

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF
ORAL HISTORY

Edited by
DONALD A. RITCHIE

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INTRODUCTION: THE EVOLUTION OF ORAL HISTORY

DONALD A. RITCHIE

ORAL history is as old as the first recorded history and as new as the latest digital recorder. Long before the practice acquired a name and standard procedures, historians conducted interviews to gain insight into great events, beginning at least as early as Thucydides, who based his account of the Peloponnesian wars "partly on what I saw myself, partly on what others saw for me." Efforts to collect and preserve oral reminiscences predated the tape recorder, and they exist in archives today in various forms, from interrogations recorded by church scribes during the Inquisition, to veterans' pension applications for American Revolutionary War pensions, and interviews with former slaves conducted by unemployed writers hired by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression.¹

In the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson commented that "all history was at first oral," but the term "oral history" was first used in reference to troubadours and oral traditions.² Oral history did not attach itself to interviewing until an article appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1942 about Joe Gould, a Greenwich Village bohemian who claimed to be compiling "An Oral History of Our Time." Gould told of interviewing the "shirt-sleeved multitude" in saloons and on park benches, because "what people say is history." Gould's quest earned him many free meals, but was later revealed to be a figment of his imagination. He left behind no manuscript. The label stuck, however, and in 1948, when the Columbia University history professor Allan Nevins established the first archives to conduct and preserve interviews, he called it the Oral History Research Office.³

Nevins had turned to history after a career in journalism, where interviewing direct participants in events was a mainstay of the reporter's trade. A prolific writer, Nevins plumbed the traditional archival sources, manuscripts, memoirs, and newspaper accounts, but he grew concerned that modern communications and transportation were lessening the impetus for letter writing and diary keeping. Funded by modest grants from the university and a private foundation, Nevins set out to record the reminiscences of major players in important events, politicians, jurists, business executives, and military officers.⁴

His innovative approach to history swam against the tide within the profession. A leading research primer of the 1950s, *The Modern Researcher*, written by two of Nevins's colleagues at Columbia, Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, acknowledged his oral history project in a single footnote, observing confidently that "The written word is still so compelling, however, that these recordings are transcribed and the typescripts filed like books." Barzun and Graff called for scholarly skepticism and verification of evidence, dismissing eyewitness testimony as biased and unreliable, and linking interviews to sociology rather than history. (In the 1920s and 1930s, sociologists at the University of Chicago had pioneered in the use of ethnographic interviewing for studying urban life.) The walls of the library and archives defined the historian's world, rather than going out "in the field," to interview participants.⁵ Historians had been strongly influenced by the work of Leopold von Ranke, the nineteenth-century German scholar who emphasized archival documentation for greater accuracy in history. Even Ranke regarded eyewitness account as "the most genuine and direct sources," but since he was dealing with the distant past he meant the documents that participants had left behind.⁶

The news media, reflecting its own reliance on interviewing, gave more credibility to the emergence of oral history. A 1950 editorial in the *New York Times* mused about what it would be like to have recordings of George Washington describing the Battle of Trenton, or Abraham Lincoln discussing his Gettysburg Address, and urged other universities to follow Columbia's lead. Thanks to Columbia's oral histories, the editorial predicted, "history students in 2050 will know more about this generation than we know about the year 1850."⁷ During the 1950s, oral history archives were developed at the University of California at Los Angeles and at Berkeley. Over time, more universities followed this lead, as did presidential libraries, government agencies, corporations, labor unions, and religious orders, which sponsored their own oral archives.

Where the first oral history projects in the United States started with a "top down" focus on political, economic, and cultural elites, European oral historians were more rooted in social and cultural history, and allied with political movements on the Left. They reexamined history from the "bottom up," intending to include the voices of those previously excluded from national narratives. A sense of social responsibility motivated this approach, which challenged the social and intellectual status quo by interviewing those who had been overlooked or oppressed. By creating a history of everyday lives, they aimed to contribute to the larger movement

to improve those lives, and, as Ronald Grele put it, "to radicalize the practice of history."⁸

