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# Studies in Oral History

The Journal of  
Oral History Australia

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*Issue 45, 2023*



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Oral History Australia

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Oral History in Troubling Times:  
Opportunities and Challenges

Issue 45, 2023



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The Editors of the journal welcome offers of material for possible publication in the 2024 issue, No. 46. All enquires can be directed to the Editors.

## From the Editors

As is customary, the theme for this year's journal replicates the theme for the Oral History Australia (OHA)'s biennial conference. Held in Launceston in 2022, conference presenters crafted their papers around the topic 'Oral History in Troubling Times: Opportunities and Challenges'. As Carla Pascoe Leahy and Anisa Puri iterate in their paper, we have indeed been living in troubling times. Just as the disruptions and stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic began to recede from memory, they were swiftly replaced by the stresses of bushfires, floods and other troubling signs of anthropogenic climate change. These problems are not going to diminish over coming decades, with implications for how we practise oral history. Pascoe Leahy and Puri's reflective piece includes an evaluation of the pros and cons of remote interviewing. Long held assumptions regarding the desirability of face-to-face interviews are challenged in the current era. Factors such as the (generally) larger carbon footprint created by travelling to interviews, the health of participants, and inclusion of those (both interviewer and interviewee) who, for social, physical and economic reasons, cannot easily travel for interviews are important considerations. Judy Hughes's report neatly complements the opening article. Recognising the increased use of remote interviewing techniques, Hughes provides an overview and evaluation of technological advances in recording devices and transcription services, all part of the oral historian's toolbox.

The 2020s are indeed troubling times; in addition to climate change we can immediately add angst regarding the potential re-ignition of divisive and racist views in

relation to the Voice to Parliament referendum, worry over the upcoming US elections, and the seemingly never-ending war in Ukraine... (the list is endless). However, as Nicholas Herriot's and Sue Rabbitt Roff's articles remind us, each generation lives in troubling times – and each generation has the opportunity to make informed choices and challenge injustices. Herriot draws on interviews he conducted with people who participated in a four-week sit-in of Flinders University's Administration building in 1974. Although sparked by anger against compulsory exams, the protest soon became a call for the university's resources to be deployed for the people, not the bureaucrats and their bosses. As Herriot points out, ultimately the students were protesting against capitalism and US imperialism. While this sit-in has been depicted as a last hurrah of student activism, Herriot learned that, rather than leaving interviewees with a sense of defeat and disillusionment, the protest action fundamentally shaped his informants' lives, and impelled them to continue striving for a fairer and more equitable society. As we contemplate today's job-orientated degrees, online teaching, and sparsely occupied lecture rooms and campuses – it is worth reiterating the view of one of Herriot's interviewees, Anni Browning. Browning reflected that the fact that she 'never got a degree anyway' didn't matter, as 'it was much more about being at Flinders to get a much broader education'.

Sue Rabbitt Roff has spent decades researching the cover up of British atomic testing in Australia, Christmas Island and the Monte Bello Islands. In her article, Roff demonstrates the crucial role oral histories play in countering official narratives that obfuscate or deny Australian tests. For those who have seen the film *Oppenheimer*, and who may have wondered about connections between the Manhattan Project and Australian scientists, or about the extent to which Australian prime minister Robert Menzies was informed regarding the intentions of the British, Roff's dense and highly informative article will provide many answers. Roff includes a call to action, making the point that many primary sources are available to the public but have yet to be comprehensively studied.

Of course, there are many other wrongs that echo down the years to the present day. Drawing on their interdisciplinary collaboration, Ashley Barnwell, Cate O'Neill and Kirsten Wright analyse an innovative creative writing program for

Forgotten Australians (people who grew up in children's institutions) at Lotus Place in Queensland. While recording personal histories has often been undertaken as a means to come to terms with difficult pasts, the authors suggest that creative writing can be a powerful tool to process trauma while simultaneously decentring it. Their article can be read as an invitation to oral historians to consider alternative and less-literal ways of working with memory.

Ending the articles section on a poetic note, Lesley Synge's piece is another creative approach to interpreting memory. Synge draws upon an interview she conducted with her grandmother, Molly Doherty, over 40 years ago for the large Australian 1938 Oral History Project. In this affectionate and imaginative retelling of Molly's life, Synge draws upon the recorded interview, other archival sources and her own recollections of the interview process to offer a more complex and multilayered understanding of 'Molly, in her own words'.

Moving to the reports section, we have already referred to Judy Hughes's useful summary of the technological equipment available to the contemporary oral historian. Eliot Perrin informs readers of a transnational research project of which he is part, which addresses the ongoing political and economic legacies of deindustrialization. The project spans continents and has numerous partner organisations and collaborators, including trade unions, indigenous organisations and independent researchers. Perrin describes the ways these disparate people and organisations have forged connections and created a sense of community. A comparable sense of community has been created through 'The 100 Project'. John Winter reports on a crowdsourced project that he has founded, which provides a platform and professional video editing to enable families, carers and friends of 100-year-olds to publish interviews conducted with the centenarians.

Reporting on research examining the legacies of settler-colonialism in South Australia, Skye Krichauff details the unintended consequences of university administrative policies and procedures. Ironically, certain ethics requirements aimed to reassure interviewees of the good intentions of the institution can create a sense of distrust, while complicated bureaucratic requirements and delays contain the

potential to derail oral history projects. She suggests alternative processes that enhance rather than hinder trust and goodwill with Aboriginal communities. David Goodwin and Paul Bronson report on an oral history project recording the oral histories of veterans employed in oil and gas exploration in the Bass Strait in the 1960s and 1970s. The project was conducted in collaboration with students and resulted in a podcast series. Goodwin and Bronson point out that the dangerous weather conditions, logistical complexity and the need for marine skills are equally applicable in the current era of offshore wind turbine deployment.

This year's reviews section can be read as a snapshot of some of the emerging topics and methodologies that are engaging oral historians around the world. Oral historians are increasingly interested in methodologies that disrupt existing orthodoxies – and hold the potential to surprise the interviewer if they are open to what their interviewees can teach them. Books reviewed in this edition cover themes of war and crisis, environments and disasters, care and family, gender and sexuality, and the unexpected.

We would like to warmly welcome Reports Editor Alexandra Mountain and Reviews Editor Gwyn McClelland to the journal team, and thank them for their work in compiling their respective sections of this year's journal. We would also like to acknowledge and thank our hardworking editorial chair, Alexandra Dellios, who consistently ensures the smooth running of the review process. The unwavering support of the journal's Editorial Board and the OHA Executive Committee continue to be much appreciated by us both. The journal is also highly appreciative of the exemplary efforts of copy editor Katie Connolly and designer Karen Wallis. We feel fortunate to be surrounded by such a collegial and professional cohort.

We hope you enjoy reading this year's edition of *Studies in Oral History* – and that you may find some useful information in its contents to help you seize the opportunities presented by these challenging times.

Skye Krichauff and Carla Pascoe Leahy



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# Articles

# Developing a Remote Interviewing Practice: Doing Oral History During Times of Crisis

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BY CARLA PASCOE LEAHY AND ANISA PURI

*Dr Carla Pascoe Leahy is an independent researcher, and Project Manager – Research & Policy at Women’s Environmental Leadership Australia. She is an Honorary Fellow at the University of Melbourne, Honorary Associate at Museums Victoria and Joint Editor of Studies in Oral History. Her books include Becoming a Mother: An Australian History (2023) and Spaces Imagined, Placed Remembered: Childhood in 1950s Australia (2011).*

*Dr Anisa Puri is a consulting historian, and an interviewer for the National Library of Australia’s Oral History and Folklore Branch. She worked as a researcher on the Mothering in Crisis Project in 2022. Her book, Australian Lives: An Intimate History, with Alistair Thomson, was published in 2017. She is also a past President of Oral History New South Wales.*

\* This article has been peer reviewed.

We have all been living through a time of significant dynamism. Globally, we have experienced several overlapping and connected crises since 2019 including the COVID-19 pandemic and multiple climate-fuelled disasters. In this article, we pose the question: what have these years of upheaval done to oral history practice? We reflect on how our experiences of practising oral history during the last three years, including adopting remote interviewing methodologies, have prompted us to reconsider and re-evaluate much of what has long been considered best practice in the field. We firstly reflect on how oral historians around the world have responded to these crises, then explore a collaborative case study, before proposing some lessons to guide future practice. While we believe that there will always be a place for in-person interviewing, we contend that oral historians also need to embrace remote interviewing as part of our toolkit. Our proposal in this article is that we embrace flexibility as oral historians, widening our methodological strategies and remaining reflexive about what we lose and what we gain when we adopt different approaches.

## INTRODUCTION

*It's like the pandemic and things related to climate change have fundamentally changed my sense of the world being a safe place... [It] feels like an increasingly unsafe volatile environment, the pandemic mostly, and you know, associated with climate change, like there's going to be a lot, it feels like that we're entering this new era of humankind, that instability is going to be the norm.<sup>1</sup>*

We have all been living through a time of significant dynamism. In this quote above, narrator Tamara, one of the interviewees in a recent Australian oral history project, eloquently summarises her sense of living through unstable times. Globally, we have experienced several overlapping and connected crises since 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every corner of the globe through illness, death and a raft of government measures including lockdowns, mask mandates and vaccination mandates. Simultaneously, climate-fuelled disasters including fires, floods and heat waves have struck with unprecedented ferocity and devastation. Both the coronavirus pandemic and climate-linked disasters can be understood as symptoms of the Anthropocene – a geological epoch in which human beings exercise greater influence than any other natural force.<sup>2</sup> Human actions are degrading the environment which is, in turn, rebounding on us with terrifying force. These global phenomena and their local manifestations have given many people, like Tamara, a sense of living through a volatile age.

Moments of crisis can transform the ways people think, feel and act. This disruptive potential is true of oral history as much as anything else. In this article, we pose the question: what have these years of upheaval done to oral history practice? The major shift has been a rapid increase in the use of remote interviewing practices. We suggest it is now timely, three years after the beginning of the pandemic, to consider how these crises have reshaped oral history in the short term. As the dust settles on the chaos of the last few years, what do we, as oral historians, want to keep and what do

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1 Tamara, interviewed by Carla Pascoe Leahy on Zoom, 10 June 2022, recording and transcript held by author. All interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms.

2 Libby Robin, 'Histories for Changing Times: Entering the Anthropocene?', *Australian Historical Studies*, 44, no. 3 (2013): 329–340, DOI: 10.1080/1031461X.2013.817455.

we want to jettison of our experimentations? In this paper, we reflect on how our experiences of practising oral history during the last three years, including adopting remote interviewing methodologies, have prompted us to reconsider and re-evaluate much of what has long been considered best practice in the field. We firstly reflect on how oral historians around the world have responded to these crises, then explore a collaborative case study, before proposing some lessons to guide future practice.

### EXPERIENCING AND RESPONDING TO CRISIS

Both COVID-19 and climate change are global phenomena, but they have been experienced differently in different parts of the world. Responses from oral historians therefore need to be understood within their local and temporal contexts. We know, for example, that people in the Global South are particularly vulnerable to climate change.<sup>3</sup> We also know that Australia is a country susceptible to extreme weather and environmental disasters, as we have painfully experienced through the Black Summer fires of 2019–20, brutal floods in New South Wales and Queensland in 2021 and 2022, and further severe flooding in Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia in late 2022. Experiences of the pandemic have also shifted at different points in time and in different corners of the globe. It is easy to forget, with the benefit of hindsight, that in the early stages of the pandemic, some predicted, or at least hoped, it would all be over in months. We did not yet realise that COVID-19 would disrupt everything we considered normal in our personal and working lives. Rather, many hoped that this would be a temporary interruption before life returned to the way it was.

The Australian experience of the pandemic was in some respects different to other parts of the world, with low case numbers but stringent restrictions in some states across 2020 and 2021. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Australia was on

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3 H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, M. Tignor, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löscke, V. Möller, A. Okem (eds), 'IPCC, 2022: Summary for Policymakers', in H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M. Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S. Löscke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA, 2022), 3–33, DOI:10.1017/9781009325844.001.

25 January 2020. On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and eight days later, the federal government shut Australian borders to all except citizens, permanent residents and their immediate families.<sup>4</sup> Very quickly, the Australian experience of coronavirus fragmented depending upon location. The state of Victoria, where the two authors reside, experienced the most severe pandemic disruptions: the first lockdown was announced on 22 March 2020, with the state enduring six lockdowns across 2020 and 2021, totalling 263 days.

Oral historians in the Global North responded in a range of ways. The United Kingdom's Oral History Society issued a statement in April 2020 recommending that oral historians cease interviewing. The organisation took the view that remote interviewing is inferior to face-to-face interviewing for several reasons, including reduced audio quality (making it harder to reuse or archive the interview afterwards) and reduced rapport and ability to read non-verbal signals. While this advice has been updated several times since, until mid-2022 the OHS recommended that remote interviews only be conducted if an interviewee is unwell, if the interview is about the pandemic itself or the project deadlines cannot be extended.<sup>5</sup>

The Oral History Association in the United States took a slightly different tone. Like the Oral History Society, it was sceptical about whether remote interviews could be as effective as face-to-face interviews. However, rather than recommending that interviews should cease unless absolutely necessary, the Oral History Association adopted a more pragmatic approach and suggested a range of considerations that oral historians should take into account. These include the narrator's preference; the intended end use of the interview; the minimum quality needed for that use; project deadlines; the feasibility of postponement; the location of the narrator; and

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4 Kelsey Campbell and Emma Vines, 'COVID-19: a chronology of Australian Government announcements (up until 30 June 2020)', Australian Parliamentary Library, Research Paper Series 2020–21, 23 June 2021, [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp2021/Chronologies/COVID-19AustralianGovernmentAnnouncements#\\_Toc74317383](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2021/Chronologies/COVID-19AustralianGovernmentAnnouncements#_Toc74317383).

5 Charlie Morgan with Rob Perks, Mary Stewart, Camille Johnson, 'Advice on remote oral history interviewing during the Covid-19 pandemic', Version 7 (8 February 2021). Available at <https://www.ohs.org.uk/covid-19-remote-recording/>. Accessed 15 June 2022.

the health and mobility of narrator and interviewer. Crucially, the Oral History Association suggested that there will always be a place for remote interviewing.<sup>6</sup>

Oral History Australia initially followed the lead of the Oral History Society and recommended that oral history projects cease. As the pandemic dragged on, Oral History Australia began to adopt a middle ground, acknowledging that some members were using remote interviewing and providing links to resources to improve such practices.<sup>7</sup> *Studies in Oral History*, the journal of Oral History Australia, invited a series of reports in 2020 from oral history historians around the country, explaining whether they had continued interviewing during the pandemic and why.<sup>8</sup> In acknowledgment that oral history practice is changing, Oral History Victoria based its 2022 symposium around the question of ‘Oral History: Making it Work through the Pandemic’.<sup>9</sup>

If there have been some divergences between national oral history bodies, there have also been a range of responses from individual oral historians. Some oral historians decided to cease interviewing due to concerns about lesser audio quality in remote interviews. Consultant historian Fiona Poulton was working on a number of commissioned oral history projects for clients when the pandemic struck. She and her colleagues paused these projects because a critical factor in project design was the recording of high-quality interviews so the recordings could be used for several purposes in the future, including audio documentaries, podcasts and digital stories.<sup>10</sup> The National Library of Australia, which maintains very high audio recording standards for archiving interviews, also paused oral history projects when in-person interviewing became illegal and/or risky. In an attempt to nevertheless capture some

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6 Oral History Association, ‘Remote Interviewing Resources’ (27 August 2020). Available at <https://oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/>. Accessed 15 June 2022.

7 Oral History Australia, ‘Remote interviewing’. Available at <https://oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/remote-interviewing/>. Accessed 15 June 2022.

8 ‘Covid Reports’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020), [https://oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020\\_journal\\_covid\\_reports.pdf](https://oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020_journal_covid_reports.pdf).

9 ‘Oral History: Making it Work through the Pandemic’, Oral History Victoria Annual Symposium, Melbourne, 19 June 2022.

10 Fiona Poulton, ‘The impact of COVID-19 on consulting historians’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 166–167.



of the historical significance of the pandemic, the NLA commissioned oral historian Nikki Henningham to go out with an audio recorder to record the sounds of a locked-down city. She travelled around Melbourne recording the sounds of an Australian Rules football match without a crowd, the sounds of an anti-lockdown protest in the otherwise silent Melbourne CBD, and the sounds of a schoolyard when only a handful of students were still attending school.<sup>11</sup>

Other oral historians ceased interviews due to concerns about the vulnerability or capacity of their participants. Alistair Thomson explained that as he was working on a project involving elderly narrators, he ceased interviewing even before official restrictions were introduced, due to concerns about the potential health risk of social contact for these participants.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Skye Krichauff was in the midst of research interviewing elderly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants. Many geographically contained Indigenous communities closed early in the pandemic because of the health vulnerabilities of First Nations peoples, caused by the enduring social inequities sparked by colonisation. This rendered in-person interviews impossible. Skye rejected the idea of remote interviewing because internet reception is poor in these communities, technological expertise is not strong among the cohort, and she had previously found face-to-face interactions critical to building rapport with Aboriginal participants.<sup>13</sup> Other oral historians in Australia stopped interviewing when pandemic restrictions were introduced because they felt that oral history interviews are not as satisfying or successful without the non-verbal cues that come with face-to-face contact.<sup>14</sup> There was a widespread sentiment that something precious is lost when interviews are no longer two people meeting in one space.

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11 Nikki Henningham, “‘Why would you want to do that?’ Recording Soundscapes of a Global Pandemic”, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 180–182.

12 Alistair Thomson, ‘Introduction: Oral history during the pandemic’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 163–165.

13 Skye Krichauff, ‘Abandoning oral history interviews during COVID-19 restrictions’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 177–179.

14 Margaret Leask, ‘Optimism vs pessimism – An oral historian and the COVID-19 pandemic’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 183–185; Ruth Melville, ‘A different kind of listening’, *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 190.

Many important considerations influenced some oral historians to cease interviewing during the pandemic, including a concern that remote interviewing would reduce audio quality; a concern to protect vulnerable participants; and a conviction that much of what interviewers and interviewees value in an interview is lost when it is not in person. But there were others who chose to continue interviewing and adapt their approach. Those on projects with time pressures – such as students or those with funding deadlines – often had no choice. University student Janice Barr was studying family history online when the pandemic struck. She re-imagined her student project and interviewed her husband about his family background, making surprising new revelations about his life.<sup>15</sup> Secondary school history teacher Phillip O'Brien was teaching oral history to students in Victoria when the state transitioned to remote learning. He gave students the challenge: what can you find out about history from your immediate family members? Students conducted their interviews in person, recorded on mobile phones. Their interviewing training and subsequent analysis was conducted in their virtual classroom.<sup>16</sup> These examples show that even with lockdown restrictions, some oral historians found ways to keep doing in-person interviewing, looking afresh at the resources in their homes and communities. PhD candidate Sarah Faulkner was planning to conduct face-to-face interviews to understand how migrants construct a sense of place, home and belonging. As a postgraduate student, she faced time restrictions on her candidature so could not wait for the pandemic to end to conduct interviews. Sarah was instead forced to adapt her research techniques to embrace remote methodologies. She consciously built pre-interview rapport with participants through phone, text and Skype conversations. She also asked participants to share photos with her beforehand that both participants could then discuss during the interview. Through these adaptations, Sarah was able to shift her methodology in order to answer her research questions despite pandemic restrictions.<sup>17</sup>

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15 Janice Barr, 'Lockdown revelations', *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 168–170.

16 Phillip O'Brien, 'Hands on history: An active approach to creating oral historians in the secondary classroom', *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 186–189.

17 Sarah Faulkner, 'Conducting overseas fieldwork during a global pandemic: Challenges, changes and lessons from the field', *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 171–176.

Other oral historians kept interviewing because they felt there was something important to capture of the present moment. As Stephen Sloan argues, there is arguably a greater need for oral history in moments of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic because it helps humans to make sense of our experiences, and to record changing interpretations while they are still fluid. Nevertheless, Sloan and others recognise that careful consideration must be given to the timing of interviews concerning crisis, to ensure that interviewees are not asked to relive difficult experiences at a time when this will be prejudicial to their personal recovery from crisis.<sup>18</sup> While some oral historians have worried about the potential for emotional harm to participants when conducting research during crises, Emily Peirson-Webber wondered whether intimacy may have actually been enhanced by the online format of her interviews during the pandemic, as remote interviews gave her narrators a sense of agency and connection during a difficult time.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps most fundamentally, some oral historians have suggested that the increased use of remote interviewing during the COVID-19 pandemic has helped expose the inadequacy of some common assumptions about oral history. As a scholar experiencing barriers to travel, Jessica Stroja has always had to conduct interviews remotely – the pandemic simply gave her a sense that other interviewees were experiencing her normal mode.<sup>20</sup> Sarah Dziedzic similarly suggests that the value of this global health crisis is that it highlights the experiences of those for whom in-person interviewing is always problematic; to query whether ableism underpins some of the field's assumptions.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the pandemic has offered oral history an opportunity – to think about whether providing a greater range of methods for speaking and listening can improve the inclusivity, equity and accessibility of our

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18 Stephen M. Sloan, 'Behind the "Curve": COVID-19, Infodemic, and Oral History', *The Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (2020): 193–202, DOI: 10.1080/00940798.2020.1798256.

