



Dancing through the memory of our movement: four paradigmatic revolutions in oral history

Dr. Alistair THOMSON

University of Sussex, United Kingdom

This paper was presented at the XIVth INTERNATIONAL ORAL HISTORY CONFERENCE, SYDNEY, 2006. A longer version is available as 'Four paradigm transformations in oral history', *Oral History Review (USA)*, 34, 1, 2007, pp 49-70

In the course of editing a second edition of *The Oral History Reader*, Rob Perks and myself have had the pleasure and privilege of scouring recent oral history scholarship and reviewing the history and development of our movement.¹ We have identified four paradigmatic revolutions in oral history: the post-war renaissance of memory as a source for 'people's history'; the development, from the late 1970s, of 'post-positivist' approaches to memory and subjectivity; a transformation in perceptions about the role of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst from the late 1980s; and the digital revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Threaded through discussion of these paradigm shifts, this paper also reflects upon four factors that have impacted upon oral history and have, in turn, been significantly influenced by oral historians: the growing significance of political and legal practices in which personal testimony is a central resource; the increasing interdisciplinarity of approaches to interviewing and the interpretation of memory; the proliferation from the 1980s of studies concerned with the relationship between history and memory; and the evolving internationalism of oral history.

The first paradigm transformation - and the genesis of contemporary oral history - was the post World War Two renaissance in the use of memory as a source for historical research. Paul Thompson, among others, charts the prehistory of the modern oral history movement, explaining that historians from ancient times relied upon eyewitness accounts of significant events, until the nineteenth-century development of an academic history discipline led to the primacy of archival research and documentary sources, and a marginalization of oral evidence.² Gradual acceptance of the usefulness of oral evidence, and the increasing availability of portable tape recorders, underpinned the development of oral history after the Second World War. The timing and pattern of this emergence differed markedly around the world. For example, the first organized oral history project was initiated by Allan Nevins at Columbia University in New York in 1948, and his interest in archival recordings with white male elites was representative of early oral history activity in the United States. In Britain in the 1950s and 1960s oral history pioneers were more interested in recording the experiences of so-called 'ordinary' working people and had initial links with folklore studies; George Ewart Evans, for example, famously determined to 'ask the fellows who cut the hay'.³ The lived experience of working class, women's or black history was undocumented or ill-recorded and oral history was an essential source for the 'history from below' fostered by politically-committed social historians in Britain and around the world from the 1960s onwards.

Paul Thompson, a social historian at the University of Essex, played a leading role in the creation of the British Oral History Society in the late 1960s and the subsequent development of an international oral history movement from the end of the 1970s. His pioneering book, *The Voice of the Past: Oral*

History became a standard textbook - and a standard-bearer - for oral historians around the world when it was first published in 1978. Thompson sought to defend oral history against critics who claimed that memory was an unreliable historical source, and determined to prove the legitimacy and value of the approach. As a socialist, he was committed to a history which drew upon the words and experiences of working-class people, and argued that oral history was transforming both the content of history - 'by shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgements of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored' - and the processes of writing history, breaking 'through the boundaries between the educational institution and the world, between the professional and the ordinary public'.⁴ For many oral historians, recording experiences which have been ignored in history and involving people in exploring and making their own histories, continue to be primary justifications for the use of oral history. For example, Susan Armitage and Sherna Gluck argue that oral history retains an urgent political importance in parts of the world where women's oppression is reinforced by the silencing of women's voices and histories.⁵ And in many countries oral history has developed powerful roots outside higher education, in schools, community projects and reminiscence work.

The second paradigm shift in oral history was, in part, a response to positivist critics - for the most part traditional documentary historians of a conservative political persuasion - who feared the politics of people's history and who targeted the 'unreliability' of memory as its weakness. At the core of criticisms of oral history in the early 1970s was the assertion that memory was distorted by physical deterioration and nostalgia in old age, by the personal bias of both interviewer and interviewee, and by the influence of collective and retrospective versions of the past. For example, the Australian historian Patrick O'Farrell wrote in 1979 that oral history was moving into 'the world of image, selective memory, later overlays and utter subjectivity And where will it lead us? Not into history, but into myth'.⁶ Goaded by the taunts of historian critics, early oral historians developed their own handbook guidelines to assess the reliability of oral memory (while shrewdly reminding the traditionalists that documentary sources - many of which were created as records of spoken events - were no less selective and biased). From social psychology and anthropology they showed how to determine the bias and fabrication of memory, the significance of retrospection and the effects of the interviewer upon remembering. From sociology they adopted methods of representative sampling, and from documentary history they brought rules for checking the reliability and internal consistency of their sources. These guidelines provided useful signposts for reading memories and for combining them with other historical sources to find out what happened in the past.⁷