In 1966 British historians founded the History Workshop at the trade union-sponsored Ruskin College, on the belief that history should be a collaboration of the efforts of researchers, archivists, curators, local historians, and "the 'do-it-yourself' enthusiast." Oral history was one of the tools that fit all. The radical adult education movement combined with women's history and community history to shape British oral history, which also received a boost from Ronald Blythe's widely acclaimed *Akenfield* (1969), a portrait of an East Anglian village drawn from his interviews with rural agricultural folk. In 1978 Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* helped give scholarly credibility to the "hidden histories" that interviewing revealed.⁹ In the United States, the "bottom up" approach also took hold in the 1970s, with American oral historians increasingly turning their attention to race, class, gender, and local communities. Promoting this trend were the best-selling oral histories by Studs Terkel, *Hard Times* (1970), *Working* (1974), and *The "Good War"* (1984), which made the method far more widely recognized. A veteran of the WPA's Federal Writers' Project, Terkel was a radio interviewer who based his books on the long interviews he had conducted on the air. An earlier television career might have reduced him to sound bites except that he was blacklisted for his leftist politics and returned to the radio, where he spent the next half century talking to people in a medium that tolerated long interviews.¹⁰

Oral historians debated the merits of "elite" versus "non-elite" interviewing, but many came to appreciate that the same methodology fit both approaches. The British emphasis on working-class interviews had led to the observation that a fisherman was more likely to be interviewed than a Member of Parliament. But over time the focus expanded and, for instance, social historians approached "the City" (the oldest part of London) to record from the inside the transformation of London's financial establishment.¹¹ Interviewers could record generals or privates, managers or workers, activists and the apolitical, and projects that recorded multiple perspectives from different levels developed a more comprehensive picture of the actions and counteractions, motives and results in human events. Oral historians collected the recollections of soldiers and antiwar protestors, women in the war industries, Holocaust survivors, civil rights demonstrators, political refugees, immigrants, and those grappling with their sexual identity.

Oral history projects became a staple of college campuses and community organizations, but governments also saw the value in collecting interviews. During World War II, the U.S. military began dispatching interviewers to war zones, where they recorded soldiers' combat experiences immediately after battle. Interviewers later followed the troops across Europe to Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. War-related projects interviewed combatants on both sides, whether in Japan and the United States after World War II or in Great Britain and Argentina after the Falklands War. They sought military planners, prisoners of war, conscientious objectors, and defense workers. Intelligence agencies, whose personnel were prohibited

from speaking openly to outsiders, conducted internal interviews to create their own archives. On the domestic side, national parks collected oral histories for their historic sites, using the testimony for reconstructing buildings, preparing orientation films, and providing information for visitors.

The oral history movement spread worldwide, with a proliferation of oral history projects and national associations. Beyond the United States and Western Europe, it expanded into Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America as they were undergoing social and political upheaval, and where the written archives reflected discredited regimes. Oral historians recorded the testimonies of those who overturned the old order, along with those who had suffered under those regimes. In South Africa, where racial apartheid collapsed and a multiracial democracy emerged, oral historians noted that their George Washingtons and Thomas Jeffersons were still living and available to be interviewed. Eastern European oral historians recorded those who toppled and replaced the Communist regimes, but having lived with a one-sided history under the old regime they set out to interview both the victors and the vanquished. Other societies found oral history useful for confronting and understanding old injustices. Australians have reexamined their relations with Aborigines, just as American and Canadian interviews with Native American and First Peoples helped explain their diverse cultures.¹²

MILESTONES IN SOUND RECORDING

Advancements in recording equipment made all these developments possible. But technology has challenged as well as propelled the field of oral history. Practitioners have benefitted from and must also cope with their technologically driven methodology. Interviewers, constituting a tiny segment of the consuming public, could exert little influence on the developing technology, and instead have adjusted their practices to fit whatever the recording industry produced. In purchasing equipment, oral historians have had to "follow the music," since the most popular ways of playing music dominated the markets for recording equipment, regardless of their suitability for recording and preserving interviews. Equipment that is compatible with the technology most widely used for music sales will be likely to last the longest, even if some other technologies are superior, the way Betamax lost to VHS. Projects that failed to keep current with technology quickly became outmoded, restricting the usefulness of their collections. Others changed with the times, seizing upon new opportunities to conduct and disseminate interviews in ways that not long ago would have been unimaginable.

