space in which to sit, listen and consider the different attitudes and behaviours involved in forming (and not forming) romantic and sexual relationships across the generations, and how these intimacies are remembered and discussed. The interviews collectively illuminate how similarly volatile and transformative dating can be for anyone, and especially when you are geographically isolated, or socially marginalised. While dating, love and sexual encounters seem to have been more prescriptively controlled in the earlier part of the twentieth century, some of the participants who were dating in this period also discussed sexual and romantic relationships that were seemingly in radical opposition to the mores of the time. Brian Carter from Victoria travelled to the Kimberly in 1960 and met a Bardi woman, Violet, and the two eventually got married. He explained that because Violet was Aboriginal "she was under Native Welfare and I had to go through a lot of rigmarole to get permission to marry her. I just had to answer a lot of questions".

Oral histories are not always easily accessible or presented to a wider audience, though their importance in illuminating the complex intimacies and relationships formed in different historical periods

cannot be understated, as Brian's interview highlights. *From Glory Boxes to Grindr* exemplifies why the deeply personal stories of everyday life, from the ordinary to the extraordinary, need to be part of the Australian historical narrative. It is the intimate and important work of oral history that enables this process, and exhibitions like this one that will see these archives utilised, and these voices heard and shared.

Sophie Robinson, University of New South Wales,  
sophie.robinson@unsw.edu.au.

## Review

**Kaninjaku: Stories from the Canning Stock Route, online exhibition, National Museum of Australia, <http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/kaninjaku>.**

What is the Canning Stock Route and why don't I know more about it? The name is familiar but what is it exactly? When first opening the link to the exhibition, the audience is shown a painting depicting the stock route. Then, the description of the painting evokes some mystery – 'the invisibility of the road amongst the sand hills'. The audience is left wondering about why this is such an important point to emphasise at the very beginning. Then, the crux of the matter is revealed – 'Colonial history and strong influences on the lives of Aboriginal people'. This immediately raises red flags.

The exhibition is an attempt to use Aboriginal art as a vehicle for learning more about Australia's history and the espoused prominence of the Canning Stock Route. At the same time, there is no avoiding the fact that Aboriginal people have suffered horrendous treatment at the hands of the colonisers. Although not a popular version, this is an undeniable truth of Australia's history. The negative experiences suffered by Aboriginal people created trauma with on-going impact. This doesn't necessarily fit a western understanding of history. History is something that happened in the past. History is something to move on from, and is devoid of shame or guilt. The trauma still remains. Aboriginal people have used art and storytelling as one way of working through the trauma. An example of this ill-treatment was the 1908 Royal Commission, conducted to 'Enquire into the Treatment of Natives by the Canning Exploration Party':

During the Commission, Canning admitted to capturing a number of Martu men, feeding them salt and then chaining them up at night. His objective was to find sources of water along the route. He waited until the heat of the day, when they were thirsty and they would then lead Canning's party to water sources. During the Commission this action was accepted as

'reasonable' and Canning and other men in the party were exonerated of other charges, including raping Aboriginal women and stealing property.<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition website contains some of this contextual information, which is necessary for those members of the audience who wish to know some of the recorded facts. For anyone wanting to find it, other information about the stock route is readily available online at the Australian Government website<sup>2</sup>. A brief history is outlined on the site with an attempt at explaining the impact of the Canning Stock Route on the Aboriginal people. I found this additional background information helpful before continuing further exploration of the exhibition.

Continuing on, it becomes evident that the Canning Stock Route collection is extensive and includes the Aboriginal perspective about colonisation through both art and oral histories. The exhibition provides personal experiences and the 'human face' to the atrocities of colonisation in Australia, which in the past would have only been recorded in the history books as the triumph of Australian pioneering. The exhibition is a perfect example of the cause and effect nature of the mechanisms of colonisation, which result in differing perspectives from the 'powerful' and the 'powerless'. An example of this was the way that the Canning Stock Route was built around available water for the cattle and the pastoralists. Little regard was given to the Indigenous people depending on the water for survival. 'The wells built by Alfred Canning became sites of conflict between two cultures.'<sup>3</sup> An unusual result stemming directly from the creation of the wells is the way that Aboriginal identity became associated with the well numbers such as Lipuru (Well 37) and Natawalu (Well 40).

The Aboriginal people and stories that have contributed to the exhibition are presented as a unified group, because of the Canning Stock Route 'event' in history that has provided a common link. This concept of a shared history should actually be exposed for what it really is – a testament to the strength and resilience of Aboriginal people from the Western Desert region. The exhibition is a story of strong Aboriginal culture and survival. Aboriginal people have used art as a positive way forward. It is a very dignified approach to expressing a holistic and continuing story of knowledge and ownership, enabling a power shift. With this acknowledgement comes a degree of healing. The distinct narratives are important because 'We make sense of the world we live in, we create meaning, and we explain things that have happened to ourselves and others.'<sup>4</sup>

The Aboriginal artwork is not only aesthetically pleasing but each piece is an important historical record—primary and secondary sources of information. The importance to contemporary Australia is the fact that history can be known from this unique Aboriginal perspective other than just the imperial version that is most commonly published. The exhibition is an important Australian educational resource. Unfortunately, history in our primary and secondary schools does not include the Aboriginal voice, even though Aboriginal authors and academics such as Bruce Pascoe, Marcia Langton, and Aileen Moreton-Robinson (to name a few) are renowned for their contributions and representations of Aboriginal perspective and standpoint.

The Kaninjaku exhibition creates an ideal opportunity for the audience to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Australian history.