19 Emily Peirson-Webber, 'Mining Men: Reflections on Masculinity and Oral History during the Coronavirus Pandemic', *History Workshop Journal* 92, no. 1 (2022): 242–50.

20 Jessica Stroja, 'Oral history and COVID-19: Drastic changes or business as usual', *Studies in Oral History* 42 (2020): 193–195.

21 Sarah Dziedzic, 'Immunodeficiency and Oral History', *Medium*, 7 April 2020, <https://medium.com/@sarahdziedzic/immunodeficiency-and-oral-history-85695925dd43>.

field.<sup>22</sup> Applying a disability justice lens to oral history means considering individuals' preferred modes of participation.<sup>23</sup>

Despite such arguments, many oral historians remain unconvinced or unsure about whether remote interviewing is a reasonable substitute for in-person interviewing. Many of the concerns raised about remote interviewing have focused upon sound quality – which is presumed to be inferior – and the interview relationship – which is also presumed to be adversely impacted.<sup>24</sup> We would like to query these taken-for-granted assumptions and add some additional nuance to these discussions. Through experimenting with different options, oral historians around the world have demonstrated that audio recordings of a high enough quality for archiving can be recorded online.<sup>25</sup> Our discussion will focus more upon what happens to the interview relationship at a distance. Drawing upon our experiences of doing oral history across the last three years, we will seek to draw out some of the lessons we have learnt from interviewing through crisis.

## REFLECTIONS FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Like other oral historians, our experiences and reflections have been shaped by our personal contexts. We carefully considered whether it was appropriate and ethical to conduct interviews during this crisis, especially during the initial months of the pandemic. We were aware that in a time of considerable distress when many people were experiencing a lack of safety and stability there were important questions to be

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22 Anna F. Kaplan, 'Cultivating Supports while Venturing into Interviewing during COVID-19', *The Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (2020): 214–226, DOI: 10.1080/00940798.2020.1791724.

23 Dziejic, 'Immunodeficiency and Oral History'.

24 There are also heightened data security risks with an online (and to a lesser extent, phone) interview, although these can be managed through careful attention to how an interview is recorded, stored and transferred. Both the Oral History Society and the Oral History Association offer advice on data security for remote interviewing: Charlie Morgan et al., 'Advice on remote oral history'; Oral History Association, 'Remote Interviewing Resources'.

25 British Library Oral History team, 'Remote oral history interviewing at the British Library during the Covid-19 pandemic', *Sound and Vision* (blog), 18 February 2021, <https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2021/02/remote-oral-history-during-covid-19.html>; Judy Hughes, 'Remote interviewing during the pandemic' (paper presented at the Oral History Victoria Annual Symposium, Melbourne, 19 June 2022).

raised about the ability of interview participants to fully consent and to adequately protect themselves during and after an interview.

Before 2020, neither of us had conducted oral history interviews using video conferencing. When the pandemic struck, Carla Pascoe Leahy was in the last two years of an Australian Research Council–funded project examining the history of Australian motherhood and she was not permitted to extend the end date of the research beyond 2021. This meant she was faced with the choice of not completing all of her interviews or embracing a remote format. She chose to complete the final few interviews online, particularly because these remaining interviews were aimed at increasing the diversity of the cohort, which was important to the representativeness of the history she wanted to write.

Carla made this decision in consultation with Museums Victoria (MV) because, in the project, narrators could elect to have their interview preserved in the cultural institution's collection. Discussions with MV curators acknowledged the reduced audio quality of Zoom interviews compared to in-person interviews with high-quality audio recording equipment. But Carla and the curators ultimately decided that caring for children under lockdown conditions was an important part of the Australian history of mothering to capture, and that a remote interviewing methodology was a further reflection of that specific experience.

Carla noticed an immediate difference with these, her first online interviews. The intimacy of the encounter had shifted in an unfamiliar way, by not being in the same room. Although she could see the narrators on screen, not being able to see their whole bodies made it harder to read subtle visual cues. Despite these challenges, the interviews were historically significant, capturing a unique moment in time when the interviewees' mothering had come under extraordinary pressure from the pandemic. In addition, two interviewees disclosed very personal and sensitive information about domestic abuse which had not been shared by any previous participants in the research, despite the statistical probability that it had affected others. This experience left Carla wondering if it might sometimes be easier or more comfortable

for participants to share difficult material when they are physically distant from the interviewer.

Carla also experimented with another form of qualitative research during these lockdown periods. Alarmed at the unequal effects of COVID-19 upon academic mothers, she decided to track and analyse some of these impacts in collaboration with feminist researcher Emilee Gilbert. The challenge for both Carla and Emilee was that they were burdened by the self-same conditions they were seeking to capture – academic mothers struggling to manage their continuing work commitments while home-schooling and caring for children. Instead of attempting the near-impossible task of scheduling live, online interviews with other mothers while they were all extremely time-poor and lacking domestic privacy, Carla devised a ‘maternal epistemology’ that could be flexibly scheduled around other commitments. She invited written responses to a series of questions that could be jotted down in spare moments or late at night and returned via email.<sup>26</sup> This methodology was a form of ‘collaborative witnessing’ where the boundaries between researchers and researched were permeable. While some oral historians have worried about the emotional impacts of conducting interviews during times of crisis, these participants spoke of the benefits of involvement in the research at a time when their difficult experiences felt insufficiently recognised. In bearing witness to and documenting the historical significance of the pandemic experiences of academic mothers, there was an ethical, epistemological and political imperative underpinning the research.<sup>27</sup>

Anisa’s oral history practice was not as dramatically affected as Carla’s when the pandemic commenced, as her main research project during 2020 and 2021 was completing her doctoral thesis which focused on interpreting archived digital oral history interviews. Anisa did conduct one session of an in-person interview for the

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26 Kaplan similarly suggest that experimenting with a range of ways to elicit personal reflections may improve the inclusivity of a project’s methodologies, to ensure a diverse participant sample can be included: Kaplan, ‘Cultivating supports’.

27 Emilee Gilbert and Carla Pascoe Leahy, ‘Visibilising care in the academy: (re)performing academic mothering in the transformative moment of COVID-19’, *Gender & History* 35, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12659>; Emilee Gilbert, Sarah Knott, and Carla Pascoe Leahy, ‘Care, Mothering and the Academy: Making the Invisible Visible’, *Gender & History* 33, no. 3 (2021): 608–617.

National Library of Australia's Oral History and Folklore Collection in 2021, but the ongoing challenges and disruption associated with the pandemic, including further lockdowns, substantially delayed the second session. Anisa ultimately decided to pause in-person interviewing for safety reasons until late 2022. For a brief stretch in late 2022, Anisa was conducting both remote and in-person interviews on different projects, which deepened her sense of the value of being able to have both formats as part of her oral history toolbox.

Attempts to come together as oral historians have also been interrupted by crises. In June 2022 Oral History Victoria held its annual symposium in Melbourne, Victoria. But despite it being finally permissible to hold in-person events in Victoria after two years of what felt like interminable lockdowns, the spectre of COVID-19 still hung over the gathering. A new wave of infections was gathering force which meant that many participants wore masks indoors and stepped outside during breaks. There was a tension present, in that gathering in a room with other oral historians felt like a much-appreciated privilege, and yet simultaneously dangerous and fraught. In October 2022 Oral History Australia held its biennial conference in Launceston, Tasmania, after cancelling the conference in 2021 due to COVID-19 risks and restrictions. Again, many oral historians present commented upon how satisfying it was to gather in person with colleagues. But that event was haunted by climate change. As Carla and Anisa prepared to travel to Launceston, they deliberated over whether it was safe to fly due to warnings of extreme storms. After arriving in Launceston, heavy rain lashed Victoria and Tasmania. Serious floods affected widespread areas in both states, with some sections of northern Tasmania close to Launceston evacuated. The city is somewhat protected from extreme weather events by civil engineering – the recurrent floods historically produced by sitting at the confluence of major rivers have been reduced by the recent construction of flood walls and levees. As the conference progressed, Anisa and Carla nervously checked the flood updates and evacuation orders each day, while on the wall of their accommodation hung a photo of the same street in flood a century earlier. It was becoming clear that while oral historians often value opportunities to gather in a room, anthropogenic crises such as disasters and pandemics are beginning to render such events problematic and risky. At the same time, some historians were beginning to question whether

the carbon cost of academic conference travel was defensible, in an era in which public awareness was growing of the contributions of high-carbon modes of travel to the climate crisis.<sup>28</sup>

### CASE STUDY: MOTHERING IN CRISIS

Some of the issues and opportunities raised by interviewing through unstable times have been experienced during our collaborative research across 2022. The authors have been working together on a project titled ‘Mothering in Crisis: Family, Disaster and Climate Change’.<sup>29</sup> The project explores how mothers are being affected by climate change and worsening environmental disasters such as floods and fires. There are three major strands to the project. The first is analysing archived interviews on how Australian families have experienced disasters in the past, to consider whether there is something distinctive about the present moment. The second is creating interviews with contemporary mothers in Australia about their experiences of more recent, climate-fuelled disasters. The third is comparing these Australian interviews to interviews with UK mothers about their experiences of climate change.

The contemporary interviews focus on how climate change and environmental disasters are impacting maternal experiences, emotions and decisions. For the Australian interviews, the region of Gippsland, in Victoria, was selected as a case study because of its long association with coal mining and burning and its recent experiences of climate-linked disasters including fires and floods.<sup>30</sup> The original plan was to conduct in-person interviews during two field trips to Gippsland in 2022. Several factors compelled us to change that plan and adopt remote interviewing. Recruitment of

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28 Carla Pascoe Leahy, Andrea Gaynor, Simon Sleight, Ruth Morgan and Yves Rees, ‘Sustainable academia: The responsibilities of academic historians in a climate-impacted world’, *Environment and History* 28, no. 4 (2022): 545-570, DOI: 10.3197/096734022X16552219786645; Toby Green and Simon Sleight, ‘Historians and sustainability’, *Historical Transactions* (blog), 31 October 2019, <https://blog.royalhistosoc.org/2019/10/31/historians-and-sustainability/> (longer version available as PDF).

29 For a seminar recording summarising research in the first year of the project, see: C. Pascoe Leahy, C. Gay and A. Puri, ‘Mothering in crisis: Family, disaster and climate change’, (Melbourne Climate Futures CRX Seminar, University of Melbourne, 2 December 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqIWcuRtbeE>.

30 Alexandra Delliou, *Heritage Making and Migrant Subjects in the Deindustrialising Region of the Latrobe Valley* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).



participants proved unexpectedly slow and difficult. We advertised through diverse community networks and organisations, including an offer of a participant payment of AUD\$50, but still found recruitment challenging. Both we and our interviewees experienced ongoing, unpredictable disruptions during 2022 caused by repeated waves of infection and new environmental challenges. Anecdotally, other qualitative and quantitative researchers attempting to recruit participants from the southeastern parts of Australia, hard hit by pandemic lockdowns and disasters, experienced similar challenges. There was an irony for us in that the very phenomena we were trying to study – maternal experiences of raising children during multiple crises – made it hard for mothers to find the time and energy to become involved.

By the end of the year, we managed to conduct 10 interviews with mothers living in Australia who had children under 18 years of age. The focus of the interviews was how mothers are experiencing climate change and climate-fuelled disasters, within the context of their wider life history. Towards the end of the project, the recruitment challenges we faced prompted us to expand the geographic scope beyond the initial case study region of Gippsland. In the end, eight interviewees lived in Gippsland, and the other two lived elsewhere (one in a different part of Victoria, and the other in Queensland). Despite this expansion of the area from which participants were drawn, common themes emerged across all interviews.

We commenced the project at the beginning of 2022, optimistic that lockdowns would not impede in-person interviews as they had during the first two years of the pandemic. But we soon discovered that there were other challenges to navigate. The first of these related to timing. Funding rules mandated that research funds had to be spent in 2022. Two fieldwork trips to Gippsland had been carefully planned around Carla's teaching schedule and to avoid school holidays, which we knew would be a more difficult time for maternal participants to schedule interviews. When ethics approval and participant recruitment took much longer than predicted, the first window of opportunity for in-person interviews was lost, so we decided to schedule the first interviews online.

We soon encountered additional disruptions including high rates of illness among the population. When one of Carla's children was diagnosed with COVID-19 in March 2022 the whole family was plunged into one week's isolation, an experience which was repeated in August 2022. In addition to coronavirus, unusually high levels of the cold virus, flu virus and other illnesses have circulated within the Australian community in 2022, particularly among school children and their families. Several interviewees had to reschedule interviews at the last minute due to illness, with the online format facilitating easy rescheduling which may have been impossible if interviews were conducted in person during fieldwork trips.

In these respects, technology eased the interviewing process. All recorded interviews rely upon different forms of technology and can be impeded or enhanced by technical factors. Remote interviews rely upon the interviewee being able to individually manage their technology because the interviewer is not in the room with them. The cohort of women interviewed for this project were all comfortable using Zoom video conferencing technology. But there were occasional challenges when participants' internet connections were not working well. In one interview Anisa conducted, the interviewee's video display stopped working and neither of them were able to diagnose why. Anisa found it more difficult to read the interviewee's emotional state and subtle cues without that visual input. In cases where technology worked seamlessly, we wondered if we as interviewers were perhaps more attentive to the interviewee than we might have been in person because we did not need to carefully monitor a physical recording device throughout the interview. We were, however, conscious of 'Zoom fatigue' and carefully planned the interview schedule to ensure that interview duration was one to two hours long, in an attempt to avoid tiring interviewees. Nevertheless, we were aware that an interview might add yet another Zoom meeting to the daily schedule of an interviewee, creating fatigue not only in the length of the interview but in the proportion of the interviewee's time potentially spent on Zoom that day.

We also noted that in many respects, reducing travel to conduct an interview was experienced as a reduced burden for the interviewer, especially when the distance to travel is considerable. Interviews in regional locations, like Gippsland, make

travelling by public transport difficult. Almost all travel has a financial cost – and driving a conventional motor vehicle has become more expensive in the last two years due to rising fuel prices. Many forms of travel also carry a carbon footprint, which is attracting increasing attention in our climate-impacted world. While there is also a small carbon cost incurred by video conferencing, it is often considerably less than travelling to interview in person.<sup>31</sup> This is particularly the case if conducting research interstate or overseas.

Removing the need to travel to conduct interviews reduces the burden for interviewers and interviewees in other ways too. For people with mobility challenges, disabilities or health conditions, needing to move around to conduct interviews can be difficult or impossible. For some oral historians or participants with disabilities or chronic illnesses, the opportunity to conduct interviews remotely can make the difference as to whether it is possible to conduct them at all.<sup>32</sup> For people with caring responsibilities, scheduling in-person interviews is particularly difficult as it often requires organising an alternative carer for one's children. Several interviewees in the *Mothering in Crisis* project remarked that they were able to conduct their interview with a sick child watching television in another room because of the flexibility afforded by Zoom. While in this project remote interviewing seemed to increase equity of access, we note that it also has the potential to reduce access for people without internet access, without devices able to download video-conferencing software, or without the expertise or familiarity to use such technologies.

### **HOW DOES THE INTERVIEW RELATIONSHIP CHANGE WHEN INTERVIEWS ARE HELD REMOTELY?**

While there were many perceived advantages, both authors felt the relationship between interviewer and narrator was changed by interviewing online. It was much harder to capture a tangible sense of place. This is arguably more important when interviewing people in a particular case study area, as we were. Some Gippsland

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31 As a rough guide, one hour of video conferencing or streaming emits 150–1,000 grams of carbon dioxide: Pascoe Leahy et al., 'Sustainable academia'.

32 Stroja, 'Oral history and COVID-19'.

mothers described things like the variable air quality, and scents associated with air pollution, in different towns in their region, which we could have perhaps smelt ourselves had we been there. Others described the proximity of bushland to their home and how that influenced their sense of safety from bushfires, which again is more easily seen and appreciated in person. In addition to that wider sense of a locality, it was harder to gain a holistic understanding of an interviewee's home during a remote interview. We generally take careful note of surroundings when we interview someone in their home, sometimes starting conversations about the domestic environment such as asking about family members in photographs on a wall or talking about a person's garden glimpsed through the window. Such observations might form part of the interview reflections we write after an interview, as we take note of what things like furnishings or decor might tell us about the narrator. It is often harder to 'read' a narrator's domestic environment through a webcam.

It is also more difficult for us as interviewers to judge the influence of external factors when we are not sharing space with someone. For example, the presence of another person in the house – such as a partner, child or other – will subtly influence the level of disclosure a person feels they can make due to a fear of being overheard. But during an online interview we may not be aware or informed that another person is present nearby and hence unable to analyse the influence of another on the narrator's reticence. Nevertheless, there were moments during the *Mothering in Crisis* interviews where sometimes this became clear, such as when one participant stated that one of her children was in the house when Anisa asked about her experience of becoming a mother.

Perhaps most profoundly, there is a subtle intimacy gained by being in the same space with someone. It brings a sense of closeness of which we are not fully aware until it is absent. From the last few years of pandemic lockdowns and border closures, we have gained an intuitive sense of the difference between being in person and online, though it is hard to fully articulate why or what that is. Carla wondered whether, in losing the intimacy of sharing space with someone for a period of time, oral historians might also feel less emotionally close to them and that this may subtly diminish our sense of ethical responsibility. Of course legally, our ethical duties remain

undiminished by an online mode, but beyond formal, explicit duties there is a more subtle sense of ethical obligation that oral historians feel to their interviewees that is not reliant upon legalities for its observance.<sup>33</sup> We also noted the lesser frequency of ‘off-the-record’ breaks, which are common during in-person interviews, and often involve conversations that deepen the relationship – including trust and rapport – between the interviewer and interviewee.

Despite this, we suggest that there are some ways in which remote interviews may actually lead to less remote subject matter. We noted above that in some of Carla’s remote interviews during pandemic lockdowns, participants disclosed private and painful material, and said that they felt an emotional benefit to sharing this information. It felt as though in those instances, physical distance facilitated a paradoxical disclosure. In other words, being apart made it easier to reveal difficult things.<sup>34</sup> It might also depend on the topic being covered in an interview as to whether this is true for all research. Anisa wondered whether the challenging subject matter covered in the *Mothering in Crisis* interviews may have sometimes reduced the sense of distance. She found that some of the interview relationships that developed felt as meaningful as those developed in in-person contexts. Perhaps the topics covered in these interviews require (or at least invite) a vulnerability that facilitates an emotional closeness between the interviewee and interviewer.

Through these interviews, Anisa and Carla came to realise that distance and intimacy are not mutually exclusive. Even in cases where there were not notable disclosures, many of these interviews were deeply emotional and moving spaces where vulnerable conversations took place. We also noted a new symmetry and reciprocity, facilitated by the two-way gaze of the webcam, not present in our previous in-person interviews. Interviewees were afforded a glimpse of our home spaces during each interview, allowing them to peer into our private realm. If they chose, interviewees

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33 Carla Pascoe Leahy, ‘The afterlife of interviews: explicit ethics and subtle ethics in sensitive or distressing qualitative research’, *Qualitative Research* 22, no. 5 (2022): 777–794, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211012924>.

34 Peirson-Webber also suggested that interviewing remotely may have enhanced candour in her research: Peirson-Webber, ‘Mining men’.

could protect the privacy of their own home spaces with a blurred or virtual background. The reciprocity of the Zoom gaze has a subtle effect on the balance of power in an interview in ways we are still coming to understand.<sup>35</sup>

### EMOTIONAL CARE DURING REMOTE INTERVIEWS

Although we have identified that there are advantages as well as disadvantages to conducting oral history interviews remotely, Anisa and Carla have still worried about the ramifications of shifting online for our research. This was particularly the case in the context of this subject matter. We were interviewing mothers – people who are deeply invested in the futures of their children – about how it feels to be parenting during a time in which the future is drastically uncertain and sometimes feels bleak. We asked questions about potentially sensitive material such as what it feels like to be trying to care for your children when their safety is threatened by disasters. This is not easy or superficial subject matter by any stretch.

Due to our concerns about interviewee wellbeing, we debriefed regularly with each other and spoke about the strategies we were using and developing. There were three key issues we focused on. Firstly, we discussed how to read emotion effectively during an interview. This is an issue that every oral historian in every interview needs to consider, but we worried that in a remote interview we might be less competent at reading subtle emotional cues, particularly those communicated through non-verbal signals. We discovered that pace was particularly important in these online interviews. As interviewers, we needed to make sure we maintained a slow, unhurried pace where we left spaces and pauses to ensure the interviewee had time to communicate fully. We had to be more deliberate about allowing time and space for silences in an online setting. We were also reminded that we needed to listen and watch carefully and attentively. Someone distressed in a remote interview might reveal their feelings through a change in the tone or speed of their voice, or through physically fidgeting or shifting in their seat. Alternatively, an interviewee might explicitly state, 'I felt upset'. Even if a narrator appeared otherwise composed, we took seriously and

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35 Peirson-Webber makes a similar point, musing that 'our interpersonal relationship seemed to benefit from my loss of anonymity': Peirson-Webber, 'Mining men'.

literally those verbal declarations of feeling-states, treading carefully when strong emotions were invoked.