In the late nineteenth century, sound was first recorded on wax cylinders, some of which still survive and have been copied onto tape and digital formats. Other audio formats, from gramophones to vinyl records, replaced wax cylinders, but were generally impractical for field work. When the WPA dispatched unemployed

writers during the Depression to conduct interviews, most simply made notes on paper. Their stenography was notoriously uneven, and a few apparently used their writing talents to embellish their transcripts.¹³

Rudimentary wire recorders dated back to the 1898 but became more practical in the 1940s. Even then their cumbersome size generally limited their use to office dictation. At Normandy Beach, military historians used the wire recorders for debriefings on hospital ships but feared that the bulky wire recorders would draw sniper fire on shore. Wire recorders used steel piano wire to make recordings. These were durable for archival preservation—some lasted for a half century after the war—but the wire could also tangle and break, and it was difficult to edit.

As soon as wire recorders became less expensive and more readily available for consumer purchase, they were rendered obsolete by the introduction of magnetic tape recorders in 1948. Magnetic tape had been developed in Germany, and it was only after the Allies invaded during World War II that they acquired any tape recorders. While wire recordings were fine for voice, magnetic tape was much more popular because of its portability, high fidelity, and ability to accommodate stereo music recordings, which accounted for its postwar popularity. Reel-to-reel tape recorders became the mainstay of the first oral history archives. They combined improved recording facilities with archival-quality tape.

The first commercial tape recorder went on the market in 1948, the same year that the Columbia Oral History Research Office opened. Columbia recorded its interviews on reel-to-reel and then transcribed them, allowing interviewees to correct the transcript, practices, and principles that influenced other oral history archives. Because the edited transcript varied from the spoken word, Columbia regarded the recordings as irrelevant once they had been transcribed. To save money, always in short supply, it recorded other interviews over its original tapes. When a scholar raised objection to this policy in 1962, then director Louis Starr doubted the practicality of storing hundreds of hours of recordings that "would have to be indexed to be of much use, and that in itself would be pretty expensive." He also noted that only one of the hundreds of people who had used the oral history collection had ever asked to hear a tape.¹⁴ Columbia's cost-saving elevated practice into principle and promoted the transcript over the recording. Other projects recognized the importance of the "aural" nature of interviews and began saving their recordings. The Columbia practice of downgrading the recordings in favor of transcription influenced American practices but was not adopted in Europe, due to its origins among linguists and folklorists, and also because the British oral historians Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson took an early stance in favor of the value of the tape as documentation.¹⁵

The first Columbia transcripts also turned the dialogue of the interview into an autobiographical monologue by deleting all the questions. The responses therefore appeared as a long, uninterrupted narrative, implying that interviewing was generic and that interviewers were interchangeable. This format, by omitting the give-and-take of the interview, obscured the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, which can significantly influence the discussion. When answering

questions, people talk about issues and provide information that they might not have volunteered unprompted. Interviewees often adjust their responses depending on the age, race, gender, and status of the interviewer, providing what they think the interviewer wants to hear, and also to shape the interpretation of the interview. The practice of omitting questions from the transcript was challenged by other oral historians, notably those at Duke University, whose methodologies called for more active involvement of interviewers in the interview process, warning that passive interviewers surrendered too much of their professional capacity. Rooted in social history and influenced by the social sciences, this school of thinking called for more thorough research and scholarly analysis of interviews.

The next milestone in oral history occurred in 1963, when the Netherlands-based Royal Phillips Electronics, Inc. (otherwise known as Phillips) introduced the compact cassette tape recorder. Portable recorders using cassette tapes eliminated the need to thread large reels. Since they were less expensive and easier to carry, cassette recorders quickly supplanted the reel-to-reel recorder, despite the longer archival shelf life of reel-to-reel tape. For years afterwards, the National Archives continued to request that oral histories be submitted on reel-to-reel, requiring some donors to copy their cassettes onto reel-to-reel. The copy became the "original" for preservation purposes, while the cassettes was designated the "copy" for research use. Over time, as the manufacturing of reel-to-reel recorders declined, oral history archives either had to maintain obsolete equipment to play back their interviews or to go through the expensive process of transferring their recording to cassettes. Veteran interviewers clung to their antiquated recorders, feeling comfortable with them, and cannibalized old machines for parts to keep a few of them operating. By 1984 cassette tape recorders had become so prevalent that for the first time music cassettes surpassed the sale of LP records.