Tracy Woodroffe, Charles Darwin University, [tracy.woodroffe@cdu.edu.au](mailto:tracy.woodroffe@cdu.edu.au)

## **(Endnotes)**

- 1 Australian Government, The Canning Stock Route | australia.gov.au <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/canning-stock-route> 2011, May, par. 15
- 2 <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/canning-stock-route>
- 3 Australian Government, The Canning Stock Route | australia.gov.au <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/canning-stock-route> 2011, May, par. 3
- 4 N. Hunt, & S. McHale, *Making sense of trauma* (1st ed.), Sheldon Press, London, 2012, p. 1

# Membership information

## Oral History Australia

(formerly the Oral History Association of Australia)



The Oral History Association of Australia was established in 1978 in Perth, Western Australia and was renamed Oral History Australia in 2013. 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 OHA Journal. Members have access to a copy of the annual Oral History Australia Journal and newsletters and publications from their individual State branches. Among other publications, the South Australian branch of Oral History Australia has published the Oral History Handbook by Beth M Robertson, which is available to members at a discounted rate.

The Oral History Australia website can be found at: [www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au](http://www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au). National enquiries can be made to the Secretary at [secretary@oralhistoryaustralia.org.au](mailto:secretary@oralhistoryaustralia.org.au). Enquiries should be directed to State member associations at the following addresses:

### ACT

Incorporated into the New South Wales association.

### New South Wales

President: Anisa Puri  
Oral History Association of Australia Inc.  
PO Box 261  
Pennant Hills NSW 1715  
Email: [president@oralhistorynsw.org.au](mailto:president@oralhistorynsw.org.au)  
or: [secretary@oralhistorynsw.org.au](mailto:secretary@oralhistorynsw.org.au)  
Website: [www.oralhistorynsw.org.au](http://www.oralhistorynsw.org.au)

### Northern Territory

Incorporated into the South Australian Branch

### Queensland

President: Margaret Brown  
PO Box 3296  
Birkdale QLD 4159  
Email: [president@ohq.org.au](mailto:president@ohq.org.au)  
or: [info@ohq.org.au](mailto:info@ohq.org.au)  
Website: <http://www.ohq.org.au/>

### South Australia

President: June Edwards  
PO Box 3113,  
Unley SA 5061  
Email: [ejune32@yahoo.com](mailto:ejune32@yahoo.com)  
Website: [www.oralhistoryaustraliasant.org.au](http://www.oralhistoryaustraliasant.org.au)

### Tasmania

President: Jill Cassidy  
c/- Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery,  
PO Box 403,  
Launceston Tas 7250  
Mobile: 0418 178 098  
Email: [mandjcassidy@gmail.com](mailto:mandjcassidy@gmail.com)  
Website: <http://www.oralhistorytas.org.au/>

### Victoria

President: Susan Faine  
C/o RHSV  
239 A'Beckett Street  
Melbourne Vic 3000  
Email: [president@oralhistoryvictoria.org.au](mailto:president@oralhistoryvictoria.org.au)  
or: [susan@susanfaine.com.au](mailto:susan@susanfaine.com.au)  
Website: [www.oralhistoryvictoria.org.au](http://www.oralhistoryvictoria.org.au)

### Western Australia

President: Doug Ayre  
PO Box 26,  
Northbeach WA 6920  
Email: [ohaawa@gmail.com](mailto:ohaawa@gmail.com)  
or: [history@westnet.com.au](mailto:history@westnet.com.au)  
Website: [www.ohaa-wa.com.au](http://www.ohaa-wa.com.au)



# CALL FOR PAPERS

Contributions are invited from Australia and overseas for publication in  
Oral History Australia Journal No. 40, 2018

## *Moving Memories: Oral Histories in a Global World*

Contributions are invited in the following three categories:

**A** Papers on the themes of the Biennial National Conference held in Sydney in September 2017 (*limit 5,500 words*), 'Moving Memories - Oral Histories in a Global World.' Themes are:

- Migration
- Journeys and pilgrimage
- Contested memories across cultures in local communities
- Sensory memories
- Oral history and emotions
- Movement across and within borders
- Mobile apps and podcasts for oral histories
- Oral history as listening
- Digital technology in a global world
- Place and belonging.

Papers in Category A may be submitted to the Oral History Australia Editorial Board for peer-review. However, please note:

- Papers for peer-review must demonstrate 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 2018, they may not be processed in time for publication in the 2018 issue of the Journal. Furthermore, regardless of when offers are forwarded to the Board, no guarantee of publication can be given, due to availability and time constraints of reviewers.
- Before being submitted for peer-review, papers will first be assessed for suitability by the Editorial Board. Authors will be advised of the recommendations made by the Chair of the Board.

**Deadline for Category A submissions for peer-review: 28 February 2018** Forward to: Dr Ariella van Luyn, Chair, Oral History Australia Editorial Board, email: [Ariella.vanLuyn@jcu.edu.au](mailto:Ariella.vanLuyn@jcu.edu.au), mobile: 0401 925 228.

**B** Articles/project reports 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*).

**Deadline for Category B submissions: 1 April 2018**

Forward to: Dr Sue Anderson, Editor, Oral History Australia Journal, email: [Sue.Anderson@unisa.edu.au](mailto:Sue.Anderson@unisa.edu.au).

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

**Deadline for Category C submissions: 1 April 2018**

Forward to: Dr Jayne Persian, Reviews Editor, Oral History Australia Journal, email: [Jayne.Persian@usq.edu.au](mailto:Jayne.Persian@usq.edu.au).

### **Accompanying Materials**

Photographs, drawings and other illustrations are particularly welcome, and may be offered for any of the above categories of contribution. Please obtain written permission from image owners and make every endeavour to ascertain the name of the photographer.