Anisa and Carla also worried about whether we could adequately console someone who became distressed if we were not in the same room, and we discussed together how to deal with that situation. Again, our experiences seemed to highlight the importance of taking time. If someone appeared upset we would ask questions that allowed the narrator to practise self-care and to take control of the interview, such as ‘Are you okay? Do you want to take a break? Do you want to keep talking about this or change the subject?’ In this way, we hoped to give agency to interviewees who may have wished to stop talking about difficult subject matter or may have preferred to express how they were feeling. Our basic strategy after checking in with the interviewees’ wishes was to affirm their experience through a comment such as ‘That must have been really difficult for you’. We let them know that other interviewees had voiced similar sentiments and that they did not need to apologise for crying, to normalise and contextualise their distress, without minimising it. We also explicitly thanked them for trusting us enough to share distressing material.

Finally, we thought and talked about how we could ensure that our interviewees were okay at the end of the interview. From the outset, we consciously designed the interview schedule so that we ended the interviews on a positive note, asking ‘what inspires you or motivates you? What makes you feel hopeful?’ In closing we would often remark, ‘we covered some challenging topics today – how are you feeling?’ In a follow-up email after the interview, we would ask how they felt in the aftermath when it felt appropriate to check whether they needed to speak further with us. While we recognise that these are not perfect strategies, after careful consideration we concluded that they were as good as we would be able to manage in an in-person context. We remain convinced that the topic of how mothers are coping with the climate crisis remains significant and hence important to capture. There are no easy answers as to how interviewers can continue to take emotional care of narrators when inviting them to speak about profound and potentially distressing subject matter.

## SAFETY AND INTIMACY

Pre-pandemic, oral historians used to often think about in-person interviews as creating a safe and special space. We assumed that intimacy was enhanced through being in the same place with an interviewee. Our oral history interviews were an opportunity to share space and time, consciously fostering rapport and actively working to create a space where both interviewer and interviewee feel secure and comfortable. (Although there have always been exceptions to this such as interviewing in violent, tense or adversarial settings.<sup>36</sup>) But the pandemic has shifted how Carla and Anisa think about safety and intimacy in interviews. We have all become so much more conscious of how germs spread through touch and through sharing air. Being in the same space as another person no longer feels as safe as it once did. In fact, sharing another person's air feels strangely intimate – to breathe the same air without a mask is to expose oneself to potential danger. It always was, of course, but it was not front of mind for most of us.

In the past, best practice to create a high-quality audio recording was to interview inside, with doors and windows closed, to minimise background noise. But is this safe practice now? And does it uphold a duty of care to interviewee and interviewer? There is always an option to wear masks for in-person interviews, particularly with more vulnerable participants. But wearing a mask introduces a literal barrier between people and reduces our ability to read facial expressions. In these pandemic times, it may feel more intimate and safer to interview online, where both parties can be safely mask-free. As oral historians who have been practising our craft for a number of years, we are aware that some of our most fundamental assumptions about how to create trust and rapport with narrators, and how to behave ethically and carefully, have been unsettled by this coronavirus.

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36 See, for example, Erin Jessee, 'The limits of oral history: ethics and methodology amid highly politicized research settings', *The Oral History Review* 38 (2011): 287–307; Kathleen Blee, 'Evidence, empathy and ethics: Lessons from oral histories of the Klan', *Journal of American History* 80, no. 2 (1993): 596–606.



## CONCLUSION

Since 2019 all of our lives have been upended by a series of multiple and overlapping crises, including floods, fires and pandemic. Although the worst of lockdown disruptions in Australia were experienced in 2020 and 2021, residents have experienced far worse illness and death in 2022, demonstrating that this pandemic is not finished with us yet. All of these environmental and health disasters are broadly symptoms of what some call the Anthropocene, an epoch in history in which anthropogenic crises are disrupting our lives with stunning frequency and ferocity.

At the start of the pandemic, many of us optimistically hoped that the crisis might last only a few months. This was the basis on which many oral historians paused our interviews or postponed our gatherings. But it is now clear that the risks posed by the pandemic are not ending any time soon. Environmental disasters, in turn, are multiplying and intensifying. The uncomfortable truth is that disruption and crisis are the new normal, and we know that experiences of crisis are variable and unevenly distributed. Oral history has always strived to be an inclusive field and it has made important social justice contributions. There is an opportunity for us now to collectively reconsider how to increase equity of access in designing interview projects, as we evaluate how to be inclusive of people with different comfort levels, vulnerabilities and capacities around meeting in person.

What does all this mean for oral history practice? The last few years have radically unsettled dominant ideas about doing oral history, as they have disrupted everything else. We believe that there will always be a place for in-person interviewing. It often feels more intimate and it generally gives us a better understanding of a person in their environment. But we contend that we also need to embrace remote interviewing as part of our toolkit as oral historians. There will be more and more times when it is not safe or practical for us to interview in person because of illness, disaster or other factors. If we want to nevertheless continue capturing important historical changes, we need to adapt our oral history methodologies as we are having to adapt to the disrupted world that we live in. It is better to do so thoughtfully, consciously and deliberately – and to think carefully about what best practice remote interviewing looks like in these troubling new times.

There are always a multitude of factors to take into account when deciding how to conduct an oral history project. Whether we decide to conduct interviews in person or online, there will be multiple considerations to weigh relating to the researcher, the participant and the individual project ambitions, constraints and priorities. We are fortunate in that we inhabit a period of human history in which technology has afforded (some of) us alternatives to interviewing in person. Our proposal in this article is that we embrace flexibility as oral historians, widening our methodological strategies and remaining reflexive about what we lose and what we gain when we adopt different approaches. The pandemic has given us a moment of critical disruption to step back and evaluate where we want oral history practice to go from here. Each of us has the opportunity to consider: what does it mean to do oral history in a time of crisis? The answer will likely be different for each of us, at different moments in time.

#### **NOTE**

As an editor of this journal, Carla Pascoe Leahy has removed herself from the peer-review process for this article and followed best practice recommendations of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), <https://publicationethics.org/>.

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# The ‘People’s Registry’ and the Long Afterlife of Student Radicalism

NICHOLAS HERRIOT

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\*This article has been peer reviewed.

The four-week student occupation of the Flinders University Registry in August 1974 was a climactic confrontation between student activists and the university administration. The mid- to late 1970s are often understood as a time of disillusionment and decline for Australian student radicalism. This article draws upon the oral testimony of 11 former Flinders student activists and casts doubt on this narrative of straightforward defeat by tracing the complex evolution of radical subjectivities after 1974. In the case of Flinders University, tracing both the immediate aftermath and longer-term afterlives of the 1974 sit-in challenges a problematic characterisation of the People’s Registry as a ‘last hurrah’ of student activism. Although activists faced new challenges within the university and wider society, many directed their activities towards new issues and concerns such as women’s liberation. Oral history interviews are used to highlight the ways political activism had a lifelong impact on the personal lives of those who experienced it. Oral testimony is therefore positioned as a significant source for understanding the longer-term evolution of activist identities forged on the campuses.

## INTRODUCTION

On 1 August 1974, over 100 students launched a four-week sit-in of the Flinders University administration building. Adelaide’s *Advertiser* painted a sensational portrait of the occupied Registry: ‘Students had erected a barricade across the entrance road in readiness to repel any unwelcome visitors, particularly the police. Perched like a keep on the top of the hill, [the Registry] was bedecked with defiant banners and slogans...“People’s Occupation. Fight Oppression”, “No Cops on

Campus” and “Kick the Bosses, Coppers Out”.<sup>1</sup> Historian Graham Hastings claims that some militants ‘got a bit carried away by the drama...and decided to bring guns along to the occupation, ready for a Eureka Stockade–style fight to the death’.<sup>2</sup> In Maoist parlance, the building had become a ‘People’s Registry’. ‘Come and use it’, the students wrote. ‘Show that a university’s resources are for the people and not the bureaucrats and their bosses!’<sup>3</sup>

Flinders opened in 1966 as South Australia’s second university and quickly became a cauldron of radical ideas. The experimental and youthful culture of this new institution was a magnet for less traditional students who were receptive to radical political and cultural worldviews. In the years prior to the occupation, Flinders’ student activists, and their academic allies, had earned nationwide reputations for radicalism and ‘trouble making’. Radicals voiced their dissent through publications such as controversial student newspaper *Empire Times* and took to the streets in protest, among many other issues, against the Vietnam War and apartheid in South Africa, which the Australian government was accused of endorsing by allowing that nation’s rugby team to tour Australia in 1971. In doing so, students hoped to challenge injustices on both a global and local scale.

The occupation of the Registry was a climactic confrontation between student activists and the university administration. The immediate trigger for the People’s Registry was a dispute in the history discipline between students and staff regarding compulsory examinations. But this issue masked the students’ deeper concerns about the university being autocratic and in the service of capitalism and American imperialism. As they sought to democratise Flinders University, the student activists developed a critique of their institution that mirrored their critique of society more broadly.<sup>4</sup>

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1 ‘They’re the Kings of the Castle’, *Advertiser*, 13 August 1974, 1.

2 Graham Hastings, *It Can’t Happen Here: A Political History of Australian Student Activism* (Adelaide: Flinders University Students Association, 2003), 97.

3 ‘The People’s Registry’, student leaflet, 1974, Protest Movements Collection/046, Flinders University Library (henceforth FUL).

4 For elaboration, see Nicholas Herriot and Paul Sendziuk, “‘The Best Way to Help Vietnam is to Make Revolution in your own Country’: Student Radicalism at Flinders University in the Long 1960s”, *Labour History* 124, no. 1 (2023): 163–189.

Adelaide's daily papers offered sensational coverage of the People's Registry before rapidly losing interest in the activities of student activists. 'News of the liberation of the Flinders University Registry building yesterday after more than three weeks of occupation by dissident students provokes a reaction of relief', the *Advertiser* editorialised on 29 August 1974.<sup>5</sup> As the press sighed with relief, as staff returned to their offices and as cleaners began removing student graffiti, some commentators were tempted to believe that the curtain had closed on this 'lawless performance'. 'Rebel students', wrote journalist Stewart Cockburn, had 'demonstrably lost their principal tactical battle with the administration'.<sup>6</sup> In his history of Flinders University, David Hilliard claims that after the occupation, 'students lost interest in political activity' and 'for the next few years there was a mood of apathy on the campus'.<sup>7</sup> Hastings concluded that the 1974 Flinders occupation proved to be a 'last "hurrah" for the generation radicalised by Vietnam'.<sup>8</sup> And, indeed, the mid- to late 1970s are generally understood as a time of decline for Australian student radicalism.<sup>9</sup> This article considers if the activists did indeed realise that the moment for making revolution had passed. Did they cut their hair, stop printing radical literature on the Gestetner and join the mainstream? Drawing upon the testimony of 11 former student radicals who either participated in the Registry occupation or attended Flinders University around that time, as well as the written testimony of others, I cast doubt on a narrative of straightforward defeat by tracing the complex evolution of radical subjectivities after 1974.

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5 'The Flinders Farce', *Advertiser*, 29 August 1974, 5.

6 'Professor Keeps Faith in Young', *Advertiser*, 30 August 1974, 5.

7 David Hilliard, *Flinders University: The First 25 Years, 1966–1991* (Adelaide: Flinders University, 1991), 68.

8 Hastings, *It Can't Happen Here*, 76.

9 See, for example, Alan Barcan, *From New Left to Factional Left: Fifty Years of Student Activism at Sydney University* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011), 125–155; Mick Armstrong, 1, 2, 3, *What Are We Fighting For? The Australian Student Movement from its Origins to the 1970s* (Melbourne: Socialist Alternative, 2001), 95–111; Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett, *Seizures of Youth: 'The Sixties' and Australia* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1991), 164. For a contrasting account that disrupts the conventional 'rise and fall' narrative of activism and dismissal of student radicalism since the 1960s, see Tim Briedis, "Education for Liberation not for World Domination": Student Protest in Australia, 1985–2006', (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2018).

**LOTTERY**  
 \*TODAY'S DRAW P. 18

# THE NEWS

Phone (Editorial and other business) 22 0221  
Classified 22 0182

Adelaide: Thursday, August 29, 1974 7c\*

**LAST**  
 Action Line . . . 31  
 Crossword, Strips . . . 41  
 Finance . . . 26-28  
 Out on the Town 29-31  
 Television . . . 34, 35  
 Weather . . . 58  
 Women's . . . 43-47

WEATHER

A shower or two. TEMP. (at 1 p.m.) 15.0 C. Sunset 5.55.

# CAMPUS BATTLE



ABOVE: Covering their faces, students are escorted from the university by police this morning. BELOW: Senior Constable John Keough and Sulu (left), with Sgt. Lloyd Morley and Kaffir at the university.

## Rocks hurled as 70 police called to Uni.

*By Peter Murphy*  
 A night battle for Flinders University's administration block ended early today when 70 police drove on to the campus.  
 Police were called about 1.30 a.m. by university staff members who said they were being attacked in the administration building by about 70 students.

The staff members said students squirted them with fire extinguishers, threw rocks, and attempted to force the barricaded front door with a wooden plank.  
 About a dozen staff men and 20 security guards retreated to the first floor and then called police as the students tried to retake the building.  
 One security man received head injuries from a brick hurled at the building.  
 As the police task force, which included detectives and two police dogs, led by the Assistant Commissioner of Operations, Mr. E. L. Calder, approached the campus, the door of the main generator room was forced and the power supply was cut off.  
 The convoy of police cars drove up university road and ambulances bombarded them with bricks and rocks out of the darkness.

**Besieged**  
 Mr. Calder said three police cars were damaged before the convoy reached the administration block.  
 The students (and others) gathered outside the besieged administration building block as police approached.  
 A student said: "We were standing there awaiting the cars. When we reached them we decided it was time to take off."  
 The attackers scattered into the university grounds. About 12 students took refuge in the university union building.  
 About two weeks ago, the University Union announced that the building would be a sanctuary for students if police were called in to settle the sit-in dispute.  
 Police gathered outside the union building while other police and the two tracker dogs, Sulu and Kaffir, searched the grounds for those who fled after the attack on the administration block.  
 Secretary of the University Union, Mr. Ian Yates, carried messages from police to the students in the union building.

• Cont. Page 7

## PM keeps out

CAMERON ROWS WITH PILOTS

CANBERRA, Today: The Prime Minister, Mr. Whitlam, will not take any action to persuade the Labor Minister, Mr. Cameron, from intervening in the pilots' pay claim.

It is understood Mr. Whitlam, who is holidaying in north Queensland, considers the matter urgent up to Mr. Cameron. When the pilots' case came on in Sydney today, the ACTU announced it would intervene. Mr. Cameron has clashed with the ACTU president, Mr. Hawke, who accused Mr. Cameron of breaching ALP policy in intervening in pay negotiations between Qantas and the Australian Federation of Air Pilots.

• Cont. Page 3



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Figure 1 The News reports on clashes between students, staff and police at the conclusion of the Registry occupation, 29 August 1974. Photograph supplied by Nicholas Herriot.

The creation of first-hand accounts of student radicalism was an integral part of this research.<sup>10</sup> Although the story of Flinders radicals exists within local folklore in Adelaide, this is the first attempt to record the narratives of Flinders student activists through oral history. The 11 interviewees recruited for this project – seven men and four women – were active participants in the student movement at Flinders between 1969 and at least 1974. They were reached both through an open call in the Flinders University alumni newsletter and snowballing contacts from the initial recruits, two of whom were known to a fellow researcher and introduced to me. While the sample is limited and many prominent activists are either deceased or untraceable, the participants hail from diverse backgrounds and hold multivocal memories. They represent a cross-section of the radical political perspectives dominant among students at the time: Maoism, Trotskyism, Communism and others who 'disagreed with all of the -isms'.<sup>11</sup>

Oral history interviews allow historical actors to narrate subjective experiences in their own words, and thus are valuable sources for understanding the convictions of activists and what motivated them to act. Alessandro Portelli suggests that oral histories 'tell us less about events as such than about their meaning', and in a similar vein I am not concerned with the objective reconstruction of historical events themselves as much as mapping the personal experiences of participants within those events, asking how they constructed their own radical subjectivities.<sup>12</sup> In doing so, following Reynolds, Robinson and Sendziuk, I accept that the recall of past events inevitably involves a process of editing in which particular details are selected and others suppressed, often according to one's gender, class, contemporary political outlook or other factors, including the influence of 'collective memory'.<sup>13</sup> First-hand

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10 The oral history project received ethics approval from both the University of Adelaide (H-2021-072) and the State Library of South Australia, where most of the interview recordings have been deposited with the intention of assisting future scholars.

11 Andrew McHugh, interviewed by author, Adelaide, 6 September 2021, tape and transcript held by author. See Appendix 1 for details regarding interviewees' gender, enrolled course and political affiliation, if any.

12 Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop Journal* 12, no. 1 (1981): 99.

13 Robert Reynolds, Shirleene Robinson and Paul Sendziuk, *In the Eye of the Storm: Volunteers and Australia's Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2021), 14. Also see Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 'Interpreting Memories', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 297–310.

documentary sources such as memoirs, diaries and letters are, of course, similarly affected. In an attempt to mitigate these factors and strengthen the veracity of oral accounts, each interviewee's testimony has been corroborated with the testimony of others and with reference to student and staff publications, political ephemera and other parts of the surviving documentary record.

The oral history interview is an encounter in which the subjectivities of interviewer and interviewee are shaped by their 'collision'.<sup>14</sup> I often met interviewees in their homes; small talk around the kitchen table or on the sofa quickly established my identity as a young and politically active student, and therefore a sympathetic researcher.<sup>15</sup> Although these interactions undoubtedly influenced the ways in which former Flinders students spoke about themselves, I believe that my 'insider' status helped build trust and make interviewees more receptive to sharing their memories. Despite the age gap, we shared an identity around political activism, and narrators expected me to take their worldviews seriously. This intersubjectivity enabled me to establish a significant degree of rapport and, as a result, elicit detailed and highly textured interview responses.

Assuming mutual understanding can cause omissions, and while I may have shared common assumptions with many interviewees, I was cautious to maintain my distance as a researcher by avoiding leading or close-ended questions. Open-ended questions have the benefit of eliciting more personal and emotional responses.<sup>16</sup> Because I am too young to have been involved in the Sixties student movement, I was able to cast a more detached eye on memories of that period. This distinguished me from many historians of student activism who are former radicals and write from an autobiographical standpoint. I self-reflexively considered my status as an activist and how that was both perceived by interviewees and influenced the following analysis. To further negotiate issues of intersubjectivity, this article draws

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14 Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 58.

15 Valerie Yow, "'Do I Like Them Too Much?': Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa", *Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (1997): 55.

16 Portia Dilena, "'Listening Against the Grain': Methodologies in Uncovering Emotions in Oral History Interviews", *Oral History Australia Journal* 41 (2019): 45.



upon a diverse and representational selection of narrators and brings archival sources into dialogue with oral testimony as tools for further contextualisation, comparison, contrast and interpretation.

The editors of a recent study of post-war Australian radicalism suggest that historians have only recently begun the process of 'piecing together' the long-term impact of left-wing activism on Australian society.<sup>17</sup> An important starting point for the project of mapping activism is the individual lives and trajectories of radicals themselves. This paper expands the literature on Australian student radicalism by shedding new light on the enduring impact of activism on radicals in the comparatively under-examined South Australian context.<sup>18</sup> It offers insight into the history of the student movement at Flinders University and the lives and identities of some of its participants during, and beyond, the 'long 1960s'. Although there is a growing body of literature exploring student activism in Australia during this period, we know little about the subsequent lives of student activists in comparison to what is known about their actions on campus. Relatively few studies have foregrounded oral history. This is a major historiographical weakness because, as the interviews conducted for this article reveal, the experience of student activism remained with individuals for the rest of their lives. Studies of 1960s radical activists in Europe have employed oral testimony not only as evidence but in order to consider the shape and meanings of narratives produced retrospectively. Celia Hughes, for example, has highlighted the ways in which activist subjectivities are formed and negotiated through life stories and recollections of 1960s radicalism.<sup>19</sup> Following Hughes, this article positions oral history as particularly suited to illuminating the longer-term impact of radicalisation on the lives of student activists.

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17 Jon Piccini, Evan Smith and Matthew Worley (eds), 'Introduction', in *The Far Left in Australia Since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 14.

18 Most studies of Australian student radicalism have concentrated on events in Australia's largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne. Hastings' *It Can't Happen Here*, provides a detailed chronological overview of the Australian student movement that draws extensively on South Australian events, but his analysis does not draw extensively on oral testimony nor detail the longer afterlives of participation in the student movement on individual activists.

19 Celia Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left: Sixties Activism and the Liberation of the Self* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

The former student activists' accounts of their activities following the People's Registry leads to the conclusion that it did not signal the end of radicalism. Although the university campus did become inhospitable to political activism, radicalism spread into the wider community. 'Radicalism hadn't exhausted itself', recalled student protester Jeff Richards, 'It had begun to transform itself'.<sup>20</sup> Speaking with former activists clearly conveyed that their experiences of radical politics had enduring 'afterlives'.<sup>21</sup> The mainstream press, and historians alike, missed a fascinating story not just about the conflicts that followed the occupation, but the longer-term evolution of political identities forged on the campuses.