Portable cassette recorders vastly expanded the number of oral history practitioners and facilitated field-based interviewing that better suited the growing "bottom up" approach to history. Extensive interviews were conducted regarding racial segregation and the civil rights movement, and with environmentalists, jazz musicians, Hispanic farm workers, folk crafts artists, and any number of other groups. When the military sent historian interviewers into Vietnam in the 1960s to conduct postcombat debriefings, they carried cassette recorders. Soldiers in Vietnam, and their families back home, often exchanged cassettes of chat and music, many of which have survived under the worst possible conditions before being donated to archives for preservation. It was still relatively expensive to record and preserve oral histories, and projects tended to be located in larger institutions.

In 1966 American oral historians held their first national colloquium at Lake Arrowhead, California, as a result of which they founded the Oral History Association the following year. Among the participants at that first meeting were professors of history, economics, and speech, journalists, archivists, and librarians, government historians, folklorists, psychoanalysts, state and local historical society directors, and a number of people connected with medical history and medical libraries.¹⁶ British oral historians held their first meeting in December 1969 at the British

Institute of Recorded Sound (now the British Library Sound Archives), launched the journal *Oral History* in 1971, and founded the Oral History Society in 1973. In 1979 the British Oral History Society hosted the first International Conference on Oral History at the University of Essex, and other international meetings were held over the next decade in Western Europe. In 1996 the International Oral History Association (IOHA) adopted a constitution and began holding biennial meetings beyond Europe, from Latin America to Africa and Australia. The same years saw the formation of national oral history associations, among them Canada (1974), Australia (1978), New Zealand (1986), Argentina (1996), Brazil (1998), Japan (2003), South Africa (2004), Italy (2005), Argentina (2005), Czech Republic (2007), and Ukraine (2007). Each ran its own meetings and workshops and published journals, further encouraging oral history interviews.

THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

It may have been coincidental that formal organization of the IOHA occurred in 1996, a year of explosive growth in the newly emerging Internet, but the enterprise likely would not have succeeded without the digital communications revolution. Between biennial meetings, its council grappled with concerns about finances, publications, translation, education, connections to national oral history associations, and scholarships to encourage diversity at the meetings. Spread out across the world, its members met electronically and distributed their announcements and newsletters online. Without email and the Internet, this multitude of tasks would have been insurmountable. At the same time, oral history projects everywhere established Web sites to advertise and disseminate their collections.

Digital electronics broke like a wave over the analog world during the 1980s. The first digital recordings, on compact discs (CDs), were introduced to the market in 1982. Five years later, digital audio tape (DAT) recorders appeared. By 1988 CDs topped record sales, and over the next decade they replaced cassettes in sales. As the music world changed, cassettes survived primarily through the sale of books on tape. Once the audiobooks were transferred to disk, however, cassette tapes went the way of reel-to-reel. While analog tape recorders are still used by projects that invested heavily in older equipment, oral historians have trouble finding merchants who still stock cassette tapes.

Minidiscs came on the market in 1992. In 2001 Apple introduced the iPod, which students began using for interviews, since all they needed was to purchase inexpensive microphones to adapt them to oral history. Older practitioners preferred more substantial digital recorders, although the correlation between size and sound quality had disappeared. Military historians in Iraq recorded postcombat interviews on compact flash audio recorders, emailing the sound files back to their headquarters for transcription.