By the late 1970s imaginative oral historians turned these criticisms on their head and argued that the so-called unreliability of memory was also its strength, and that the subjectivity of memory provided clues not only about the meanings of historical experience, but also about the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity, and between individual and collective memory. For example, Luisa Passerini's study of Italian memories of interwar fascism highlighted the role of subjectivity in history - the conscious and unconscious meanings of experience as lived and remembered - and showed how the influences of public culture and ideology upon individual memory might be revealed in the silences, discrepancies and idiosyncrasies of personal testimony.⁸ Also writing in the 1970s, North American oral historian Michael Frisch argued against the attitude that oral history provided 'a pure sense of how it "really" was', and asserted that memory - 'personal and historical, individual and generational' - should be moved to centre stage 'as the object, not merely the method, of oral history'. Used in this way, oral history could be 'a powerful tool for discovering, exploring, and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory - how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them'.⁹ Memory thus became the subject as well as the source of oral history, and oral historians began to use an exhilarating array of approaches - linguistic, narrative, cultural, psychoanalytic and ethnographic - in their analysis and use of oral history interviews.

Though conservative historians were the most vocal critics of oral history in the 1970s, oral history was also challenged from the Left. In the late 1970s and early 1980s some socialist historians were particularly critical of the notion that the method of oral history was necessarily radical and democratic. For example, in Britain the Popular Memory Group argued that public struggles over the construction of the past are profoundly significant both in contemporary politics and for individual remembering. Thus oral history as used within the community and women's history movements could be a significant resource for making more democratic and transformative histories.¹⁰ Yet the Popular Memory Group concluded that this radical potential was often undermined by superficial understandings of the connections in oral testimony between individual and social memory and between past and present, and by the unequal relationships between professional historians and other participants in oral history projects.

These arguments overlap with two interconnected concerns that continue to trouble some oral historians: that the increasing theoretical sophistication of academic oral history is incomprehensible to, or ignored by, oral historians outside the academy - for example those working in schools, community projects and the media - and that our interviewees may be bewildered by the deconstruction of their memories. A reflective, critical approach to memory and history undoubtedly makes for better oral history - as Linda Shopes has argued recently in the context of community history - yet at the same time oral historians who are committed to a dialogue with their interviewees and a wider public audience need to write and speak in terms that make accessible sense.¹¹

The Popular Memory Group's writing highlighted the political possibilities and contradictions for oral history projects which have a radical agenda. Yet in the early 1980s the political scope and impact of oral history and memory work was still comparatively limited. Since then memory has come to be used for advocacy and empowerment in an increasingly diverse range of contexts: intergenerational oral history projects with elders and young people; health, social care and development work; community-based projects with marginalised groups such as the homeless and refugees; and the use of testimony in legal and political processes related to indigenous people's rights and restitution, post-conflict resolution and national truth and reconciliation. Indeed, though oral history has often played a significant role within such projects, commentators such as Fuyuki Kurusawa argue that memory and testimony have become critical constituents of a more general 'witnessing fever' in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, in which 'bearing witness' is 'a mode of ethico-political practice'.¹²

A third transformation in oral history involved a paradigmatic shift in our approach to the 'objectivity' of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst. Throughout the 1980s positivist notions of researcher objectivity were increasingly questioned by feminist theorists, post-modern anthropologists and qualitative sociologists - and by some oral history interviewers who were deeply reflective about the relationships they formed with their narrators. Oral historians were also influenced by developments in reminiscence work that highlighted the benefits of remembering for older people and reminded interviewers to consider the value of the exchange for both parties.¹³ In an article published in the *Oral History Review* in 1997, Valerie Yow argued that from the late 1980s a new oral history 'paradigm [...] permits awareness and use of the interactive process of interviewer and narrator, of interviewer and content'.¹⁴ Oral historians were increasingly alert to the ways that they were affected by their interviews and how the interviewer, in turn, affected the interview relationship, the data it generated and the interpretative process and product. Quoting Victor Turner, Yow called for 'an objective relation to our own subjectivity', and explained how oral historians can use this reflexive alertness to enhance interviews and their interpretation. Feminist oral historians have made especially important contributions in this regard, illuminating issues about oral history relationships and the interconnections between language, power and meaning.¹⁵

Valerie Yow's article also exemplifies the interdisciplinarity that has been one of the most significant features of oral history from the 1980s onwards. Though memory is now a respected historical source, history is just one of many academic disciplines and emergent intellectual fields that work with memories. Yow writes about the 'trickle over effect' from other disciplines such as qualitative sociology, anthropology, biographical and literary studies, and life review psychology. To this list we could add cultural studies, linguistics, communication and narrative studies, folklore studies and interdisciplinary work exploring the relationship between memory, narrative and personal identity. While theoretical and methodological developments in each of these fields have enriched the practice of oral history, oral historians have themselves made substantial contributions to the theory, method and politics of qualitative research through their interdisciplinary reflections on interview relationships and about the interpretation and use of recorded memories.