### THE 'LAST HURRAH'?

Activism at Flinders in the aftermath of the occupation problematises a narrative of straightforward defeat for student radicals following their ejection from the People's Registry at the end of August 1974. In contrast to the mainstream press's portrait of failure, Flinders student leader Dave Macpherson described 'a very sudden realisation amongst ex-occupants and non-occupants alike that the struggle was not over, it had merely entered a new phase'.<sup>22</sup> Macpherson's realisation was supported when 1,000 students gathered for a general university meeting on 2 September 1974. Reaffirming their opposition to compulsory examinations, the overwhelming majority in attendance voted to endorse the aims of the People's Registry.<sup>23</sup> Both the record attendance at this meeting and its outcome suggests that radicals had garnered significant sympathy among students on campus following the occupation. Citing information leaked to the Australian Union of Students, some activists even claimed that the Australian Universities Commission 'feared a nationwide student uprising' inspired by the troubles at Flinders.<sup>24</sup> While such a rebellion never eventuated, Flinders vice-chancellor Roger Russell was regularly harangued by student

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20 Jeff Richards, interviewed by author, Adelaide, 10 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

21 Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

22 Booklet on the Flinders Occupation prepared by Dave Macpherson for the Annual Council of the Australian Union of Students, 1975, FUA/Student Politics/Occupation of the Registry/2, FUL.

23 'Troubles at Flinders', *Advertiser*, 3 September 1974.

24 Booklet on the Occupation, FUL.

activists at speeches across the country.<sup>25</sup> According to Hilliard, student criticism of the vice-chancellor's research (discovered during the occupation to have been partly funded by the American military) meant that Russell became 'less visible on the campus' until his retirement in 1979.<sup>26</sup>

Support for students facing disciplinary charges provided another anchor to activists who wanted to continue to resist the university administration after 1974. Several activists were suspended or expelled for incidents of alleged staff harassment following the occupation. Consistent with their emphasis on participatory democracy, radicals rejected the closed-door Board of Discipline investigations and instead demanded that all charges be heard at mass university assemblies.<sup>27</sup> One expelled Worker-Student Alliance activist, Michael Clark, continued to occupy his university-owned home until 1977, long after he had been ordered to vacate.<sup>28</sup> As former student Andrew McHugh explained, 'the notion of fairness and justice' continued to motivate activists after 1974 because, in his view, 'of all the punitive measures that the university used to try and bring a few ringleaders to bear'.<sup>29</sup>

### A SHIFTING TERRAIN

In mapping the afterlives of activism, it is first necessary to acknowledge the ways in which a changing political terrain did create new challenges for radicals within the university. This section introduces the evolution of student radicalism at Flinders after 1974, during what can be characterised as a transition period from the heady weeks of the People's Registry to a new context in which activists navigated unfamiliar challenges, rethought their tactics and, in some cases, even realigned their ideological positions. Although the campaign against discipline at Flinders enabled students to challenge the vice-chancellor after 1974, it simultaneously signalled the increasingly defensive character of campus-based activism. In hindsight, Mark Rohde reflected,

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25 Hastings, *It Can't Happen Here*, 118.

26 Hilliard, *Flinders University*, 89.

27 'Discipline News', student publication, 1975, FUA/Student Politics/Student Protests at Flinders University 1975/2, FUL.

28 'Student Loses Home and Uni Rights', *Advertiser*, 12 November 1976, 8.

29 Andrew McHugh, 6 September 2021.

dealing with a series of court cases involving students who had participated in the occupation, particularly those implicated in skirmishes with staff, consumed activists’

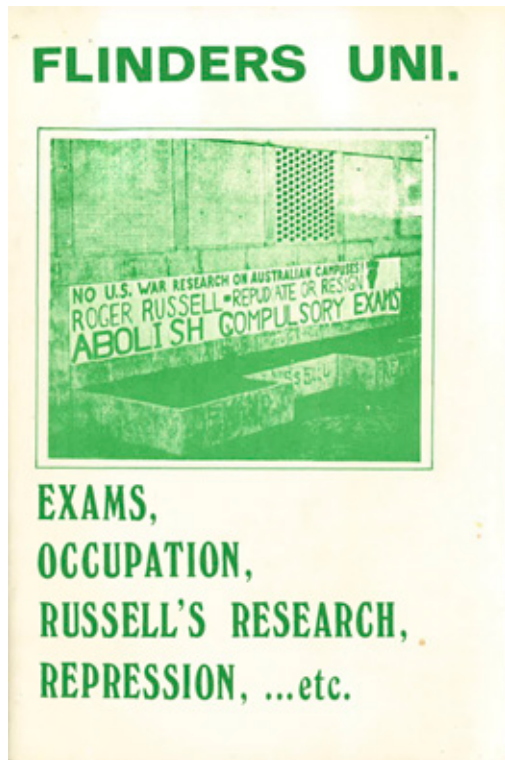


Figure 2 Front page of a booklet on the Flinders Occupation prepared for the Australian Union of Students, January 1975. Photograph supplied by Nicholas Herriot.

time and meant that ‘we weren’t able to focus on other things’.<sup>30</sup> By the mid-1970s, broader developments both within the university and wider society meant that, in some ways, the ground was beginning to shift beneath the feet of student radicals.

The most severely wounded victim of a changing political situation was Maoism, a way of viewing the world and the nature of revolution that was particularly prevalent among student activists at Flinders. Maoist students at Flinders were inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China, particularly what they perceived as the struggle of students and youth in Chairman Mao’s

struggle against bureaucracy. The Flinders Worker-Student Alliance gave organisational expression to Maoist ideas in a local context and emphasised the three key principles of ‘opposition to US imperialism, fighting fascism in Australia, and opposition to capitalism’.<sup>31</sup> ‘I still have a memory in my head of probably early 1976, going through the campus and wondering, what the hell, the Maoists have fucking disappeared’, Jeff Richards, a member of Socialist Youth Alliance (SYA), a rival Trotskyist group, recalled.<sup>32</sup> Although it is inconceivable that students vanished into

30 Mark Rohde, interviewed by author, Adelaide, 6 September 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

31 ‘The Truth about WSA and the Correct Line(s)’, *Empire Times*, 27 April 1972. For further discussion of the meaning of Maoist ideas at Flinders University, see Herriot and Sendziuk, “‘The Best Way to Help Vietnam’”, 174–177.

32 The Socialist Youth Alliance (SYA) was a Trotskyist group affiliated with the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, led by Ernest Mandel. Notably, the SYA were staunch opponents of what they saw as ‘Stalinist’ regimes and, according to Jeff Richards, ‘This set us apart from the hardcore Maoists and

thin air, as Jeff suggested, it is the case that Maoism largely exhausted its energies by the late 1970s. For Mark Rohde, student activism during 1974 had initially clarified his political beliefs: 'Instead of being on the edges of [Maoist] groups, I became involved fully in them. At that point I saw myself as becoming engaged with a broader Marxist–Leninist form of politics'. Mark's increasing 'disillusionment' with Maoism, however, had its roots in the very attempt to make revolution in Australian society. The Maoist agenda of Australian independence from foreign domination led to increasing political frustration during the later 1970s. 'It made sense to talk about Australia being independent of the US as a starting point for people's radicalism', Mark reflected. But 'a lot of people just seemed to be stuck there'.<sup>33</sup> In Mark's view, a spuriously progressive Australian nationalism came to overshadow the importance of socialist revolution. Pragmatic evolutions in Chinese foreign policy only reinforced a sense of confusion among Australian radicals.<sup>34</sup> 'We were very strong on supporting the Vietnamese revolution', Jeff Richards remembered. 'So, to see China making a deal with Nixon while Cambodia was being bombed...I think it put a lot of questions in the heads of many radicals'.<sup>35</sup>

When asked about their experiences after 1974, activists often described fundamental changes to the social landscape that had inhibited or enabled them to discover their identities as radicals. Ian Yates evoked the metaphor of a wave to describe his 'sense that you were with a big tide of people, but then the issues became more complex and less overwhelming'.<sup>36</sup> For others, the dismissal of prime minister Gough Whitlam in 1975 functioned as a convenient marker for significant social changes and, in some ways, the onset of an increasingly conservative political 'mood'.<sup>37</sup> 'We

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supporters of the Soviet Union within traditional communist parties'. At Flinders, Trotskyists such as Jeff 'felt it was our role to challenge the myths surrounding Cultural Revolution Maoism and the Maoists' ultra-left stances'. Jeff Richards, personal correspondence with the author, 20 May 2023.

33 Mark Rohde, 6 September 2021.

34 Xiaoxiao Xie, 'The Rise and Fall of Australian Maoism' (PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 2016), 201.

35 Jeff Richards, 10 August 2021.

36 Ian Yates, interviewed by author, Middleton, 14 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

37 Jeff Richards, 10 August 2021; Anni Browning, interviewed by author, online, 12 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author; Steve O'Brien, interviewed by author, online, 20 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

had the Whitlam era and free education', Bob Ellis reflected. 'When that changed, so did the student body's perceptions. They had to keep their nose to the grindstone. They didn't have time to participate in broader activities'.<sup>38</sup> Andrew McHugh, who remained employed as the printer of the Flinders' student newspaper *Empire Times* for several decades after 1974, echoed Bob's observations: 'As people ended up creating more debt or needing to pay more for education, they suddenly had to start working part-time. And then I think people started seeing their fellow students in a less egalitarian way'.<sup>39</sup>

The transformation of universities themselves created an increasingly unfavourable environment for activists. Indeed, the trajectory of courses with their origins in the political ferment of the early 1970s illustrated the challenges of sustaining radicalism within the academy. As Flinders faced new financial difficulties, Women's Studies, which had been a nurturing hub for student activists, suffered job losses and marginalisation.<sup>40</sup> From the perspective of student activists, the cuts to Women's Studies stemmed from its fundamentally 'threatening and "unacademic" intentions'.<sup>41</sup> The threat of complete closure was only prevented after a successful public campaign in 1983.<sup>42</sup> At the end of his career, radical professor of philosophy Brian Medlin reflected on how difficult it had become for a socialist to work within the academy. Experimental courses, Medlin lamented, 'became harder to teach' and group assessment was replaced with a 'top down' teaching style.<sup>43</sup> By 1978, the Flinders University Socialist Youth Alliance painted a gloomy portrait of student radicalism:

This university is bedevilled with the politics of mediocrity and compromise  
– among student politicians, among bureaucrats and among lecturers and

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38 Bob and Julie Ellis, interviewed by author, Wistow, 9 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

39 Andrew McHugh, 6 September 2021.

40 Women's Studies Collective, *A History of Women's Studies at Flinders University* (Adelaide: Empire Times Press, 1987).

41 Prue Anderson, 'Women's Studies Conference', *National U*, 26 July 1975, 6.

42 Susan Sheridan, "'Transcending Tauromachy": The Beginnings of Women's Studies in Adelaide', *Australian Feminist Studies* 13, no. 27 (1998): 72.

43 Brian Medlin, Submission to the Committee for the Review of the Discipline of Philosophy, 1991, Medlin Collection, Box 1, Folder 21, Brian Medlin Collection, FUL.

tutors. Backroom deals, secrecy, dismissal of Student Consultative Committees – all this is not the mark of a vital and enlightened institution, but one that is in a slow process of decay.<sup>44</sup>

Although hyperbolic, this rhetoric marked a dramatic shift from the earlier political optimism of publications such as *Empire Times*. Just four years after the occupation, the diagnosis of this editorial was grim: 'Depressions and distinctions will become the motto from our Alma Mater'.

### THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND MOVING INTO THE COMMUNITY

The People's Registry foregrounded new challenges and concerns for student radicals. Perhaps most importantly, the occupation was an opportunity for female activists to consider their position on the radical left. One participant, Karen, likened the sit-in to a family in which tensions and contradictions were brought to a head.<sup>45</sup> For Judith Wotherspoon, although the occupation was full of tremendous political excitement, she encountered 'constant problems between blokes and women'. 'All the domestic work was left to the women', she remembered. 'It's so common...but the men don't notice'.<sup>46</sup> Judith's memory of having her 'hands in the sink' complicates the portrait of democracy painted by some of the male student activists. Female activists protested their exclusion from leadership positions by forming a 'women's caucus' within the occupation. They alleged that men undermined female chairs during meetings and denied women the opportunity to develop their skills by writing political pamphlets. While few male interviewees recalled gendered conflict within the sit-in, women often reflected on what they saw as the masculinism of male radicals. Some male narrators did recount encounters with the emergent women's liberation movement around the time of the occupation. Jeff Richards vividly recalled his 'first moment of recognising the beginning of the feminist movement' when he was reprimanded

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44 *Socialist Challenge*, weekly leaflet of the Flinders University Socialist Youth Alliance, 1978, PRG 622/9, State Library of South Australia (henceforth SLSA).

45 Karen and Bri, interviewed by Audrey Windram in Adelaide in 1975, PRG 1608/2/21, SLSA.

46 Judith Wotherspoon, interviewed by author, Adelaide, 15 September 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

by a female comrade for referring to women as ‘chicks’.<sup>47</sup> Mark Rohde stressed his sympathy for the ‘strong feminist influence on the campus’ and particularly activists ‘struggling against male chauvinism within the Maoist movement, which it was somewhat notorious for at times’.<sup>48</sup> The fraternal culture of male activists, however, generally featured more prominently in women’s accounts of student radicalism, whereas female activists tended to assume more of a background presence in men’s stories. ‘The New Left was looking pretty old in lots of ways’, former student Chris Beasley explained.<sup>49</sup>

Written in the aftermath of the 1974 occupation, a statement by Sally Trevena and Belinda Porich suggests that female radicals at Flinders found themselves marginalised within a movement claiming to embody the ideals of participatory democracy. Their letter opened with a quote from American feminist Robin Morgan: ‘A genuine left doesn’t consider anyone’s suffering irrelevant, nor does it function as a microcosm of capitalist economy, with men competing for power and status at the top, and women doing all the work at the bottom’. Morgan’s words gave voice to the women’s own experience of the People’s Registry. ‘We are prepared to be militant, and revolutionary’, they continued, ‘but not at the dictates of sexist male revolutionaries’.<sup>50</sup> Sexism was a common feature of student movements worldwide during the long 1960s and often catalysed demands for women’s liberation.<sup>51</sup> In her study of the 1968 student movement in Italy, for example, oral historian and feminist Luisa Passerini has highlighted the ways in which women’s personal and negative experiences in the New Left ‘posited the problem of women’s liberation in a more

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47 Jeff Richards, 10 August 2021.

48 Mark Rohde, 6 September 2021.

49 Chris Beasley, interviewed by author, Adelaide, 26 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

50 ‘Counterfeit Left Exposed’, statement by Sally Trevena and Belinda Porich, 16 September 1974, PRG 622/7, SLSA.

51 For discussion of gender issues in student movements during the long 1960s, see Ronald Fraser, *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), 304–310; Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1979); Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Van Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 153–170.



urgent mode than before'.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Celia Hughes notes the ways in which activists' experiences of protest were inflected by gender. 'Subjectivity and the bonds of comradeship', Hughes argues, 'were shaped within a shifting social and political landscape in which to be a young activist woman was replete with uncertainty'.<sup>53</sup> As women sought to emphasise issues of subjectivity and sexuality, many developed a feminist politics that moved away from the Maoism dominant at Flinders. The People's Registry had taught Trevena and Porich that they could not 'automatically view the left as our allies...our primary political allegiance is to other women'.<sup>54</sup> Chris Beasley felt that the Flinders Marxist–Leninists 'constructed themselves as a kind of warrior class'. She remembered her dissatisfaction with Maoism in similar terms to Trevena and Porich:

It was very much about being a tough guy for the revolution and little attention paid to how people interacted with each other...the way they actually acted as a group was often at odds with what I felt was the right way to be a socialist, or a feminist or any other kind of -ist who was trying to change the world.<sup>55</sup>

For many politically radical young women, the occupation demonstrated the need to assert women's liberation as an autonomous political force both on and off the campus.

Trevena and Porich's polemic draws attention to a general trend for student radicalism to move beyond the campus and into the community after 1974. 'The feminist struggle', they argued, 'must be extended far outside the confines of the Registry, and the university'.<sup>56</sup> Participatory democracy continued to provide an influential political framework for women's activism at Flinders after the People's Registry. Reflecting a commitment to consciousness raising, Women's Studies courses were

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52 Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 100.

53 Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left*, 97.

54 'Counterfeit Left Exposed', SLSA.

55 Chris Beasley, 26 August 2021.

56 'Counterfeit Left Exposed', SLSA.

open to women outside the university.<sup>57</sup> Chris Beasley eagerly explained the radical pedagogy informing Women's Studies: 'We were asked to come together in tutorials, which might include people from the community who hadn't finished high school. The idea was to have a genuinely community-based knowledge grouping, consciousness-raising groupings in a way'.<sup>58</sup> Anonymous testimonies compiled for a 1987 publication by the Women's Studies Collective affirmed how radical education at Flinders encouraged political involvement. For one student, women's studies 'had a profound impact on my life, it challenged my previously held values and kindled my interest in feminism'.<sup>59</sup> When asked about the long-term impact of her activism, Judith Wotherspoon recounted meeting Helen Oxenham, an unenrolled Women's Studies student. Helen, she explained, established a women's shelter at Christies Beach: 'She would borrow material from the university and bring it down and the women could discuss it there, like having a tutorial but locally and informally'. Judith was uncertain as to why she related Helen's story to me: 'Anyway, I forget why I'm telling you this'.<sup>60</sup> However, far from being tangential to her experience of student activism, Judith's involvement in the women's shelter echoed a common process of radicalism becoming localised. Motivated by their view that the personal was political, many students worked in women's shelters and services. Judith's own participation in the women's movement not only gave her a sense of purpose, but embodied the shift described by Jeff Richards, of radicalism spreading 'further out into the community' after 1974.<sup>61</sup>

Echoing this perspective, Brian Medlin argued strongly against the 'false impression' that activism simply 'nose-dived' after the mid-1970s. 'In some ways', he argued, 'things improved' as radicals 'moved into cultural, education and other work of great importance'.<sup>62</sup> Medlin's comments support a sceptical attitude towards narratives of

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57 Yvonne Allen, 'The Silence Ends', in Penny Ryan (ed.), *A Guide to Women's Studies in Australia* (Melbourne: Australian Union of Students, 1975), 9.

58 Chris Beasley, 26 August 2021.

59 Women's Studies Collective, *A History of Women's Studies*.

60 Judith Wotherspoon, 15 September 2021.

61 Jeff Richards, 10 August 2021.

62 Brian Medlin, 'A Time of Revolt: An Account of the Late Sixties and Early Seventies', essay, date unknown, Box 1, Folder 10, Brian Medlin Collection, FUL.

straightforward decline after the People's Registry. Although activists were challenged by changes within the university and wider society, many directed their activities towards new issues and concerns and gravitated towards new political organisations. Chris Beasley's experiences in the student movement led her to develop an interest in Trotskyism, followed by her decision to join the Communist Party of Australia two years after the occupation. 'There were all these different versions' of socialism, Chris explained. 'But I thought "I think I'm more interested in the Eurocommunist version, which seems more concerned about egalitarian politics"...And they took women's stuff pretty seriously. Not as seriously as they ought to, but better than the other groups did'.<sup>63</sup> Mark Rohde, who subsequently became a trade union activist, reflected that 'the things we learnt about and the ways of thinking we got [through student activism] gave us a way to approach our work and our politics in the years that followed'.<sup>64</sup> One possible explanation for why the Maoists, in Jeff's view, seemed to disappear from campus is that many became employed at the nearby Tonsley Park Chrysler factory where they agitated among rank-and-file workers.<sup>65</sup> The formation of Maoist-influenced band, Redgum, in 1975 was an expression of Flinders activists attempting to make art, in Mao's phrase, serve the people.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, many student activists emphasised links with the working class and ordinary Australian people as they moved into the community.

#### **'THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED THEN MADE ME WHO I AM NOW': RADICALISM'S AFTERLIVES**

Activists often recalled a sense of radical optimism when narrating their youth. Julie Ellis spoke for many of her comrades when she described her belief that 'life would never be the same again' after the American defeat in Vietnam. 'We were going to have a revolution', Steve O'Brien laughed.<sup>67</sup> If historians accept a narrative of

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63 Chris Beasley, 26 August 2021.

64 Mark Rohde, 6 September 2021.

65 See James Vigus, 'A Short March Down the Hill: Flinders University Student Radicals and the Rank and File Movement at the Tonsley Park Chrysler Factory, 1973–1977' (Honours thesis, Flinders University, 2012).