Paralleling the changes in recording equipment were the electronic communications that linked oral historians and enlarged access to their collections. Email became available in the 1980s, and by the 1990s the Internet opened a world of possibilities. Oral historians established the H-ORALHIST listserv to post announcements, pose questions, and share answers. Some oral history archives posted their catalogs online, while others put up entire transcripts, along with sound and video recordings. Research use multiplied exponentially, reaching new audiences of teachers and students, genealogists and local historians, and casual Web browsers. Where previously archivists had lamented that not enough researchers consulted their oral histories, they now worried that too many might use them, perhaps improperly. They would lose their "guardianship relationship" with the interviews in their collections if anyone could read them online. Archivists grew concerned about protecting interviewees' privacy and whether their original consent agreements permitted Internet posting, and many have taken care to consult with interviewees before posting anything about them. As sites began to include both the recording and the transcript, they also highlighted the differences between the two, reviving the debate over whether transcripts should be strictly verbatim, or whether interviewees should be able to edit them. Some projects resisted transcripts entirely, preferring that researchers listen to the sounds of the interview. Research in sound recordings was facilitated by the development of spoken-word indexing. Another unexpected result of placing interviews on the Internet was that for the first time oral historians were likely to access interviews done by their colleagues, opening the possibility of worldwide peer review.¹⁷

The marriage of oral history and digital electronic technology has bred creative uses for interviews. Oral history has been used to provide commentary for audio walking tours of historical areas. Some universities are offering oral history courses online, or as distance learning through video links, with faculty and students communicating electronically, and student projects being published on CD-ROMs. One oral historian at the Regional Oral History Office in Berkeley has used text messaging to interview a man with severe disabilities that affect his speech.

Digital recording also facilitated video interviews, adding what the Impressionist artist Paul Gauguin called the "listening eye." As early as the first oral history colloquium in 1966, a participant advocated recording interviews on 16mm motion picture film to preserve the "intangibles" of appearance and expression. By then Sony had already introduced its first consumer video cameras, and in 1969 the first videocassettes went on the market. Experts warned oral historians not to conduct video interviews by themselves because video cameras still required lights and a crew to record at a decent quality, and to reduce the number of distractions for the interviewers. By 1996 DVD cameras were introduced in Japan, and soon afterward the same experts were reporting that without the need for additional lighting and bulky equipment, they were able to conduct interviews and keep an eye on them through discreet monitors held in their laps. While the debate has continued over whether interviewees would be intimidated by the cameras, advocates argue that those with a story to tell will tell it regardless of the equipment being used,

particularly if the equipment is placed unobtrusively. In a notable demonstration of people's willingness to be interviewed on camera, even about the most painful memories, the Shoah Visual History Foundation project since 1994 has amassed an archive of more than fifty thousand video testimonies in thirty-two languages from Holocaust survivors.

The migration of sound recordings from analog to digital has additional costs for older projects, both in terms of purchasing new equipment and in converting extensive collections to the new medium. New equipment appears on the market so quickly that recent acquisitions may approach obsolescence and discontinuation before the interviewer has gotten used to operating it. DAT recorders and minidisks have already been relegated to the shelves with eight-track players and VHS tapes. Fortunately, once in the digital domain the whole act of transferring data becomes simpler, quicker, and more automated. The constant changes in technology have generally kept oral historians, like Alice through the looking glass, running as fast as they can just to stay in place.

THE INTELLECTUAL EVOLUTION OF ORAL HISTORY

The strata of technological development have been matched by multiple layers of interpretation. As a method of collecting and interpreting information, oral history has attracted a remarkable diversity of disciplines, from historians to archivists, curators, journalists, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, folklorists, and educators at all levels. This multidisciplinary foundation has constantly expanded to incorporate the interests and needs of new practitioners, encouraging them to consider each other's different methods and uses of interviewing. As a sign of this diversity, graduate and undergraduate courses in oral history taught at universities are often offered outside of history departments. Many fields consider interviewing a valuable skill as well as a teaching tool that engages students through "active learning."

Oral history's big tent incorporates both the humanities and social sciences, and methodological debates have ranged among its dissimilar constituents. For instance, anthropologists and sociologists have a long tradition of participatory observation and the use of anonymity and pseudonyms for the individuals and communities they study, while historians expect verification through identifiable sources. Although one approach may be unconventional by the other's standards, oral historians have tried to respect and learn from these differences. Indeed, the great strength of both oral history meetings and literature has come from the intersection of disciplines, with practitioners including ideas from multiple fields in their citations, although too often other fields omitted oral history sources from their own notes. Over time, this one-way traffic also began to change and "oral history"

began appearing in the titles and notes of scholarly articles in diverse fields, such as medical journals, which carried articles considering not only the evidence gathered from oral history but the therapeutic value of doing interviews with patients.