To cite just one recent example, Daniel James' book, *Dona María's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity*, published in 2000, is an exemplary work of women's oral history from South America.¹⁶ The first half of the book comprises Dona María's own testimony, as recorded and edited by James, and vividly recalls the life and times of a working-class woman activist in a twentieth century Argentinean industrial community. The interpretative essays that follow consider Dona María's experience and testimony, and the history and memory of her community, from cutting-edge interdisciplinary perspectives. For example, 'Listening in the cold' explores the challenges of recording, hearing and comprehending testimony that is influenced by prevalent narrative forms, by the political and psychological identity of the narrator, and by an interview relationship that can enable or disable recollection. 'Stories, anecdotes and other performances' draws upon narrative theory to analyse the nature and meaning of personal testimony; 'Tales told out on the borderlands' reads Dona María's story for gender and argues that clues about gender tension and dissonance are found on the 'borderlands' of experience and narrative.

James also considers the importance of remembering - as 'embodied in cultural practices such as storytelling' - for individuals and for their communities, and poses the problem of modern memory for working-class communities faced with deindustrialisation and the destruction of sites for social and collective memory. In this regard his work exemplifies the 'ascent of "memory" as an object of investigation by historians' in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Omer Bartov offers a compelling explanation for this trend, in which memories recorded by oral historians have played a significant role:

'The stream of 'memory studies' was clearly related to the pervasive cultural sense of an end of an era, both as a chronological fact and as a reflection of rapid socioeconomic transformation. The 'rediscovery' of Maurice Halbwach's theories on collective memory; the publication of Pierre Nora's massive tomes on *lieux de mémoire*; the growing scholarly interest in the links between history and memory, documentation and testimony; the popularity of works of fiction and films on memory; debates among psychologists over 'deep' and repressed memory; and, not least, the public controversies on forms and implications of official commemoration. All seemed to indicate that 'memory' had firmly established itself as a central historical category.¹⁷

James' work also highlights the increasing internationalism of oral history. In 1979 a number of North American oral historians met up with their European counterparts at an International Conference on Oral History held in Essex, England. This meeting was to be the first of many international exchanges, and was a catalyst for the publication of an *International Journal of Oral History* (from 1980 until 1990) and a series of collaborative, international oral history anthologies. In 1996 the international oral history conferences were formalised within a newly constituted International Oral History Association (IOHA), for which representatives from each continent were elected to a Council responsible for the biennial conference and a bilingual (Spanish and English) newsletter and journal, *Words and Silences / Palabras y Silencios*. The conferences and publications have sustained and propelled a cross-fertilisation of ideas and practices across the different national contexts of oral history, and have shifted the centre of gravity in oral history away from Europe and North America.

The recent sequence of conferences in Turkey, Brazil, South Africa and Australia has showcased the rich histories and extraordinary growth of oral history in the 'South'. Indeed, Latin American oral historians are challenging the European and North American oral history hegemony. In an editorial introducing a 2003 issue of *Words and Silences* about 'Oral history and the experience of politics', the Mexican IOHA Vice-President Gerardo Necochea suggests that whereas in Western Europe and the United States oral history is often 'directed to problems of identity and cultural recognition within democratic regimes Latin America continues to be a space for utopia, for thinking about the far-away relatively just society and fearing the fracture of the ever fragile present. Politics there jumps at you', and oral history is intertwined with politics.¹⁸ In the same issue the Brazilian, José Sebe Bom Meihy, argues that the international conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1998 was a turning point, with Latin American oral history in particular offering a more radical political context and purpose.¹⁹

We are in the middle of a fourth, dizzying digital revolution in oral history, and its outcomes are impossible to predict. Email and the internet are certainly fostering oral history's international dialogue. But, more than that, new digital technologies are transforming the ways in which we record, preserve, catalogue, interpret, share and present oral histories. Very soon we will all be recording interviews on computers, and we can already use satellite links and conference call facilities to conduct virtual interviews with people on the other side of the world. Audio-visual digital recordings will be readily accessible in their entirety via the internet, and sophisticated digital indexing and cataloguing tools - perhaps assisted in large projects by artificial intelligence - will enable anyone, anywhere to make extraordinary and unexpected creative connections within and across oral history collections, using sound and image as well as text.