66 Judith Wotherspoon, 15 September 2021.

67 Steve O'Brien, 20 August 2021.

decline after 1974, we might expect that these Promethean hopes of social change have been replaced by diagnoses of failure and disillusionment. As Ronald Fraser noted as early as 1988, ‘much that seemed exhilarating, even triumphant, about the movements has been buried in memory by subsequent history’.<sup>68</sup> It is the case that the sheer utopianism of youthful radicalism is sometimes more clearly articulated in the pages of *Empire Times* rather than oral history interviews. Nonetheless, for many respondents, speaking with me was a means not just of remembering their younger selves, but of coming to terms with their past experiences of 1960s radicalism and reaffirming their activist identities in a changed political world. As Celia Hughes suggests, oral history interviews can function ‘as a means of remembering not only past activist selves, but reshaping political subjectivity’ in a contemporary political landscape.<sup>69</sup> Shortly after our interview, Anni Browning contacted me to emphasise that she still attends ‘demos’ for various issues.<sup>70</sup> Steve O’Brien stressed that he is engaged in more activism today compared to ‘what I did when I was however old then’. When recalling the People’s Registry, Steve interpreted the very act of remembrance as an affirmation of his Trotskyist identity:

I’ve got a reasonable memory for this stuff. Why? Theodor Draper wrote a biography of James P. Cannon and he said, ‘How come James P. Cannon can remember all of this stuff?’ and he says, ‘Because he wants to remember. Because he’s not ashamed of that’. So I’m not ashamed of that. I want to remember because I’m still a radical. I’m still a socialist. I’m still an activist.<sup>71</sup>

Steve’s comment reveals the extent to which oral remembrance is a reflexive process in which activists often reconstruct past events through the prism of present political beliefs. For Andrew McHugh, chiding the ‘establishment’ careers pursued by his peers was a way of affirming his own identity as a radical: ‘I just wish that a few people hadn’t given up quite as easily. Not that I think I’ve changed the world much,

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68 Fraser, 1968, 6.

69 Celia Hughes, ‘Negotiating ungovernable spaces between the personal and the political: Oral history and the left in post-war Britain’, *Memory Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 72.

70 Anni Browning, personal correspondence with the author, 12 August 2021.

71 Steve O’Brien, 20 August 2021.

but I still have always tried to a little bit'. Andrew summarised his journey of radicalisation at Flinders in the following way:

When I went to university, I just became more aware of politics. I started going to the Moratoriums and reading up about stuff and trying to form some kind of coherent frame of reference for myself, but I still haven't quite been able to do it. But I suppose I'm probably now quite left of centre. I probably started out as a wishy-washy lefty. And the world has just moved... or at least in Australia [people have] moved further and further to the right.<sup>72</sup>

Like others of his generation, Andrew is still actively attempting to find a meaningful political 'frame of reference'. This process was set in motion through the crucible of student politics and continues to this day. Steve O'Brien narrated a similar process:

When I went to Flinders University, it normalised radical and socialist behaviour to me...It was a belief system that has subsequently been supported or confirmed by the privileges and experiences I've had in my workplace, in my union activities and the fact that I've been able to live and work overseas and participate with comrades in other countries in struggles, and see the confirmation that this isn't just a middle-class schoolkid's thing, this is a serious struggle.<sup>73</sup>

For Steve and Andrew, their experience of the last half-century has not discouraged a radical worldview. In fact, for Steve, the contemporary context of 'climate catastrophe and rising inequality' has reinforced his belief in the need for a socialist society: 'There is a hope for the world. And it's a hope I gained at school and it was confirmed by Flinders and subsequently confirmed throughout all the years, that there's certainly something worthwhile contributing your life to'.<sup>74</sup> In this way, activists often cast the Sixties as the beginning of an ongoing struggle for a more tolerant and equal society. Oral histories strongly suggest that many radicals did not

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72 Andrew McHugh, 6 September 2021.

73 Steve O'Brien, 20 August 2021.

74 Steve O'Brien, 20 August 2021.

repudiate a vision of a better society. Instead, interviewees viewed their lives after university as a continuation of their activist experiences.

### THEN AND NOW

Many of the 11 activists interviewed for this article were either modest or uncertain about the significance of their experience as student radicals. ‘It feels a bit strange’, Mark Rohde explained as we arranged to speak. ‘I am more used to wanting to read other people’s stories’.<sup>75</sup> Mark’s comment revealed how interviewees weigh up whether or not their own life narrative belongs to the history I have attempted to document. Although my questions emphasised activists’ experiences during their time at Flinders, I ended the interviews by asking participants if they felt that they had impacted society. ‘I’d like to think that we made a bit of a difference’, Anni Browning reflected.<sup>76</sup> Mark’s initial apprehension and Anni’s hesitancy when responding to my question indicate that I was looking for the story of Flinders student radicalism to fit into a conventional historiographical narrative of how youthful rebellion ‘changed Australian society forever’.<sup>77</sup> In reality, the impacts of student radicalism are often more intangible, making oral testimony a particularly significant source for understanding how the political became personal.

The process of interviewing former activists conveyed the long afterlives of student radicalism. Bob and Julie Ellis had preserved not just their memories, but dozens of newspapers, ASIO files and other documents that they eagerly shared with me. The snowballing recruitment process, in which initial interviewees volunteered other participants, clearly demonstrated the endurance of friendships and networks forged in activist groups and at street demonstrations. Many respondents indicated that their experiences as student radicals strongly influenced their careers and life choices. Bruno Yvanovich’s decision to pursue a career in the public service stemmed from the keen sense of social justice he had developed through his involvement in activism against apartheid and the Vietnam War. ‘I saw that as a way to continue working for

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75 Mark Rohde, personal correspondence with the author, 3 September 2021.

76 Anni Browning, 12 August 2021.

77 Meredith Burgmann and Nadia Wheatley, *Radicals: Remembering the Sixties* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2021).

the common good', he said.<sup>78</sup> As Anni Browning explained, 'A lot of the things that happened then made me who I am now'.<sup>79</sup> Judith Wotherspoon emphasised how she has 'lived on those memories all these years'. For her, being part of the People's Registry 'was the best political lesson I've had in my life'.<sup>80</sup>

The streets and the sit-in, rather than the classroom alone, it seems, offered students a lifelong political education. Formative experiences of student radicalism, such as labouring over a hot printing press, political debate and attending demonstrations, helped cohere long-standing activist identities. Mark Rohde was certain that he 'learnt a lot more through activism' than his academic studies at Flinders.<sup>81</sup> In this sense, activism functioned as a 'school' that gave students the skills they took with them to their subsequent roles as educators, researchers, trade unionists and community leaders. Involvement in the 1974 occupation and the student movement at Flinders 'gave me a means to be comfortable with the way I approached my politics in the workplace', Mark reflected.<sup>82</sup> Student activism offered Bruno Yvanovich fundamental skills 'about working in organisations, meeting procedures, dealing with papers for committees and learning to stand up in front of a group and speak with confidence'.<sup>83</sup> For Anni Browning, the fact that she 'never got a degree anyway' didn't matter, as 'it was much more about being at Flinders to get a much broader education'.<sup>84</sup>

The memories of former student activists are undoubtedly shaped by the different trajectories they took throughout their adult lives. Learning how to 'work in the system...to get things done', Ian Yates experienced perhaps the most significant evolution. Several decades after having played a leading role in the People's Registry, he became deputy chancellor of Flinders University in 2007. In light of his

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78 Bruno Yvanovich, interviewed by author, online, 17 August 2021, tape and transcript held by author.

79 Anni Browning, 12 August 2021.

80 Judith Wotherspoon, 15 September 2021.

81 Mark Rohde, 6 September 2021.

82 Mark Rohde, 6 September 2021.

83 Bruno Yvanovich, 17 August 2021.

84 Anni Browning, 12 August 2021.

subsequent professional career, it is understandable that Ian indicated some remorse for his past actions. He recounted an occasion when police arrived at the Flinders Student Representative Council office, looking to arrest him for draft resistance:

I walked out the back end of the office, went up to the Refectory and grabbed some of my mates and said, 'We've got Commonwealth Police on the campus'. And within about half an hour, we had this huge demonstration saying – I probably regret it now, but saying – 'Pigs off campus, pigs off campus'. So, I mean, we were nasty to them when it's not them, they were doing their job.<sup>85</sup>

The flow of Ian's animated narration was interrupted by a sense of regret. The discomfort associated with such memories of protest, however mild, does suggest the contested character of student radicalism. Interviews, as Mark, von der Goltz and Warring explain, are full of 're-workings' as activists give meaning to their past.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, perhaps because of a general tendency to emphasise continuity between the narrated and narrating self, the disclosure of remorse was not a common feature of most interviews. Echoing the views of many interviewees, Anni Browning was unambiguous about her time as a radical, saying 'I look back at it fondly, I must say. There's no regrets'.<sup>87</sup> Regardless of what activists thought should or should not have happened during that period of radical commitment, all interviewees undermined a narrative of disillusionment or decline. While we should be wary of generalising the experiences of a generation from the select sample of activists who agreed to speak with me, what emerges is the long-term impact of student activism on the personal lives of those who experienced it.

Due to my own prejudices, I admit that I had initially expected to encounter ageing activists who would either repent aspects of their youthful radicalism or explain to me why their generation's political contributions were superior to the apathy

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85 Ian Yates, 14 August 2021.

86 James Mark, Anna von der Goltz and Annette Warring, 'Reflections', in Robert Gildea, James Mark and Annette Warring (eds), *Europe's 1968: Voices of Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 283.

87 Anni Browning, 12 August 2021.



of students today. Instead, I met a cohort of people who offered highly considered reflections on the strengths and limitations of their radicalism during the long 1960s. They maintain a pride in their past activism and empathise with students today who face new challenges such as increasing tuition fees.

Contemporary commentators wrongly portrayed the dramatic events of the People's Registry as the concluding chapter of activism at Flinders University. Similarly, contemporary historians might be tempted to believe that the only remaining traces of student radicalism are yellowing newspapers or leaflets in a library archive. This article has drawn on the memories and experiences of student activists themselves to demonstrate the continuing importance of such events as the People's Registry in the lives of those who experienced them. In the case of Flinders University, mapping both the immediate aftermath and longer afterlives of the 1974 student occupation challenges a problematic narrative of the People's Registry as a 'last hurrah' of the Vietnam generation. Oral history narratives have an important role to play in further unearthing the longer-term personal impact of political radicalisation and, in doing so, creating a more complete portrait of student activism during and beyond the long 1960s.

#### APPENDIX 1

NAME	GENDER	ENROLLED DEGREE AT THE TIME OF THE 1974 OCCUPATION	POLITICAL AFFILIATION
Andrew McHugh	Male	Unenrolled. Editor of <i>Empire Times</i> and printer for the Flinders University Students Association.	Unaffiliated
Anni Browning	Female	Unenrolled. Formerly enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts.	Unaffiliated
Bob Ellis	Male	Master of Arts (University of Adelaide)	Adelaide Revolutionary Marxists

NAME	GENDER	ENROLLED DEGREE AT THE TIME OF THE 1974 OCCUPATION	POLITICAL AFFILIATION
Bruno Yvanovich	Male	Graduate (Bachelor of Science)	Unaffiliated
Chris Beasley	Female	Bachelor of Arts	Socialist, Euro-communist and socialist feminist. Influenced by radical feminism.
Ian Yates	Male	Graduate (Bachelor of Arts). Secretary of the Flinders University Union.	Unaffiliated
Jeff Richards	Male	Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science	Socialist Youth Alliance
Judith Wotherspoon	Female	Not provided	Not provided
Julie Ellis	Female	Graduate (Bachelor of Teaching, University of Adelaide)	Adelaide Revolutionary Marxists
Mark Rohde	Male	Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Economics	Unaffiliated at the time of the occupation, but committed to Maoism in early 1976
Steve O'Brien	Male	Bachelor of Arts	Socialist Youth Alliance

*Based on information and descriptions recalled and provided by participants.*

# ‘Truth Is the Daughter of Time, Not of Authority’:<sup>1</sup> How Oral Histories Revise the Official Narrative of British Atomic and Thermonuclear Testing in Australia

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SUE RABBITT ROFF

*Sue Rabbitt Roff studied and taught at Melbourne and Monash Universities in the 1970s then worked in human rights in New York including as Press Officer to the FRETILIN delegation to the United Nations. She has studied the long-term health effects of participation in British atomic and nuclear tests. Her publications are collated at [www.rabbittreview.com](http://www.rabbittreview.com). She is currently a postgraduate tutor at Dundee University Medical School.*

AUKUS, the tripartite defence agreement between Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, was announced on 15 September 2021. It is an extension of the nuclear alliance that was forged between Australia and Britain as the latter sought to resuscitate the Anglo–American wartime alliance that led to the development of the atomic bombs detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Fortunately, there are still accessible oral history primary sources that enable us to review and revise the official histories of these events. Although oral histories are often ephemeral, digital technology allows us to access important observations from what might be termed the ‘subaltern’ contingent who made up the mass of the 16,000 Australian and 22,000 British ‘participants’ in the 12 detonations that led up to the eventual detonation of the British H bomb in the 1957–58 Grapple series off Christmas Island. Contrary to statements by the official British historians of the tests that

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1 Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (1620).

the Grapple shots ‘were not a bad start, going straight from the drawing board to an air-dropped test device’, they were designed and field tested in Australia. This article reviews many discrepancies evidenced by oral testimonies and statements when they are compared with official statements.

When Britain withdrew from its commitments east of Suez in the 1960s, Australia’s testing grounds at Maralinga and Woomera – together with uranium resources – were embraced in the American forward defence umbrella. But as we approach the 71st anniversary of the first British atomic test in Australia (Operation Hurricane at the Monte Bello Islands on 3 October 1952), it is sobering to realise how under-researched Australia’s co-operation in the development of Britain’s atomic/fission and then thermonuclear/fusion weapons has been.

This article explores multiple unanswered questions in Australian atomic and nuclear historiography. They include:

- Why was Australian physicist Sir Mark Oliphant afraid he would be cursed in 1992?
- Did Lord Penney lie to the Royal Commission about the Black Mist?
- Was the 1985 Australian Royal Commission into British nuclear tests fair to Sir Ernest Titterton in saying he was planted on prime minister Menzies?
- Did Australia give sufficient ‘informed consent’ to the development of the British Hydrogen (H) bomb in Australia to make it a nuclear power?
- Were thermonuclear materials tested for the British H bomb in Australia?
- Did the Menzies government’s Safety Advisor and British government officials lie to the 1985 Royal Commission about health hazards to servicemen required to participate?
- What was the significance of the Kite detonation 40 days before the opening of the 1956 Olympic Games downwind in Melbourne?

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I conducted my first oral history interview when I was in fifth grade at Edithvale Primary School, 40 or so kilometres from Melbourne on the shores of Port Phillip Bay. The headmaster taught some of our classes and, for a class assignment, he required us to interview someone who had served in World War One. My dad – who sold builders' supplies in the 10-shop main street – found a willing interviewee for me.

I attended school when all students were given milk for morning recess. I remember getting annoyed on the days we were told to pour our milk down the gully trap. When I went home for lunch the ABC 'Country Hour' was usually on the radio. On those no-milk days, farmers would be warned that radioactive clouds were drifting eastward from the atomic test sites in Monte Bello and, later, Emu Field, and finally Maralinga. My dad – still in the US Navy Reserve – also came home for lunch. Although normally the mildest of men, he would swear (he had mastered the local vernacular) 'Bloody drongos! Why do they let the bastards nuke them in their own backyard?'

This question has followed me for decades – from my time as an accredited non-governmental organisation representative to the United Nations in New York through the 1980s where I also worked with Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific Movement organisations who supported Micronesians en route from the islands contaminated by US nuclear testing to the Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island for continuing medical monitoring.

### **WHY WAS SIR MARK OLIPHANT AFRAID HE WOULD BE CURSED IN 1992?**

On joining a Scottish medical school in 1991, I began to study the long-term health effects on the men (no Anglo-European women were permitted to participate in the tests) who had served at British atomic and hydrogen bomb tests in Australia and then Christmas Island. I started by interviewing Australian physicist Sir Mark Oliphant in Canberra in 1993 when he was a deaf but sprightly 92-year-old. I was accompanied to the interview in Sir Mark's bungalow in the suburbs of Canberra by my friend, the late Dave Aronson, a highly experienced Melbourne labour lawyer.

Afterwards, I asked Dave what he made of Oliphant. ‘He was highly rehearsed and hiding something. He kept control of the conversation every minute of the way and was just stepping from one porky to another’, Dave said instantly. I suggested it might have been his age and his deafness that made him, whilst very charming, also very domineering.



Figure 1 Oliphant and Aronson. Photograph by Sue Rabbitt Roff (1993) and Brendon Massei (2023)

At the time, I wasn't aware of the long interview Oliphant had conducted the previous year, in which the then 91-year-old discussed with clear pride his role in making the first atomic bombs in the USA that were to end World War Two, pensively adding:

I wouldn't like somebody to dig up some dirt – and there might be some dirt in my past – that I'm unconscious of. Such as being concerned with the development of the nuclear weapon and I might be cursed for it. I hate that idea, I don't want to be cursed by anybody.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Marcus Oliphant, interviewed by Robin Hughes on 20 January 1992, Australian Biography: Sir Marcus Oliphant, National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, NFSA ID 250839, <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/australian-biography-sir-marcus-oliphant>; Sue Rabbitt Roff, 'Making the Jitterbug Work – Marcus Oliphant and the Manhattan Project' (30 May 2019). Available at <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/history/making-jitterbug-work-marcus-oliphant-and-manhattan-project/>. Accessed 21 August 2023.

His choice of words – ‘such as being concerned with the development of the nuclear bomb’ – is important; his pivotal role in the Manhattan Project (developing the atom bombs detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki) was well known. As such, he is likely referring to the post-war development of the British hydrogen, thermonuclear bomb – for which the component parts were tested in Australia in the 1950s.

The documentary records provide evidence that Oliphant was one of the strongest advocates for both a British nuclear arsenal and an independent Australian nuclear deterrent in the first decade after World War Two.<sup>3</sup> He energetically opposed American attempts to retain a monopoly of nuclear weapons rather than internationalising their control, even if that meant proliferation. He was compromised by his association with the British spy Klaus Fuchs.<sup>4</sup> As reported by MI5 interrogator James Skardon after his third interview with Fuchs on 18 January 1951:

Fuchs was completely composed, and I questioned him about his present position. He said he had been told he must go [from Harwell/AERE], but that there was nothing very urgent about it and he had not so far made any positive enquiry to find any job. He thought the task would not be too hard, and mentioned that Sir John Cockcroft had offered him the choice of two posts, one at Adelaide and the other with Professor Oliphant, also in Australia. He thought that he would not like to work with Oliphant, although he hardly knew him.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that a suspected Australian atomic spy who had worked with Oliphant in the Manhattan Project was also under investigation in London added to American

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3 I have outlined Oliphant’s post-war views and interventions in Sue Rabbitt Roff, *Making the British H Bomb in Australia: from the Monte Bellos to the 1956 Olympics*, Vol. 1, Part 1 (Cellardyke, Scotland: Sue Rabbitt Roff, 2021), [www.rabbittreview.com](http://www.rabbittreview.com). See also Sue Rabbitt Roff, ‘Was Sir Mark Oliphant Australia’s – and Britain’s – J. Robert Oppenheimer?’, *Meanjin*, 22 January 2019, <https://meanjin.com.au/uncategorised/was-sir-mark-oliphant-australias-and-britains-j-robert-oppenheimer/>.

4 Sue Rabbitt Roff, ‘Mark Oliphant’s no-show at the British atomic and nuclear tests in Australia – the Fuchs factor’ (10 June 2020). Available at <https://johnmenadue.com/british-atomic-and-nuclear-tests-by-sue-rabbitt-roff/>. Accessed 21 August 2023. See also Roff, *Making the British H Bomb in Australia*.

5 Klaus Fuchs, interviewed by James Skardon on 18 January 1951, The National Archives of the UK, FILE KV 2/1263, 44.

distrust of Australia's senior nuclear scientist.<sup>6</sup> Oliphant was blackballed from participating in the British tests, which were largely intended to persuade the Americans to re-enter nuclear collaboration with the UK.

Oliphant never spoke out against the fallout implications of the British tests in Australia. When I interviewed him in 1993, he told me, 'Menzies was glad to comply [with the testing]. I think at the time it was the right thing to do, it was impossible to leave the only nuclear weapons in the world in the hands of the USA and USSR. It was an unstable situation that could not be allowed to go on'. 'But were they safe?' I asked. He responded, 'The Brits thought they could ensure any fallout or contamination was not too big. They were very pig headed about it. The people in control were very haphazard about the estimates'. I then asked why didn't he, Australia's premier atomic scientist, speak out about the hazards? He replied, 'People seemed to have great faith in it. People whom I respected so I accepted it'.<sup>7</sup>

Still the question remained: why now, decades later, he didn't speak out about the residual radioactive contamination at Monte Bello, Maralinga and Emu Field, even when he was governor of South Australia. He responded:

You can really decontaminate Maralinga by leaving it alone. Plutonium alpha particles contamination I think is grossly overplayed. The Aborigines are using it to the full. At the same time it was very naughty of the British to leave it and to think of spreading it that way in the first place was very nasty. The British people were very reticent about revealing contamination especially regarding food contamination. They hugged that to their chests very closely.<sup>8</sup>

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6 James Griffiths, 'Peace activist or atomic spy? The curious case of a Cold War nuclear scientist' (6 April 2019). Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/05/uk/uk-atomic-spy-australia-intl-gbr/index.html>. Accessed 21 August 2023. See also Roff, *Making the British H Bomb in Australia*.

7 Sir Mark Oliphant, interviewed by Sue Roff and Dave Aronson, December 1993, transcribed notes from interview held by author.