Like Allan Nevins, historians have generally conducted interviews to acquire information that would otherwise not have existed, since their subjects were writing fewer letters and diaries. This approach seeks in interviews the small but telling details that previously escaped notice and were overlooked in the historical narrative. They do interviews to hear the observations and perspectives of eyewitnesses, even if the testimony confounds their own assumptions. Information gained from interviews can force historians to rethink what they thought they knew, and there will often be unexpected discrepancies between the written and oral sources. Much of the initial scholarly resistance to oral history had to do with its "subjective" nature. Memory can change over time and is dependent on perception. Documents were unchangeable and therefore seen to be "objective." Although oral historians recognize the fallibility of memory, they do not put more weight on a source just because it has been written down. They have found that memos have been written to obscure rather than illuminate what happened; that memoirs can be notoriously self-serving; and that newspapers sometimes get the story wrong. Contradictory oral testimony has forced interviewers to reexamine the written sources and sometimes alert them to documents they might not have consulted, or that the archives might not have collected. More than one oral historian has been rewarded by an interviewee with a box of pertinent letters, photographs, or artifacts long stored in an attic, which verify the narrator's version of events.

Anthropologists, folklorists, linguists, and others have been attracted not only by the details that interviewees recall but also by what they fail to remember, get wrong, or choose to remain silent about. Memory studies have examined autobiographical memory (unique to a particular individual), collective memory (the historical consciousness of a group), and public memory (the ways in which communities remember and commemorate their past), pursuing the patterns of memory among many narrators. Oral history and memory studies differ but are compatible. Oral history relies on people's testimony to understand the past, while memory studies concentrate on the process of remembering and how that shapes people's understanding of the past. Memory studies are often more interested in how facts are remembered and in distortion of facts than in the facts themselves. But since oral historians deal so directly with long-term memory, they have incorporated memory studies into their own methodological discussions.¹⁸

While people are interviewed at different stages in their lives, many are more comfortable giving reflective interviews in their retirement rather than at mid-career. It is not simply a matter of having more time on their hands. In the 1960s, the gerontologist Robert Butler put forward the notion that as people grow older they go through a mental process of "life review." Long forgotten earlier memories return and grow vivid as people sort through their successes and failures. Such life review can cause depression and despair in some, and candor and serenity in others.¹⁹ Though Butler's theories immediately appealed to oral historians and to

those working with the elderly in nursing homes and hospitals, psychologists and gerontologists and those working in "reminiscence therapy," given their preference for quantified studies, did not begin studying "autobiographical memory" until the 1980s.²⁰

Social scientists generally depended on structured and standardized questionnaires to obtain the maximum amount of valid, reliable information, while minimizing distortions of what respondents knew. Others, influenced by the "linguistic turn" of social inquiry, felt that this approach failed to question where their informants' knowledge was coming from, and how it was derived. What sociologists have called "active interviews" transformed their interviewees from "subjects" into "constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers." They argued in favor of more conversational interviews whose means are cooperatively reached and interpreted. The interviewer's objection should not be to dictate the interpretation through a predetermined agenda but to provide a conducive environment for people to address relevant issues in their lives.²¹

Robert Butler's concept of "life review" significantly influenced oral historians, although Butler himself remained skeptical of oral history. He found it a shame that oral historians did not use a standard questionnaire. Rooted in scientific methodologies, Butler wanted quantifiable data for generalizable research. Emerging from the humanities, oral historians have generally rejected questionnaires, except for specific issues, reasoning that no single set of questions could encompass the diversities of experiences, observations, and opinions that their projects record. Oral history interviewers often find that the best material they collect was volunteered by the interviewees with little prompting, sometimes covering subjects they had not anticipated and about which they had prepared no questions. "I didn't know that, can you tell me more about it?" being the best response they could make.²²