In a recent conference paper, Michael Frisch argued that the digitisation of sound and image will challenge the current dominance of transcription and return auralness to oral history. Furthermore, non-text-reliant digital index and search mechanisms will enable users to find and hear the extracts they are looking for in their own interviews - and across countless interviews from other projects - and will enable imaginative, unforeseen interpretations.²⁰ Frisch proposes the emergence of a 'post-documentary sensibility' which breaks down the distinction between the oral history document source and the oral history documentary product. He offers the prosaic but instructive example of family video collections and asks whether 'instead of one, two, or even a file folder full of such pre-cast movies, it wouldn't be more interesting to imagine the material so organized and accessible that ... a path could be instantly generated in response to any visiting relative, or a child's birthday, or a grandparent's funeral, or the sale of a house in the hometown, or whatever might be occasioning interest in the relevant resources found in the video record. Such a located selection could easily be displayed, saved, and worked into a presentational form, if it proved interesting. Or, it could be released to return to the database, awaiting some later inquiry or use.' Frisch suggests a comparable future for oral history recordings and productions, and concludes that 'new digital tools and the rich landscape of practice they define may become powerful resources in restoring one of the original appeals of oral history - to open new dimensions of understanding and engagement through the broadly inclusive sharing and interrogation of memory'.

Our interviewees may well think rather differently about telling a story that will be instantly accessible and easily manipulated. Throughout the past decade oral historians have been grappling with the technical, ethical and epistemological implications of the digital revolution. This fourth paradigm transformation of oral history is still in process, and life on the cusp of change before an ever-changing horizon can be uncomfortable. The future of oral history, and the role of the oral historian, has never been so exciting, or so uncertain.

1. R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, 2006. The introduction to the 'Critical Developments' section in the *Reader* provides a more extensive set of references for issues noted in this conference paper.

2. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 25-81.
3. G.E. Evans, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*, London, Faber, 1956.
4. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, pp. 8-12.
5. S.H. Armitage and S.B. Gluck: 'Reflections on Women's Oral History: An Exchange', *Frontiers: Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1998. pp. 1-11.
6. P. O'Farrell, 'Oral history: facts and fiction', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 1982-83, no. 5, pp. 3-9.
7. See, for example, the first, 1978 edition of Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* for a defence of oral history in these terms.
8. L. Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987; L. Passerini, 'Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism', *History Workshop*, 1979, no. 8, pp. 82-108.
9. M. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1990, p. 188 (from his article 'Oral history and *Hard Times*: a review essay', first published in 1972).
10. R. Johnson *et al* (eds), *Making Histories: Studies in History-writing and Politics*, London, Hutchinson, 1982.
11. L. Shopes, 'Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes and Possibilities', *Journal of American History*, vol. 89, no. 2, 2002, pp. 588-598
12. F. Kurasawa, 'A message in a bottle: bearing witness as a mode of ethico-political practice', http://research.yale.edu/ccs/papers/kurasawa_witnessing.pdf.
13. J. Bornat, 'Oral history as a social movement: reminiscence and older people', *Oral History*, 1989, vol. 17, no. 2.
14. V. Yow: "'Do I Like Them Too Much?'" Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa', *Oral History Review*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1997, pp. 55-79.
15. The core texts for feminist oral history are S. Berger Gluck and D. Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, New York and London, Routledge, 1991; and S. H. Armitage (ed.) *Women's Oral History: The Frontiers Reader*, University of Nebraska Press, 2002.
16. Daniel James, *Dona María's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
17. O. Bartov, in a review of three books about the European memory of the Holocaust and World War Two, in *American Historical Review*, vol. 106, no. 2, 2001, p. 660.
18. G. Necochea, 'Editorial', *Words and Silences*, 2003, new series vol. 2, no. 1, p. 2.
19. J.C.S.B. Meihy, 'The radicalization of oral history', *Words and Silences*, 2003, new series vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 31-41.
20. M. Frisch, 'Towards a Post-Documentary Sensibility: Theoretical and Political Implications of New Information Technologies in Oral History', paper presented to the XIIIth International Oral History Conference, Rome, June 2004, and in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 2006.

Alistair has since returned to Australia. His contact details are:

Professor Alistair Thomson
 School of Historical Studies
 Menzies Building (room S614, Clayton Campus Monash University, Victoria, 3800,
 Email alistair.thomson@arts.monash.edu.au
 Phone + 3 99059785