8 Sir Mark Oliphant, December 1993.



Oliphant was the foundation director and professor of physics at the Australian National University in Canberra. He had been the *éminence grise* behind prime minister Chifley's attempt to build the resources for a nuclear future for Australia. Oliphant was sidelined from the implementation of the military aspects of the Anglo–Australian atomic and then nuclear testing project throughout the 1950s. But he saw and heard a great deal about policymaking during the second prime ministership of Robert Menzies that covered the testing years into the 1960s. Oliphant concluded that Menzies was no dupe – as he has usually been presented in the histories of the Australian tests – but was 'glad to comply'. I was able to verify this oral statement through the documentary evidence held in the Australian and UK National Archives and other depositories. For instance, Menzies begged prime minister Macmillan for tactical nuclear weapons in the early 1960s.<sup>9</sup>

On the fiftieth anniversary of the detonation of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1995, I published *Hotspots: The Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*.<sup>10</sup> This was a study of the integrity of the research carried out in the two Japanese cities by the US Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in the aftermath. It was based on the research papers in the medical literature and the extensive, almost verbatim transcripts of the discussions at the Commission's meetings that are available in several depositories in the United States.

Australia had been tasked with controlling the Hiroshima region. *Hotspots* helped Australian members of the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces to gain pensions for service-related illnesses that had possibly been contracted during their service in Japan in the late 1940s. This caught the attention of the late Sheila Gray, Secretary of the British Nuclear Tests Veterans Association, who had an extensive file on self-reported illnesses that many veterans felt

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9 Sue Rabbitt Roff, 'How Menzies Begged Macmillan For The Bomb', *Meanjin*, 2 December 2019, <https://meanjin.com.au/blog/how-menzies-begged-macmillan-for-the-bomb/>.

10 Sue Rabbitt Roff, *Hotspots: The Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (London and New York: Cassell, 1995).

were possibly radiogenic from their time at the Australian and then Christmas Island tests. Sheila organised funding (from the renowned novelist Dame Catherine Cookson who suffered from telangiectasia) and I was able to interview more than a hundred British veterans over the next two years. From these and the material submitted by the men and their families, often their widows, we were able to develop successful appeals against the UK Ministry of Defence's denial of service pensions for possibly radiogenic injury, especially cancers.<sup>11</sup> We had to demonstrate that the appellant had participated in a test and that he suffered from an illness that was known to be possibly radiogenic. For this reason, the oral and documentary histories I took from the men, their families and their widows were so important to the appeals. But we had to rely on Ministry of Defence evidence about recorded exposure to radiation. This evidence was allegedly logged in what came to be known as 'The Blue Book'.<sup>12</sup>

More than 20 years later, in 2019 during my last visit to the UK National Archives in the weeks before the COVID lockdowns started, I was shocked to find a fax message dated 25 June 1985 from the British Defence Research and Supply Staff in Canberra to the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment in the UK. The message enquired about 'the final volume of the sanitised version of the "Blue Book". We have so far received the full sanitised version except for that part dealing with Australian participants'.

The 'sanitised' documentary evidence makes the oral and written statements of participants to the Royal Commission (amounting to at least 7,000 pages, easily downloadable from the Australian National Archives) all the more critical.

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11 Sue Rabbitt Roff, "Knocked over by a Pile of Bombs. Hasn't Felt Well Since": Nuclear Test Veterans and the UK Ministry of Defence Pensions System', in Suzannah Linton (ed.), *Festschrift for Roger Clark* (Leiden: Brill/Nijhoff, 2015).

12 UK Health Security Agency, 'Nuclear Weapons Test Participants: Epidemiological Study' (1 July 2013). Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nuclear-weapons-test-participants-study>. Accessed 21 August 2023.

Since 1983, the Blue Book records have been the basis of studies by the UK's National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) which monitors the long-term health status of nuclear test participants.<sup>13</sup> Veterans' applications for pensions relating to the health effects from their participation in the nuclear tests reference data from the Blue Book. If those records have been 'sanitised', it is possible that many pensions have been unfairly denied. Further evidence is to be found in the Royal Commission transcripts by future researchers. To date, we have established that the NRPB's epidemiological studies 'under ascertained' multiple myeloma, a marker condition for possible radiation exposure, in at least 30 per cent of test veterans.<sup>14</sup> This all raises the issue of whether other lies and half-truths were submitted as evidence – oral and otherwise – to the 1984–85 Australian Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia.

#### **DID LORD PENNEY LIE TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION ABOUT THE BLACK MIST?**

In 1984 Yankunytjajara man Yami Lester travelled to London as head of an Aboriginal delegation to lobby the British government to take responsibility for the consequences of its nuclear tests. He met with high-ranking British government officials and received assurances that the British would fully cooperate with the judicial enquiry set up by the Australian government. Forty years after the first Totem test at Emu Field in South Australia on 15 October 1953, the Aboriginal community gained respect among settler scientists and lawyers for the oral histories they had preserved of what had come to be known as the 'Black Mist' that came rolling north from Emu Field.<sup>15</sup>

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13 UK Health Security Agency, 'Nuclear Weapons Test Participants: Epidemiological Study' (1 July 2013). Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nuclear-weapons-test-participants-study>. Accessed 21 August 2023.

14 Sue Rabbitt Roff, 'Under-ascertainment of multiple myeloma among participants in UK atmospheric atomic and nuclear weapons tests', *BMJ Occupational & Environmental Medicine* 60, no. 12 (December 2003): 18.

15 Black Mist Burnt Country, 'Meeting Yami Lester' (2015). Available at <https://blackmistburntcountry.com.au/index.php/2014/09/29/meeting-yami-lester>. Accessed 23 August 2023.

The Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia published its three-volume report in November 1985.<sup>16</sup> It is based on oral testimony transcribed from participants including the Aboriginal community, military servicemen, scientists, politicians and settler inhabitants. At least 7,000 indexed pages of the transcripts of these submissions can be read and downloaded from the National Archives of Australia.<sup>17</sup> They are remarkably unstudied by researchers.

Seventy years after the tests, many of the documents relating to the British weapons tests in Australia are marked in the Australian National Archives catalogue as ‘not yet examined’, and haven’t been opened to the public. In recent years some of the material held in the UK has been removed from public access.<sup>18</sup> Even so, we can detect important discrepancies between the oral testimonies of participants and the documentary evidence that has accumulated in the Australian and UK National Archives and other depositories.

The Australian government commissioned an official *History of British Atomic Tests in Australia* that was submitted to the Royal Commission in 1985.<sup>19</sup> In a section headed ‘Strange Phenomena after Totem 1’, its author J.L. Symonds wrote:

Of recent years, there have been claims of strange phenomena after the explosion of Totem 1 such as ‘a rolling black smoke or mist’ and ‘big coiling cloud-like thing like a dust storm’. At the time, no such reports appeared in the newspapers nor were they announced by radio stations.

However, prior to the staff meeting at Emu Field on the evening of 25 October 1953 (in preparation for the second Totem detonation), Sir William Penney (Scientific Director of the Australian Trials) was informed that the Totem 1 cloud had been seen from Oodnadatta (directly due east of Wallatina). At the meeting, Sir William

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16 Justice J.R. McClelland, *The Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1985).

17 ‘Transcript of Proceedings, Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia’, National Archives of Australia, A6448.

18 Chris Hill, ‘Nuclear History and the Archive’, 13 September 2021, YouTube video, 5:40:27. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WA1PbZYc5dk>. Accessed 21 August 2023.

19 J.L. Symonds, *A History of British Atomic Tests in Australia* (Canberra: AGPS, 1985).

raised the question of mass reaction to the sight of the cloud by the civilian population and informed those present that the cloud had been seen at Oodnadatta. He is reported as suggesting that it had probably been seen from an aircraft. The report of the meeting recorded that

It was agreed that should there be any reactions arising from reports of the cloud having been seen, the Meteorological Service should announce that normal clouds were within the quoted region and the observed cloud was probably a rain cloud.<sup>20</sup>

It is therefore clear that Penney misspoke – or lied – to the Royal Commission in his oral testimony in 1985 when he said ‘I did not hear at the time, nor did I hear in the next few months. The first that I ever heard of it was perhaps two years ago when I read it in the British newspapers’.<sup>21</sup>

### **WAS THE ROYAL COMMISSION FAIR TO SIR ERNEST TITTERTON IN SAYING HE WAS PLANTED ON SIR ROBERT MENZIES?**

Ernest Titterton had been a doctoral student supervised by Professor Mark Oliphant at Birmingham University and was sent to Los Alamos in the first group of British nuclear scientists to join the Manhattan Project in 1943. On 16 July 1945, Titterton detonated the world’s first atomic bomb, Trinity, at Alamogordo in New Mexico.<sup>22</sup> When Oliphant returned to Australia in 1950 as the founding director of the Research School of Physical Science and Engineering at the newly established Australian National University (ANU), he recruited Titterton to become the first professor of nuclear physics at ANU. This was the 30-year-old Titterton’s first academic post. Prime minister Menzies’ decision to invite the newly appointed foundation professor of physics to serve as an Australian scientific observer at the tests and subsequently as chair of the Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee came

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20 Symonds, *A History of British Atomic Tests in Australia*, 177.

21 William Penney, ‘Transcript of Proceedings, Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia’, National Archives of Australia, A6448, 4348. (Hereafter: RC transcript.)

22 Sue Rabbitt Roff, ‘How an Australian ‘safety adviser’ detonated the world’s first atomic bomb’ (16 July 2020). Available at <https://johnmenadue.com/sue-rabbitt-roff-how-the-australian-safety-adviser-at-the-british-atomic-tests-in-australia-detonated-the-worlds-first-atomic-bomb/>. Accessed 21 August 2023.

after several discussions with UK officials in London and Australia and in the full knowledge that Titterton had worked with Penney in the development of the atomic bombs and would continue to do so at the Australian tests.

In late 1949, Titterton was negotiating for the ANU appointment that was offered in early January 1950 and accepted in late January 1950 (in the midst of the Fuchs revelations). Oliphant returned to Australia in August 1950. Penney then asked Titterton to serve as technical director of the first trials which he declined. While Titterton was still in the UK in the first half of 1951, there were discussions with Menzies about his being seconded as an active scientific participant in the first UK atom bomb test which was increasingly likely to be held at the Monte Bellos. (A survey team had been sent to the Monte Bellos in September 1950, but neither the Australian nor the British prime minister had publicly confirmed this). In February 1951 Titterton indicated his willingness to 'do any work required in Australia'. Titterton arrived in Canberra in April/June 1951. Churchill confirmed the Australian test plan in December 1951 although it was not announced in the House of Commons until February 1952. The date for Operation Hurricane was set for October 1952. In March 1952, nine months after his arrival in Canberra according to Titterton's oral account to the 1985 Royal Commission, discussions were initiated by the Australian prime minister's office in Canberra which led to Titterton's travel to the Monte Bellos in October 1952.

The Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia vilified Titterton as a 'plant' on Menzies and his government. This was despite the material in Lorna Arnold's official history (submitted to the Royal Commission in 1985) that repeatedly affirmed Titterton's own view of his role.<sup>23</sup> He was serving what he called 'a curious sort of unanimity' between British and Australian interests in the development of a British atomic capability in its dominion, Australia.

The Australian official historian of the tests – Dr J.L. Symonds, whose *A History of Atomic Tests in Australia* was also submitted to the Royal Commission in 1985

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23 Lorna Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship British Atomic Weapon Trials in Australia* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1987).

– didn't question the nature of Titterton's proposed involvement with the British scientific team at the Monte Bellos.<sup>24</sup> Symonds wrote:

The outcome of the observations made by Lord Cherwell was that, in early April 1952, the UK Government sent a message through the UK High Commission that they were pleased to ask whether Mr Menzies could arrange to make Dr Titterton available *to help in telemetry work for the test*.<sup>25</sup>

According to Symonds:

Mr Menzies approved the request in principle and asked the Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University, Sir Douglas Copland, whether the attachment could be organised. The Vice-Chancellor readily agreed. When Titterton approached the Prime Minister's Department for information as to his responsibilities and to whom he should report, the only assistance they could give was to suggest that he contact the UK. Penney wrote subsequently to Titterton in July asking him to contact the Head of the UKSLS [United Kingdom Service Liaison Staff] in Melbourne on the subject of his involvement.<sup>26</sup>

The significance of this incompatibility between the Royal Commission and both the Australian and British official histories of the mid-1980s is that Menzies and his government are depicted as dupes rather than consenting partners in the project. The depiction of the Menzies government radically skews the narrative of what happened over the next ten years of Menzies' prime ministership as Britain tested its atomic bomb and then moved to the development and proof of principle testing of the H bomb series, detonated off Malden and Christmas Islands in 1957 and 1958.

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24 Symonds, *A History of British Atomic Tests in Australia*.

25 Symonds, *A History of British Atomic Tests in Australia*, 55. Emphasis added.

26 Symonds, *A History of British Atomic Tests in Australia*, 55.

## DID AUSTRALIA GIVE SUFFICIENT 'INFORMED CONSENT' REGARDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BRITISH H BOMB IN AUSTRALIA?

This depiction of the Menzie's government raises the question of whether or not Australia actually became a nuclear power through its government's agreement to cooperate with the increasingly thermonuclear component tests in Australia.<sup>27</sup> Titterton told the Royal Commission that he had several meetings with prime minister Menzies before Hurricane (the first British atomic test in Australia, at the Monte Bello Islands on 3 October 1952) from March to October 1952.<sup>28</sup> According to Titterton, 'Anytime the Prime Minister wanted to know an answer to a question, usually Alan [sic] Brown came on the phone and said "Pop over" literally: and I frequently did, on my bike'. Allen Brown was secretary of the Prime Minister's Department between August 1949 and December 1958. His name appears frequently in the official correspondence between London and Canberra about the tests. According to Titterton, Menzies' brief to him was:

In view of your experience, which is unique in Australia, of three nuclear weapons tests around the world, I would be glad if you would be prepared to go to the Monte Bellos to lend whatever help you can to Dr Penney's team – as he was then – and at the same time to – well, essentially stick your oar in to make as certain as it is humanly possible to be certain that there will be no adverse effects on the Australian people, flora and fauna and in particular the aborigines [sic]. Now, he did not know how you did it, he was just saying, you have some experience of three occasions, now you go and use your experience in our interests.<sup>29</sup>

'It was', Titterton explained to the Royal Commission, 'a team. It was not just Australians versus British or British versus Australians; it was a team to do a job as well as we knew how to do the job'.<sup>30</sup>

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27 See Sue Rabbitt Roff, *Making the British H Bomb in Australia: from the Monte Bellos to the 1956 Olympics*, Vol. 2, Part 3 (Cellardyke, Scotland: Sue Rabbitt Roff, 2022), [www.rabbittreview.com](http://www.rabbittreview.com).

28 RC transcript, 7637.

29 RC transcript, 7637.

30 RC transcript, 7637.



Asked what he understood his role to be at the tests, Titterton replied, ‘if you can get somebody who is going to do two jobs, namely be helpful on the telemetry, which is a very important aspect of a weapons test, and at the same time do the job which is required of him by the Australian government, it is obviously in the benefit of both – to the benefit of both parties. From the Australian point of view, one gets know-how and experience’.<sup>31</sup>

At least at the outset of the Hurricane test in 1952, Titterton’s explanation deserves respect. He did not dissimulate his understanding of his role in the run-up to the Hurricane trial in 1952 nor in the 1980s before the Royal Commission on the nature of his role at the first Monte Bellos test. The Royal Commission staff surely had access to newspaper reports from the months before and after Hurricane in October 1952. These make it very clear that Titterton was both reporting to Menzies and had a scientific role at the Monte Bello test. The *West Australian* reported on 23 September 1952 – 10 days before the test – under the banner headline ‘Oliphant is unlikely to go to test’ that while Titterton was already at the test site, Oliphant was still in Canberra. The newspaper claimed Titterton had been given indefinite leave to attend, expected to total about two months:

He has been asked by the British Government to attend the tests, not merely as an observer on behalf of the university, but *as a key member of the upper team of scientists who will correlate and interpret the results*. Professor Titterton has specialised in aspects of nuclear physics which will have an important application at the Monte Bello tests. He is expected to spend some time *analysing the results and in conference with other leading members of the team* before he returns to Canberra.<sup>32</sup>

Titterton also wrote articles in the weeks before the Monte Bello test in October 1952 that were widely published around Australia. The biographical note attached to them states that he was to be ‘Australia’s only scientific observer’ at Monte Bello.

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31 RC transcript, 7643a.

32 ‘Oliphant is unlikely to go to test’, *West Australian*, 23 September 1952, 4. Emphasis added.

The *Western Mail* reported on 16 October 1952 that only Titterton ‘and seven others will be allowed to see the final report on the blast. Two of them will be Winston Churchill and Mr Menzies. Information even to the heads of the three services will be restricted to “what they need to know so that they can apply the new results in their own fields”’.<sup>33</sup>

Several times in her 1987 official history, Arnold refers specifically to Penney’s desire for Professor Ernest Titterton’s participation in the scientific team as a telemetry expert. A major inconsistency between both Symonds’ and Arnold’s official histories and the Report of the Royal Commission centres on the recruitment and role of Ernest Titterton. Arnold had the opportunity to read the Royal Commission transcripts – she cited them on occasion. Nevertheless, she repeatedly stated that Ernest Titterton was recruited *because* of his specialist scientific expertise that Penney valued so highly. According to Arnold’s official history as submitted to the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia before the Commission wrote its report, Penney ‘was anxious also to borrow Titterton from ANU, not as an observer but as a telemetry expert’.<sup>34</sup> Arnold elaborated:

Lord Cherwell, the British Minister responsible for atomic energy policy, was asked [about inviting Australian scientists to the tests]; his prime concern was that the presence of Australian scientists might give the Americans an unfavourable impression of British security arrangements. However if the problem was frankly explained to Menzies, and he felt that some Australian scientists should attend, Cherwell would be prepared to agree to Titterton.<sup>35</sup>

She continues over the page:

In view of Titterton’s unique expertise, it was natural that Penney, who had so much wanted him on his staff, should be anxious at least to borrow him

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33 *Brisbane Telegraph*, 22 September 1952, 5.

34 Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship*, 29.

35 Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship*, 29.

as a telemetry expert at Hurricane; it was in that capacity, *rather than as an observer for the Australian government*, that Titterton took part.<sup>36</sup>

Arnold notes that Titterton attended all the major trials – after 1955 as a member of the Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee (AWTSC) and its chairman from 1956. Even in her capacity as British official historian, Arnold comments ‘But as a very new Australian with close United Kingdom ties and a Los Alamos background, his position was bound to be seen by many as an ambiguous one’.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, from then on in her official history, Arnold herself refers to Titterton as an Australian scientist and representative at the trials.

Six pages later Arnold writes, ‘In April 1952, at Penney’s personal request, as we saw, the Australian government was asked if E.W. Titterton, recently appointed Professor of Physics at the ANU, might take part as telemetry expert’.<sup>38</sup> In her second edition of the official history published in 2006, titled *Britain, Australia and the Bomb*, Arnold did not alter her account of how Penney recruited Titterton to the British scientific team at the Australian tests.

The present author has reported elsewhere how Menzies was clearly rattled by the proposal being discussed at the Geneva Nuclear Tests Conference for ‘control posts’ in nuclear testing countries such as Australia had been conducting for a decade or more.<sup>39</sup> Even in 1985 the Royal Commission seems to have decided that it was best to downplay the extent of the Menzies government’s consent in the progression from atomic fission to thermonuclear fusion in Australia as Britain developed its H bomb. But Menzies’ role was obscured by the ‘scapegoating’ of Professor Sir Ernest Titterton in the Royal Commission’s Report.

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36 Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship*, 31. Emphasis added.

37 Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship*, 31.

38 Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship*, 37.

39 Roff, ‘How Menzies Begged Macmillan For The Bomb’.

## WERE THERMONUCLEAR MATERIALS TESTED FOR THE BRITISH HYDROGEN BOMB IN AUSTRALIA?

The 1953 Totem atomic tests and what came to be known as the ‘Kittens’ trials began the escalation from atomic bombs to hybrid boosted thermonuclear devices, culminating in the British hydrogen bomb tests off Malden Island in the central Pacific Ocean in 1957 and 1958. This occurred despite repeated public statements that the testing in Australia would not move from fission to the far more powerful fusion devices.

The Australian government permitted more than 100 Kittens trials at Emu Field and Naya 480 kilometres northwest of the Woomera in South Australia from 1953. They were tests of the trigger detonators or ‘initiators’ being designed for the hydrogen bomb. Essentially the tests were to determine how much fission energy would be necessary to trigger a fusion explosion. In other words, they were working out how an atomic bomb could become ‘a mere detonator’ for a thermonuclear hydrogen bomb.

It is possible to use the National Library of Australia’s Trove collection of digitised newspapers to trace the oral statements to the press of Menzies and Howard Beale, the Minister of Supply who was responsible for Australia’s contribution to the British testing program. For instance, a report on 27 November 1954 stated: ‘Supply Minister Beale said there was no question of a hydrogen bomb being tested on Australian territory’.<sup>40</sup> This understanding was repeated at frequent intervals through 1955.<sup>41</sup>

The UK was negotiating a ‘Memorandum of Arrangements’ for a permanent ‘Atomic Weapons Proving Ground’ at what came to be called Maralinga. This came into force in March 1956 and stated that ‘No thermo-nuclear (hydrogen) weapon will be tested on the site’.<sup>42</sup>

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40 ‘1955 A-Test at Woomera Likely’, *The Daily News*, 27 November 1954, 11.