An aggregate of individual memories forms the collective memory of a group or community. Often organized around an anniversary, oral history projects have focused on the history of businesses, unions, religious orders, military units, faculties, alumni, townspeople, activists, and volunteers. In some cases, the institution or the structure at the heart of the project survives only in the memories of the participants. Collective memory can record tragedy as well as triumphs, and in some cases plays a role in a community's attempts to emerge from a difficult past. Since the end of World War II there have been repeated efforts to air past atrocities and heal a nation through Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Seeking amnesty, the accused are required to provide "full disclosure" of their past actions, and what they recall is matched against the testimony of their surviving victims. Oral historians have carefully studied the testimonies elicited by these commissions, recognizing that a large gap between their methodology and those of the more politically motivated commissions.²³

Oral historians have also discovered that whole communities have rearranged their recollections collectively to make them more convenient and relevant to the present, a phenomenon that has been highlighted in the influential work of Alessandro Portelli.²⁴ In these cases, interviews remain meaningful, despite their

errors in fact, by revealing how the community has made sense of a troubled past. Communal forgetting sometimes involves deliberate efforts to expunge unpleasant events from the record. Inhabitants of Centralia, Washington, for instance, resisted the efforts of public historians to install any historical markers or visitor information about the bloody battle that took place there in 1919 between members of the International Workers of the World (the IWW) and the American Legion. A researcher in Salonika, Greece, looking for signs of its Jewish community, which had been the majority of the city's population before World War II, interviewed one of the few remaining Jewish residents. The woman regretted how the city had eliminated all references to that part of its history. "There is nothing in the historical institutes. Nothing in the city's museums. Hardly a book in the Greek bookstores. Nothing. As if we were never here."²⁵

Collective memory suffers bouts of amnesia. Even such traumatic events as the great influenza epidemic that claimed twenty million lives worldwide followed World War I have faded into obscurity. The historian William McNeil was just a year old when his mother and newborn sister came down with the flu in December 1918. He later observed that his parents made no written record of the event and expunged the most dreadful experience of their entire lives from family memory, so that exactly what happened and how they survived remain completely unknown to him. What the family did mention was that they had survived by going to a grandmother's farm in Canada, meaning that the tale survived in the family's oral tradition only "because the story had a happy ending." McNeil concluded that perhaps there was "nothing much to say or remember after such an experience," which may explain why the influenza epidemic left so few traces in human memory.²⁶

More recent catastrophes, however, have inspired oral historians to work at the "intersection of grief and history." An increasing number of projects have combined an interest in recording major events of the immediate past, broaden the scope of voices of history, and provide a cathartic release for the victims. Natural disasters have also generated major oral history efforts. When Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in August 2005, oral historians immediately began implementing their methodology to document the storm and its aftermath, both with those who stayed behind and those who were evacuated to other areas. The projects ranged from on-the-spot interviewing in Mississippi and Louisiana to refugees spread out from Tennessee to Texas, focusing on different aspects of the events, from rescue efforts during the flooding to medical assistance, religious responses, and the memories of specific groups, such as "Katrina's Jewish Voices." As it became clearer that the same events affect different segments of the population in different ways, oral historians in Central Florida interviewed the homeless about their experiences with three hurricanes that ripped through the state, comparing the effects of the storms on them as opposed to property owners. With fewer material concerns, the homeless received shelter and food after the storm and found work in the cleanup. The same traumatic events caused less disruption in their lives and allowed them to contribute to society.²⁷

Interviewing soon after such a traumatic event created new considerations for oral historians and initiated extensive discussions about the issues of historical distance, objectivity, reflection, and emotional trauma. After the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, oral historians began recording a wide cross section of people affected by the events, in part to preserve a multitude of experiences and observations, and in part to study what memories people take away from such events and how long they retain them. Most oral histories have been conducted long after the events, when people have had the benefit of hindsight, and when later experiences caused them to revise their earlier stories. Interviews taken in the immediate aftermath of September 11 will likely be different from those recorded years later. An oral history project conducted at Columbia University has followed this progression by returning to interview the same people at regular intervals. Other projects have ranged from the efforts of New York City Fire Department to record interview with firefighters, paramedics, and emergency medical technicians on the events of that day, to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers interviews with the boat crews who evacuated panicked New Yorkers from lower Manhattan. They noted that in the hectic days following the attacks, written records were sparse and contained mostly "dry, official documentation of any disaster response," while the interviews they collected recorded the human drama.²⁸ Beyond direct participants, the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress also instituted a September 11 project to document the thoughts and concerns of citizens from across the country.