41 Sue Rabbitt Roff, *Making the British H Bomb in Australia: from the Monte Bellos to the 1956 Olympics* Vol. 2, 22–24.

42 Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship*, 280.

This reassurance was repeated in documents in the UK National Archives in File, for example, 'Her Majesty's Government wish to state *categorically* that there has *never been any suggestion that a hydrogen bomb should be tested in Australia*'.<sup>43</sup> I provide further examples in *Making of the British H bomb in Australia*.<sup>44</sup> The UK Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, the Earl of Home, toured Australia for a month from mid-September 1955. He was advised in his briefing papers of the tangled web he would need to negotiate in relation to the proposed thermonuclear testing at the Monte Bellos.

Along with these earlier documents, there is one that is undated but filed around August 1955 titled 'Brief for Secretary of State's Tour Autumn 1955 – Top Secret'. Paragraph 6 of the Earl's brief states:

At an early stage in the negotiations with the Australian Government Mr. Beale, the Australian Minister for Supply, made categorical statements, without first consulting us, to the effect that the Australian Government had no intention of allowing H-bombs or *any related experiments* to take place in Australia. He subsequently modified the last portion to 'hydrogen bomb tests or *any tests of that character*'. Mr. Beale has, however, shown himself to be extremely sensitive over the possibility of any thermo-nuclear weapon testing in Australia.<sup>45</sup>

Paragraph 7 of the brief, headed 'Tests in Monte Bello Islands: Code Name "Mosaic"', states:

We are anxious to carry out two experimental firings consisting of atomic explosions with the inclusion of light elements as boost. The information obtained from these trials should be a vital link in the development of the thermo-nuclear weapon. We wish to carry out these trials next April, before Maralinga will be ready. We had agreed with the Australian Government that

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43 Australian National Archives, A6455, RC 559, Part 3 Item 1905016. Emphasis added.

44 Sue Rabbitt Roff, *Making the British H Bomb in Australia: from the Monte Bellos to the 1956 Olympics* Vol. 2, 24–25.

45 Australian National Archives, A6455, RC 559, Part 3 Item 1905016. Emphasis added.

we would not test thermo-nuclear weapons in Australia *but* Mr. Menzies has *nevertheless* agreed to the firings taking place in the Monte Bello Islands (off the North-West coast of Western Australia), which have already been used before for atomic tests. As already explained, the Australians are very sensitive on the question of thermo-nuclear explosions, and *although the true character of these tests is understood by the authorities immediately concerned, knowledge of the trials is restricted to a very small circle and no public statement has so far been made; when it is made, it will therefore require very careful handling.*<sup>46</sup>

The documents discussed above are available for free downloading from the National Archives of Australia among the bundles of files that were submitted to the Royal Commission into Nuclear Tests in Australia in 1985.

Despite the documents having been submitted to the Australian Royal Commission, the documents referring to Beale being ‘incorrect’ about the nature of the initiator tests and Home being advised that the ‘true nature’ of the Mosaic were known to the Australian ‘authorities immediately concerned’ were not referred to in the Commission’s Report. Nor is there any mention of the imminent 1956 Olympic Games in these reports. The lack of mention of the upcoming Olympic Games is significant due to the fact that the Games were to open in Melbourne, downwind of the test sites at the Monte Bellos, Emu Field and Maralinga.

I have indicated several aspects of the test programme that have been misreported in the official document and demonstrated how oral evidence often points out discrepancies that can be corroborated by cross-referencing and triangulation of the contemporaneous data. Nonetheless, there is still a huge trove of ‘unexamined’ material in the Australian and UK National Archives.

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46 Australian National Archives, A6455, RC 559, Part 3 Item 1905016. Emphasis added.

### **DID PROFESSOR TITTERTON (AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT SAFETY ADVISOR) AND BRITISH OFFICIALS LIE TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION?**

The chair of the Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee for most of the detonations was Professor Ernest Titterton. One of the first questions asked of him when he first appeared before the Royal Commission in May 1985, was whether he ‘had done any work which today would be described as health physics work...in relation to radiation and human biology?’<sup>47</sup> Titterton responded that he had, ‘because whenever anyone is involved in radioactivity, it has health effects’. When asked if he ever published anything relating to health effects, Titterton replied in the negative, making it clear that he was primarily ‘interested in publishing in relation to radioactivity and nuclear physics’ and that the health effects were ‘incidental’.

Several papers Titterton published in the late 1940s related to the invention of personal radiation dosimeters for atomic workers. A 1959 bibliography lists four articles in 1949 and 1950 alone, before Titterton left the UK to take up the foundation professorship of physics at the Australian National University.<sup>48</sup> For example, in 1949 he reported in the scientific journal *Nature* that, for the personal radiation badges he developed to measure exposure, ‘An accuracy to within 5% can be achieved in dose determinations without undue elaboration of measurement and calibration’.<sup>49</sup> In the same year he confirmed in an Atomic Energy Research Establishment (AERE) report that ‘one observer working full-time can determine fortnightly slow neutron doses for between 100–150 individuals’.<sup>50</sup> He repeated these findings in the *British Journal of Radiology* in 1950.<sup>51</sup>

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47 RC transcript, A6448, 14.

48 R.W. Brisbane and L.B. Silverman, *Photographic Dosimetry: An Annotated Bibliography* (n.p.: United States, 1959).

49 E.W. Titterton, ‘Slow Neutron Monitoring with Boron- and Lithium-loaded Nuclear Emulsions,’ *Nature* 163 (1949): 990–991, <https://www.nature.com/articles/163990b0>.

50 E.W. Titterton, ‘Slow Neutron Health Monitoring with Nuclear Emulsions,’ Atomic Energy Research Establishment Report AERE G/R-362, June 1949.

51 E. Titterton and M.E. Hall, ‘Neutron Dose Determination by the Photographic Plate Method,’ *British Journal of Radiology* 23 (1950): 465–471.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KITE DETONATION 40 DAYS BEFORE THE OPENING OF THE 1956 OLYMPIC GAMES

The samples of dissimulation or outright falsification by the authorities in their official histories and submissions to the Royal Commission provided above have been historical. However, this dissimulation and falsification continue today, despite current generations being able to check the film evidence online of (what was supposed to have been) the first airdrop detonation of an atomic or thermonuclear bomb in Operation Grapple off Christmas Island in 1957 and 1958.

This was intended as the field testing of the airburst system that would be used in 1957 and 1958 for the fusion H bombs that were too powerful to be detonated on the surface as a ground burst.

A 1958 report published by the Atomic Weapons Tests Safety Committee (whose second chairman was Professor Titterton) states that ‘one [weapon] was dropped from a Valiant bomber and fused to fire above the surface of the earth’.<sup>52</sup> Over the page, it states ‘On 11 October 1956, Round 3, also a device of low yield, was dropped from an aircraft and detonated above the surface of the desert’.<sup>53</sup> However, the film footage available online clearly shows that Kite detonated on the surface and the fireball behaved as a ground burst.

In the six months preceding the opening of the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, which is located downwind of both the Monte Bellos and Maralinga test sites, Britain detonated six hybrid ‘boosted’ fission–fusion bombs in preparation for the detonation of the British H bomb off Christmas Island in May 1957. The sixth test, named Kite, was detonated at Maralinga on 11 October 1956 (less than six weeks before the opening of the Games). The official historian of British atomic and nuclear testing in Australia, Lorna Arnold, wrote in 1987 that when the British Chiefs of Staff were talking of trials in 1955 or the (Australian) spring of 1956,

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52 W.A.S. Butement, L.J. Dwyer, L.H. Martin, D.J. Stevens and E.W. Titterton, ‘Radioactive Fallout in Australia from Operation Buffalo’, *The Australian Journal of Science*, no 21 (October 1958): 63.

53 Butement et al., ‘Radioactive Fallout’, 64.



*They want [sic] an airburst* to prove the Blue Danube (MK1 bomb); the centre section had been exploded at Totem, and deliveries to the RAF had already begun, but an operational test was obviously desirable as soon as possible, if only to give at least one aircrew the experience of dropping it.<sup>54</sup>

'Blue Danube' was Britain's first freefall nuclear weapon, to be dropped from an aircraft rather than detonated on a tower or from a tethered balloon.<sup>55</sup> It had an operational explosive yield of 40 kilotons. The original plan was to use a standard bomb, fused to detonate at 1,200 feet. However, if the fusing system failed, a surface burst of 40 kilotons was unacceptable so the bomb was modified to give a three-kiloton yield with a burst altitude of 500 feet.

In 1990, during a specialist defence seminar held in London, military historian Humphrey Wynn stated that

the first production bombs with this [atomic] warhead – Blue Danube – were delivered to RAF Wittering in 1953...The eventual climax of the development effort...occurred on 11 October 1956, when, in the Operation Buffalo trials at Maralinga, South Australia, a live Blue Danube was successfully dropped from a Valiant of No 49 Squadron.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, six months later, Air Vice-Marshal W.E. Oulton, Task Force Commander of the Christmas Island H bomb tests, told the same seminar that 'the *prototype thermonuclear device itself*...would be contained in the only available bomb case of suitable size in proven ballistics, the Blue Danube case.

Joseph Rotblat explained in a publication for the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute in 1981:

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54 Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship*, 94. Emphasis added.

55 RAF Barnham Nuclear Weapon Storage Site, 'Blue Danube Free Fall Nuclear Bomb' (n.d.). Available at <https://rafbarnham-nss.weebly.com/blue-danube.html>. Accessed 21 August 2023.

56 Humphrey Wynn, *The Proceedings of the Royal Air Force Historical Society*, no 7 (February 1990): 12. Emphasis added.

For explosions above ground the altitude of the burst and size of the fire-ball have an important bearing on the magnitude of the early fall-out. If the fire-ball touches the ground, the soil and other materials are vaporized and taken up with the fire-ball. The strong after-winds cause huge quantities of dirt and debris to be sucked up. They mix with the radioactive fragments of the bomb and form particles of various sizes which move upwards as well as spreading out. Later they begin to fall to the ground under the force of gravity, at rates and distances depending on the size of the particles and the velocity of the wind. This deposition of radioactivity constitutes the early, or local, fall-out. On the other hand, if the bomb is exploded at such a height that the fire-ball never touches the ground there is much less or even no local fall-out (but there will be global, or delayed, fall-out).<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, despite these conclusive findings by experts in the field, in her official report of 1987, Lorna Arnold stated with regard to Kite –

It was to be a Service operational test of a Blue Danube bomb, and originally the expected yield had been some 40 kilotons, which would have produced little fallout from firing at an altitude of about 1200ft. But there was a remote possibility that the fuzing (sic) system might fail and that the bomb would hit the ground before exploding. A ground burst of 40 kilotons would be quite unacceptable, and various safety devices were considered that would prevent detonation on impact...a low yield version was used instead, to be dropped from a Valiant bomber and fuzed (sic) to detonate at 500ft. The expected yield was 3 kilotons...It was successfully carried out on 11 October, [1956] 15.30 hours.<sup>58</sup>

Later, Penney reported back to Aldermaston:

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57 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute/Joseph Rotblat, *Nuclear Radiation in Warfare* (London, Taylor & Francis, 1981).

58 Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship*, 163–164.

RAF did a lovely job. Brilliant flash and fireball. Some trees set on fire and many scorched. Terrific dust cloud and stem. Impressive scar on desert, surface torn and rocks scattered in central area. Atmosphere very dry and stable with inversion at 14000 ft where cloud stopped as predicted. Blast and heat indicate 3 to 4 kilotons, nearer 3.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the official UK history describing Kite as ‘*Airburst*: freefall at 150m with 3 kiloton yield’, archival film footage listed in the footnote clearly shows that Kite was a *ground burst*.<sup>60</sup>

In *Valiant Boys: True stories from the operators of the UK's first four-jet bomber*, former test pilot Tony Blackman and former Valiant pilot Anthony Wright report interviews conducted with Flight Lieutenant John Ledger.<sup>61</sup> It is worth noting that the book is endorsed by a foreword from Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Michael Beetham, and that Ledger was co-pilot of the Valiant that dropped the first live bomb in the British test series in Australia (at Kite/Buffalo on 11 October 1952). Interestingly, according to the authors’ reported interview with him, Ledger had no recollection of any particular debate as to whether a ground site in Australia should be used for atomic explosions. He recalled that the crew thought it strange to be permitted to drop such a powerful weapon over land with the potential risk of fallout being spread over an inhabited area. He stated this was particularly risky

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59 Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship*, 163–164.

60 Arnold, *A Very Special Relationship*, 287. Emphasis added. The online footage indicates three views from different cameras are available. The fireball can be seen in the first seconds of the explosion, with the desert horizon clearly in view and no sign of a fireball in the sky. Rewinding very slowly gives a clearer picture of the fireball. See: Australian Screen, ‘Operation Buffalo – Colour Record’, 1956, National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, 3:06. Available at <https://aso.gov.au/titles/sponsored-films/operation-buffalo/clip2/>. Accessed 21 August 2023; Atomicforum, ‘Buffalo Kite Explosion’, 21 November 2006, YouTube video, 0:33. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyR48Hz7HD4>. Accessed 21 August 2023; British Movietone, ‘Maralinga Nuclear Test – 1957 | Movietone Moments’, 6 October 2018, YouTube video, 2:21. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0MgVjCEwd0> (see around 1:43 minutes). Accessed 21 August 2023; British Movietone, ‘The Woomera Atomic Test’, 21 July 2015, YouTube video, 2:57. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrPQ5O3wWGg> (see around 1:41 minutes). Accessed 21 August 2023.

61 Tony Blackman and Anthony Wright, *Valiant Boys: True stories from the operators of the UK's first four-jet bomber* (London: Grub Street, 2014).

when the wind changed direction and caused the fallout to blow over the southern towns.

Captained by Squadron Leader Flavell, the aircraft let go of the weapon at 35,000 feet visually aimed after a rad-controlled run-up. Telemetry confirmed a burst height between 500/600 feet, 100 yards to port and 60 yards short of the target.<sup>62</sup>

However, according to Blackman and Wright, the crew of the Valiant did not see the moment of detonation:

With regards to the special modification state of the aircraft, WZ366 had been fitted with windscreen blinds (John [Ledger] thinks made of steel) that obliterated all view from the cockpit. There was a small central slot in the blind that allowed the crew to see out for take-off and landing, which was then closed after take-off. This would explain the emphasis on instrument flying during the build-up and training phase in the UK. John thinks that the A bomb was dropped from the visual bomb aimer's position with the navigator then scrambling back to his seat post release. The crew seemed to know about the initial shock wave which he describes as moderate to severe turbulence. However, they were less prepared for the severity of the return wave, which caused them some consternation. John said that the navigator did not get back to his seat in time and was thrown about the rear cockpit due to the blast wave, much to the amusement of the rest of the crew.<sup>63</sup>

The Royal Commission noted in 1986 that

The explosion went as planned and it was a true airburst, i.e. the fireball did not reach the ground. The top of the cloud reached 15,000 feet.<sup>64</sup>

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62 Blackman and Wright, *Valiant Boys*, 36.

63 Blackman and Wright, *Valiant Boys*, 36–37.

64 Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, *British Nuclear Tests in Australia – Royal Commission (President: Mr Justice J.R. McClelland) – Report, dated 20 November 1985 – Volume 1* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1985), 287.

Seventy years after Kite misfired, authorities are still lying about it. I have indicated several aspects of the test programme that have been misreported in the official documents. I have also demonstrated how oral evidence can point out the discrepancies that are corroborated by cross-referencing and triangulation of the contemporaneous data. Nonetheless, there is still a huge trove of ‘unexamined’ material in the Australian and UK National Archives.

Several radio and television interviews with scientists responsible for the Australian tests (such as Sir Mark Oliphant and Sir Ernest Titterton) are available online.<sup>65</sup> Digital technology permits a whole new level of research. For instance, we can recover the meteorological data that refutes the claims of spokespeople that no potentially radiation-bearing rain fell on the major cities after the detonations.<sup>66</sup>

A new generation of university researchers is emerging in both Australia and the UK. Nearly four centuries after Sir Francis Bacon said ‘Truth is the daughter of Time, not of Authority’ we have a chance of extracting the truth of the first phase of the nuclearisation of Australia on the eve of the AUKUS era.

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65 ‘Mark Oliphant’, American Institute of Physics, <https://www.aip.org/history-programs/niels-bohr-library/oral-histories/4805>; ‘Sir Ernest Titterton Interviewed by David Ellyard [Sound Recording]’, National Library of Australia, <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/493517/>.

66 See Roff, *Making the British H Bomb in Australia*, Vol. 2.

# Writing Wrongs Right: Decentring Trauma with a Forgotten Australians' Creative Writing Group

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Recording personal accounts of traumatic historical events is a powerful way to learn about the past, in an age where public history aims to amplify lived experience and testimony. On a personal level, developing a narrative can help people to make sense of troubling times and memories. For people who grew up in children's institutions (Care Leavers or Forgotten Australians), sharing their experiences – through both oral history and memoir projects – has played a vital role in shifting public perceptions and raising awareness about the heavy impact of past injustices, as well as helping individuals to process difficult childhoods and develop new personal and collective identities. This article acknowledges the importance of recorded life histories to Care Leaver history and advocacy in Australia. However, through discussion of an innovative creative writing program at Lotus Place in Queensland, we highlight the shortcomings of standard models for therapeutic storytelling for people who have experienced complex

trauma. Instead we explore how creative writing, where participants are not obliged to re-tell traumatic life stories or express painful feelings, offers Forgotten Australians alternative ways to reclaim agency over their stories and to decentre trauma in their narratives. Our aim in writing this paper is to document the creative writing program at Lotus Place and unpack how it works in a trauma-informed way while decentring trauma. This research could help to inform the approach of memory-work programs that work with people who have experienced complex trauma.

## INTRODUCTION

Oral history and life writing traditions centre around life history. As Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes have argued, 'driven by the passion for the personal story', oral history 'like autobiography, tends to offer linear, causal explanations of individuals as the inevitable products of their past experiences'.<sup>1</sup> Projects focused on experiences of trauma often anchor life history in the periods of life where these experiences occurred, whilst acknowledging that traumatic memories sometimes cannot fit standard biographical models.<sup>2</sup> In this paper we explore a divergence from this tradition, where experiences of recollecting and sharing are retained but take a creative form that does not require people to explicitly recount memories. Our attention follows a wider shift identified by Dee Michell who has noted that, with regard to Care Leaver<sup>3</sup> biographies in particular, we are now arriving at a 'new movement' where Care Leavers can write beyond trauma narratives and centre everyday survival and strength.<sup>4</sup> Here we look closely at a creative writing program where this shift in emphasis is very deliberate as a collective and creative approach to trauma-informed

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- 1 Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, 'Introduction: Building Partnerships between Oral History and Memory Studies', in Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (eds), *Oral History and Public Memories* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), xi.
  - 2 John Murphy 'Memory, Identity and Public Narrative: Composing a Life-Story after leaving institutional care, Victoria, 1945–83', *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 3 (2010): 297–314.
  - 3 In Australia, people who grew up in out-of-home 'care' in the twentieth century are referred to as either Care Leavers or Forgotten Australians. We will be using these terms interchangeably throughout this article. Likewise, the term 'care' is placed in inverted commas to indicate that many people were not properly cared for while in these institutions.
  - 4 Dee Michell, 'Australian Care Leavers' "Misery Memoirs" as Anti-Stigma Activism' (paper presented at the International Australian Studies Association (InASA) Biennial Conference, Virtual, 8–10 February, 2021), 8.

support for Forgotten Australians. We argue that this approach offers an interesting provocation for oral history and life writing and leads us to revisit the enduring focus on a life history approach.<sup>5</sup> It allows us to critically reflect on who, how and why people may or may not see themselves as suited or able to participate in oral history or life writing/memoir projects, especially those who have experienced complex trauma and may not feel their story is tellable or fits the collective script.

Queensland's Lotus Place, a support service for Forgotten Australians, offers group activities, including a weekly creative writing group facilitated by writer and educator Edwina Shaw. As we detail, the program at Lotus Place differs from other memoir or narrative programs aimed at Forgotten Australians, which seek to help people write a memoir of their experiences (such as the Alliance for Forgotten Australians' recent Life Stories Project).<sup>6</sup> Nor is it a project like the National Library of Australia's Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants Oral History Project that aims to collect stories from Care Leavers in order to 'push the stories of the Forgotten Australians into the public discourse'.<sup>7</sup> Such life history projects, although various in the methods they use to disseminate Care Leaver narratives, share a purpose to amplify voices that had previously been silenced and stigmatised, to raise awareness and to effect social change. Although the fight for Care Leaver justice continues, there have been many gains since the handing down of the Senate report into children in institutional care in 2004, including the National Apology to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants (2009), the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2012–2017) and the National Redress Scheme for people who have experienced institutional child sexual abuse (2018–2028). These developments in government policy and the increased awareness of the legacy of a childhood in institutional 'care' are mirrored in the shift noted by Michell away from deficit models to survivor narratives

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5 The common ground between autobiography, memoir, oral history and life writing methodologies is discussed by Dorothy Sheridan, 'Writing to the Archive: Mass-observation as Autobiography', *Sociology* 27, no. 1 (1993): 27–40.

6 Simon Gardiner, 'Life Stories Project', *Find & Connect* (blog), 12 February 2021, <https://www.findandconnectwrblog.info/2021/02/life-stories-project/>.