Outside of the academic world, oral history has become a mainstay of genealogists, community historians, and others. Thousands of individuals have been encouraged by the Library of Congress's Veterans Project to conduct and submit interviews with relatives and friends who were veterans of various wars or had experiences on the home front. Hundreds of others have visited the StoryCorps booths in New York's Grand Central Terminal, in order to record short interviews with each other. Founded by a radio producer, StoryCorps also dispatches mobile booths around the United States, inviting people to record their own brief interviews, highlights of which are broadcast on National Public Radio. One journalist who reviewed the recordings concluded that "part of the appeal of the clips was that in less than five minutes, each of the interviews gave a real sense of someone else's experience. We are storytellers and listeners by nature, but we are also, by nature, curious about other people." While such brief narratives are entertaining to listeners and satisfying to the tellers, they are little more than snapshots, not as substantial as full scale oral history and therefore less likely to be woven into the historical narrative.²⁹

Whether as professionals or amateurs, all oral historians need to respect the dignity and autonomy of those being interviewed. Every oral history project should use legal release forms that define the interviewee's wishes for the recording and transcript and meet the copyright needs of archives and publishers. Oral historians have debated, created, and promulgated ethical and legal standards of practice, in addition to guidelines for evaluating oral history projects. Rather than being carved

in stone, these standards have been periodically revised to accommodate new developments and new technologies. Funding agencies regularly use such standards for judging professional competency. Complicating this effort has been the emergence of academic requirements for human subject review. Although designed for medical and behavioral science research with the potential for inflicting harm, some of these rules have deemed oral history as a form of human interaction. For the most part, oral history standards more than meet requirements for human subject review. However, some review boards have set inappropriate requirements, instructing interviewers to avoid asking embarrassing questions, to erase tapes, and to cite interviewees anonymously rather by name, procedures that ran contrary to the canons of the field.

"Oral history has never had more currency," *US News & World Report* declared in a 2007 cover story on the Veterans Project at the Library of Congress.³⁰ Technologically, the equipment available for conducting, preserving, and disseminating interviews in audio or video form has become more diverse and affordable. Academically, oral history has moved from the margins into the mainstream, as a readily accepted—and rigorous—method in a multitude of disciplines, as well as a proven teaching tool. Universities and the United States and Great Britain have begun offering graduate degrees in oral history and life history research. The International Oral History Association attracts hundreds of oral historians, from within and without the university, from dozens of countries at meetings that have traveled from Rome to Sydney, Rio de Janeiro, and Istanbul.

The Oxford Handbook on Oral History weaves together these many threads to display the intricate fabric of oral history worldwide. While basic interviewing skills remain fundamental to all forms of oral history, uses of the practice vary widely by nation and discipline. Oral historians may interview within a community or cross-culturally. They question the educated and the illiterate, the victors and the vanquished, those at the center of events and those on the periphery. Oral historians must be attentive to what people remember and why they forget or rearrange events of the past. They record both triumph and tragedy, whether immediately after the events when emotions still boil, or after they have simmered and individuals can reflect on their lasting impact. They experiment with modes of interview, in audio and visual formats, and apply the latest technology to conduct, preserve, and disseminate their work. They cope with legal and ethical issues that affect the doing and the using of oral history, and the relationship between interviewers and narrators, as well as archivists and researchers. They offer case studies of projects, new and well established, some undergoing transformation as new generations of oral historians reconsider what has been collected, what needs to be done, and what new equipment can offer. They evaluate implementation of oral history in education and public presentation. The articles in this volume reflect the past and project future directions. Having grown more widely used and accepted than ever, oral history will continue to evolve with the latest technologies and spawn new interpretations, testing practitioners' creativity in their applications.

NOTES

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