7 Donna Hancox, 'Amplified Stories: Digital Technology and Representations of Lived Experiences', in Susan Gair and Airella van Luyn (eds), *Sharing Qualitative Research: Showing Lived Experience and Community Narratives* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2017), 9.



and a wider platform for Care Leavers to speak to diverse life experiences.<sup>8</sup> Nearly 20 years on from the Senate inquiry of 2004, space is now opening up for creative projects that provide opportunities for people to be recognised as something other than a Care Leaver or a victim/survivor – as Hibberd points out, opportunities that are scarce because ‘their stories and identities have been assumed to be the property of public interest, media speculation and even the pursuit of justice’.<sup>9</sup>

The creative writing classes at Lotus Place encourage participants to write creatively, following prompts that lead them away from ‘problem-saturated stories’<sup>10</sup> towards a range of emotions including positive and whimsical memories, or to write imaginatively in ways that can draw on their biography indirectly or focus on altogether different topics. This does not mean that the program avoids trauma or painful experiences, rather it works in a way that recognises other routes to ‘working through’ trauma, which focus on building voice, imagination and confidence through creative writing. In this paper we look at how this approach, while not geared directly at accounting for trauma, nonetheless operates as trauma-informed support, and arguably gives participants more agency over how they know and talk about their lives, including the option not to talk about their life history at all. In this, our paper speaks to existing work in oral history on trauma and the right to silence and refusal, such as Sean Field’s ‘Beyond “Healing”’, where he states that ‘Talking about feelings or traumatic memories is not always the best strategy; listeners need to respect the speaker’s right to silence and understand the reasons for and “content” of

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8 The More than our Childhoods project aims to disrupt ‘deficit narratives’ of Care Leavers by sharing stories of Care Leaver survival and positive community contributions. See *More Than Our Childhoods* (2022). Available at <https://www.morethanourchildhoods.org/>. Accessed 6 October 2022.

9 Lily Hibberd, ‘Negotiating uncertain agency’, in Kate MacNeill and Barbara Bolt (eds), *The Meeting of Aesthetics and Ethics in the Academy: Challenges for Creative Practice Researchers in Higher Education* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 79.

10 David Drustrup and Donna Rosana Baptiste, ‘Problem-Saturated Stories in Narrative Couple and Family Therapy’, in Jay L. Lebow, Anthony L. Chambers and Douglas C. Breunlin (eds), *Encyclopedia of Couple and Family Therapy* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 2334–2336.

these silences'.<sup>11</sup> Contributing to this existing work on trauma in oral history and life writing, our aim in writing this paper is to unpack how the creative writing program at Lotus Place works in a trauma-informed way while decentring trauma. In this context, we argue, the attention to recognising trauma is in the structure rather than in the content of the activities, and it offers imaginative work as an alternative to the choice between only disclosure or silence in discussions about the cathartic value of voice.

This research also joins an interdisciplinary tradition of exploring group memory-work across oral history, life writing and memoir, and the role played by creativity and imagination in narrative and reminiscence projects.<sup>12</sup> Before the 1970s, reminiscence was viewed as an 'undesirable indulgence, an encouragement to live in the past, or at least to view the past with a high degree of nostalgia'.<sup>13</sup> Schweitzer writes about how reminiscence grew in popularity as an organised structured activity for older people in Britain, and led to reminiscence theatre productions that drew on oral testimony, to share information about the past, as well as foster connection between older people and the wider community. Reminiscence is always a creative activity, whether it is taking place in an oral history interview, testifying to an inquiry, writing a memoir or doing creative writing.<sup>14</sup> However the potentials of this are not always fully dilated in the mainstream format of oral history which accounts for nuances in memory and recall of life history but tends not to offer participants opportunities for creative reflection or to reinvent their stories.

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11 Sean Field, 'Beyond "Healing": Trauma, Oral History and Regeneration', *Oral History* 34, no. 1 (2006): 33; see also Luisa Passerini, 'Memories between silence and oblivion', in Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003), 238–254; Jennifer A. Cramer, "'First, Do No Harm": Tread Carefully Where Oral History, Trauma, and Current Crises Intersect', *The Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (2020): 203–213; Wendy Rickard, "'More Dangerous than Therapy?": Interviewees' Reflections on Recording Traumatic or Taboo Issues', *Oral History* 26, no. 2 (Autumn, 1998): 34–48.

12 Alistair Thomson, 'Oral History and Community History in Britain: Personal and Critical Reflections on Twenty-Five Years of Continuity and Change', *Oral History* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 97–98; Anneke Sools, 'Back from the future: a narrative approach to study the imagination of personal futures', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 23 (2020): 451–465.

13 Pam Schweitzer, 'Making memories matter: Reminiscence and creativity, A thirty-year retrospective', *Oral History* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 84–97.

14 Jane Mace, 'Reminiscence as Literacy: Intersections and Creative Moments', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), 393.

At Lotus Place the writers and facilitator work together to talk, listen, write, read and respond to each other's stories. The group provides a supportive and creative setting for participants to narrate their lives and reinvent and reclaim their stories. In this paper we draw from interviews with the staff and creative writers at Lotus Place, not as oral histories per se, but as accounts of doing creative writing that allow us to reflect on the ways we work with trauma, memory and life stories as oral historians or as memory scholars more generally. As Alistair Thomson has observed, 'people may well write different stories to the ones they speak, not least because they have more control when they tell their own story as opposed to when you ask them to tell it to you'.<sup>15</sup> Our observations of the Lotus Place creative writing group led us to wonder whether an inclusion of imagination and creativity could enhance life history and oral history practice, and bring in the stories of individuals and groups potentially excluded from projects that employ traditional practices.

## **BACKGROUND - CARE LEAVERS IN AUSTRALIA**

The provision of child welfare and out-of-home 'care' in Australia occurred not long after British colonisation. In Queensland, the first orphanage was established in 1865 and more institutions followed, some run by the state, and others by charitable and/or religious organisations. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, children experienced 'care' in institutions as well as foster 'care'. In the later part of the twentieth century, and in line with social policy of the time and national and international trends, the larger institutions were closed down, in favour of smaller group homes, which were meant to better mimic family life.<sup>16</sup>

It is now well understood that for many children life in out-of-home 'care' institutions was one of neglect and abuse. Many children were removed from their families and placed in institutions as a result of contemporary judgements about race, class and poverty. Life in institutions was hard, with children expected to work, and education often neglected. There was little emotional support or affection provided

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15 Thomson, 'Oral History and Community History in Britain', 98.

16 Find & Connect web resource, 'Historical Background about Child Welfare' (12 December 2018). Available at <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/resources/historical-background-about-child-welfare/>. Accessed 1 October 2022.

by the staff of the institutions, and children were prevented from seeing, or getting information about their families. Abuse of all kinds was prevalent, and no support was provided to the children once they left the institutions.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, as survivors started to articulate their experiences, knowledge grew about the difficult experiences of children who grew up in out-of-home 'care', as well as its lasting impact and a recognition that many survivors had complex trauma as a result of childhood institutionalisation. However it was not until the mid-1990s that it was understood that further investigations into these experiences needed to be undertaken – this was after ongoing advocacy from survivors and advocacy organisations.

The first report to consider these issues was the *Bringing Them Home* report (1997), the outcome of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. This was followed by the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs Inquiry into the experiences of British and Maltese Child Migrants, resulting in the publication of the *Lost Innocents* report in 2001. And finally, after much lobbying, advocacy and awareness raising by survivors who were not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders or Child Migrants, the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs inquired into the experiences of this group, resulting in the publication of the *Forgotten Australians* report in 2004.<sup>18</sup> These reports resulted in two National Apologies in the Federal Parliament in 2008 and

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17 Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians Who Experienced Institutional or out-of-Home Care as Children* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2004), 85–125. Available at [https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary\\_business/committees/senate/community\\_affairs/completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/inst\\_care/report/index](https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/senate/community_affairs/completed_inquiries/2004-07/inst_care/report/index). Accessed 29 August 2022.

18 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: Commonwealth of Australia, 1997). Available at <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-report-1997>. Accessed 28 August 2022; Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record – Report on Child Migration* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2001). Available at [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Community\\_Affairs/Completed\\_inquiries/1999-02/child\\_migrat/report/index](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/1999-02/child_migrat/report/index). Accessed 28 August 2022; Senate Standing Committee, *Forgotten Australians*.

2009 following the election of a Labor government in 2007. Responses to inquiries around institutional 'care' also took place on a state and territory level.

Following the 2009 Australian government apology, funding became available for a variety of projects to collect and preserve the stories of Care Leavers, for the purposes of memorialisation as well as awareness raising and therapeutic outcomes. Before turning to our focus on Lotus Place, we briefly outline some of these testimony and biography projects to offer a comparative ground for our analysis.

### TESTIMONY AND BIOGRAPHY PROJECTS FOR CARE LEAVERS

When it comes to narrative projects with Care Leavers, there has been an overwhelming focus on life history. As noted above, Care Leaver narratives in the form of life stories, memoirs and testimony have played an important political role in transforming public understanding about 'care' and its impact. For Care Leavers in Australia, life storytelling is inherently political, and closely tied to activism and advocacy.

Sharing and amplifying personal stories has been a very effective strategy in Care Leavers' continuing campaign for recognition, justice and redress. Testimony and lived experience have been at the centre of national and state inquiries and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Swain and Musgrove observe that the government inquiries gave primacy to survivor testimony, in the form of written submissions and public hearings.<sup>19</sup>

The introduction to the 2004 *Forgotten Australians* report acknowledged that 'without doubt this inquiry has generated the largest volume of highly personal, emotive and significant evidence of any Senate inquiry'.<sup>20</sup>

Nearly all projects that work with Care Leavers' life stories have focused on documenting the Care Leaver experience for advocacy and education purposes. The

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19 Shurlee Swain and Nell Musgrove, 'We are the stories we tell about ourselves: child welfare records and the construction of identity among Australians who, as children, experienced out-of-home "care"', *Archives and Manuscripts* 40, no. 1 (2012): 4.

20 Senate Standing Committee, *Forgotten Australians*, 11.

National Library of Australia's (NLA) Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants Oral History Project, was one of the projects funded by the Australian government after its 2009 apology. The aims of the NLA project and its method for selecting interviewees are set out in the booklet that accompanies this important collection, which states that, 'Many interviewees are working to achieve justice for those who were in institutions as children, in a range of different ways – as advocates, counsellors, support service workers and in self-help groups'.<sup>21</sup> Leading advocate Leonie Sheedy further explained the oral history project as a public history endeavour that would amplify the voices of Care Leavers for posterity and make sure the wider public knew how they were treated. As she is quoted:

Thankfully the voices of care-leavers around Australia will have a permanent place in the National Library. It is important that our voices are heard, in order for our children and the families we have created to understand what we endured as children. Our stories have a real place in Australian history.<sup>22</sup>

This mode of testimony was therefore intended as a public record to be preserved and to be used in advocacy and education.

The written submissions to the 2004 Senate inquiry, published on the Parliament of Australia website, provide another collection of Care Leaver stories, where the political motivation of the storytelling is clear.<sup>23</sup> Although there were no prescribed guidelines, the vast majority of the published submissions to the 2004 *Forgotten Australians* inquiry take a very similar form, the story of the person's traumatic childhood and its lasting impact on them. Many of the writers used the official files from their time in 'care' as the scaffolding for their life story. The files provide a

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21 National Library of Australia, *You Can't Forget Things Like That: Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants Oral History Project* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2012), 32. Available at <https://www.nla.gov.au/sites/default/files/forgotten-australians-oralhistory-booklet.pdf>. Accessed 2 October 2022.

22 National Library of Australia, *You Can't Forget Things Like That*, 45.

23 Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 'Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care: Submissions Received by the Committee' (2005). Available at [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Community\\_Affairs/Completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/inst\\_care/submissions/sublist](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2004-07/inst_care/submissions/sublist). Accessed 2 October 2022.

chronology and key information like dates, places and names, enabling Care Leavers to arrange their traumatic and partial memories into a narrative. Official records are of vital importance to construct life histories, but they have many shortcomings, as Care Leavers Jacqueline Wilson and Frank Golding demonstrate. One of the major features of child welfare files is the relentless surveillance of children and families, and the almost entirely negative representation of them in the records created by institutions and government departments. Wilson and Golding describe the records, and Care Leavers' feelings about them, as 'profoundly ambiguous': records can be the key to (re)constructing and reclaiming a life history while simultaneously continuing to oppress, deride and limit people's understanding of the past and themselves.<sup>24</sup> This necessary reliance on official records, with their many shortcomings, leads to the creation of a genre of Care Leaver narratives that inevitably share common features and follow similar narrative arcs. Scholars have observed that this has created a dominant 'master narrative' of abuse that many Forgotten Australians draw on to create a coherent life story.<sup>25</sup>

When called upon to tell their life story, many Care Leavers have little choice but to rely on these collective narratives, as well as bureaucratic records, because they can struggle to form cohesive autobiographical memories of their childhood.<sup>26</sup> It was very common for children to experience multiple placements in various types of 'care' – reception centres, foster 'care', orphanages, reformatories – making it difficult to recall a coherent chronological childhood story. In recognition of this, Life Story Work is now an established practice in out-of-home 'care', to help children and young people make sense of their identity.<sup>27</sup> In the context of this dislocation and lack of tangible keepsakes, as Davis discusses, telling one's story as testimony is

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24 Jacqueline Z. Wilson and Frank Golding, 'Latent scrutiny: personal archives as perpetual mementos of the official gaze', *Archival Science* 16 (2016): 93–109.

25 Kate Douglas, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory* (Rutgers University Press, 2010), 106.

26 Stine Grønæk Jensen, 'The Rebuilding of Fragmented Memories, Broken Families and Rootless Selves among Danish Care Leavers', *Journal of Family History* 46, no. 1 (January 2021): 79.

27 Simon P. Hammond, Julie Young and Claire Duddy, 'Life Story Work for Children and Young People with Care Experience: A Scoping Review', *Developmental Child Welfare* 2, no. 4 (December 2020): 293–315.

‘an especially partial and selective genre of life writing: They cover, at best, a short episode or series of episodes in one person’s life, selected for their relevance to the inquiry’s purpose’.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the political drive to tell a particular type of life story, there are practical reasons why Care Leaver narratives conform to a genre. Government services for Forgotten Australians often require people to repeat their life story in order for them to prove eligibility. The National Redress Scheme provides a stark example of this. The redress application process requires applicants to share ‘with as much detail as you can’ their experiences of sexual abuse (‘Part 2’ of the application) as well as the impact sexual abuse has had across the person’s life (‘Part 3’ of the application).<sup>29</sup> It is a requirement of the scheme that the information in ‘Part 2’ is shared with the institution responsible for the sexual abuse. Until 2018, the information in ‘Part 3’ was automatically shared with the institution. As a result of advocacy, when survivors raised concerns about the sharing of deeply personal and highly sensitive information with their abusers (as well as with insurers), applicants are now able to choose whether to share ‘Part 3’ with the institution.<sup>30</sup>

Existing narrative projects for Care Leavers have played an important political role, and for many people the process is also therapeutic. Most recently, the Life Stories project, delivered by the Alliance for Forgotten Australians (AFA) and funded by the Department of Social Services, has highlighted the potential wellbeing benefits of storytelling.<sup>31</sup> Its promotional brochure states, ‘Making a record of your life and telling of some of the events in your life is one way of saying you matter and that your life matters’. The AFA Life Stories project involved Forgotten Australians working with a biographer to write their life story. If the authors chose to, the stories were

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28 Fiona Davis, ‘“I Fought. I Screamed. I Bit”: The Assertion of Rights Within Historic Abuse Inquiry Transcripts,’ *Journal of Australian Studies* 42, no. 2 (3 April 2018): 19.

29 National Redress Scheme, ‘Thinking about applying’ (2021). Available at <https://www.nationalredress.gov.au/applying/thinking-about-applying>. Accessed 28 August 2022.

30 Robyn Kruk, ‘Final Report: Second Year Review of the National Redress Scheme’ (2021). Available at <https://www.nationalredress.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021-06/d21-508932-final-report-second-year-review-national-redress-scheme.pdf>. Accessed 28 August 2022.

31 Simon Gardiner, ‘Life Stories Project’, *Find & Connect* (blog), 12 February 2021, <https://www.findandconnectwrblog.info/2021/02/life-stories-project/>.



then collected and published, but the option was also there to simply keep the story for themselves or their family. The program emphasised 'You own your story. Your story stays yours!'. This reflects the important emphasis on ensuring people have agency to tell their own story and choice about how it can be used.

However, life story writing may not be suitable for all Care Leavers. Much of the literature about life writing as a therapeutic practice comes with an assumption that the storyteller will be able to achieve structure and meaning in their story, and this coherent story 'facilitates a sense of resolution, which results in less rumination and eventually allows disturbing experiences to subside gradually from conscious thought'.<sup>32</sup> However, Donna Hancox observed after working on a digital storytelling project with Forgotten Australians, this expectation that people have a coherent personal narrative available makes traditional formats for recording life stories problematic when working with people who have experienced complex trauma: 'There is...an assumption that participants arrive with a store – tangible and intangible – of memories and mementos from their lives that they can use to make a digital story', whereas 'Often such stories seem too incoherent to be told and too painful to be heard by others...'.<sup>33</sup> This highlights that developing a life story may not be suitable for all Forgotten Australians, but this should not mean they are excluded from writing altogether.

Malyn et al. note that the literature on creativity and wellbeing focuses on visual and performing arts, rather than community-based literary projects.<sup>34</sup> In the Australian Care Leaver space, the Parragirls organisation has produced many creative art projects by women who were former inmates of the Parramatta Girls' Training School.<sup>35</sup> The

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32 James W. Pennebaker and Janel D. Seagal, 'Forming a Story: The Health Benefits of Narrative', *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 55, no. 10 (October 1999): 1243.

33 Donna Hancox, 'The Process of Remembering with the Forgotten Australians: Digital Storytelling and Marginalized Groups', *Human Technology: An Interdisciplinary Journal on Humans in ICT Environments* 8, no. 1 (2012): 67, 70.

34 Brianna O. Malyn, Zoe Thomas and Christine E. Ramsey-Wade, 'Reading and Writing for Well-being: A Qualitative Exploration of the Therapeutic Experience of Older Adult Participants in a Bibliotherapy and Creative Writing Group', *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 20, no. 4 (December 2020): 715.

35 Lily Hibberd with Bonney Djuric, *Parragirls: Reimagining Parramatta Girls Home through art and memory* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2019).

women's artworks are very much grounded in the site of this institution, a precinct which was inscribed on the National Heritage List in 2017.<sup>36</sup> While Parragirls do produce creative writing pieces, the emphasis is on visual arts and performance.

The literature is much more likely to engage with creative art than with writing, and Deveney and Lawson observe that there is less literature about the therapeutic benefits of creative writing, as opposed to expressive writing, where the therapeutic benefits are well established.<sup>37</sup> Deveney and Lawson found that creative writing has 'interesting possibilities as an effective, low-level intervention', and wrote about its benefits:

These include the cognitive processing of trauma and emotional difficulties in a gentle yet beneficial way. Writers hand over their real-life personal issues to imaginary characters and, in the process, find an increased sense of detachment and objectivity, a changed perspective and new levels of self-empathy, catharsis and healing. The immersive process of writing, and the creation of a fictional narrative that uses real experience, allows patients to focus on their difficulties in a safe and positive way.<sup>38</sup>

The literature on narrative therapy (also known as narrative practice) emphasises the benefits of re-authoring the stories that we have about ourselves.<sup>39</sup> Like narrative therapy, the creative writing practised in the group at Lotus Place gives the participants a chance to find shimmering threads in the stickiest, muddiest, most problem-saturated stories and to weave a new story. Creative writing gives back

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36 Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, 'National Heritage List inscription: Parramatta Female Factory and Institutions Precinct' (2017). Available at <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/parks-heritage/heritage/places/national/parramatta-female-factory-and-institutions-precinct>. Accessed 1 June 2023.

37 Catherine Deveney and Patrick Lawson, 'Writing Your Way to Well-being: An IPA Analysis of the Therapeutic Effects of Creative Writing on Mental Health and the Processing of Emotional Difficulties', *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 22, no. 2 (June 2022): 1–2.

38 Deveney and Lawson, 'Writing Your Way to Well-being', 2.

39 Leonie Sheedy, 'Try to Put Yourself in Our Skin: The Experiences of Wardies and Homies', *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* 1 (2005): 65–71; Alice Morgan, 'What Is Narrative Therapy?' The Dulwich Centre (2000). Available at <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/what-is-narrative-therapy/>. Accessed 2 October 2022.

control to the writer that can contrast with the person's sense of helplessness in the real world.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to expressive writing, creative writing does not come with the imperative for a person to make disclosures about traumatic events or uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.<sup>41</sup> The participant can feel safe that they are able to choose what they want to share. Where life writing can be difficult for people who have experienced complex trauma due to the need to come up with a coherent narrative, creative writing can work through and beyond life history in non-linear ways.

### THE 'WRITING WRONGS RIGHT' PROJECT

This research project began when an article was published by the ABC in June 2020: *Forgotten Australians rewrite childhood trauma through power of storytelling*.<sup>42</sup> This led to conversations with Katie McGuire, Program and Resource Worker at Lotus Place, about how the organisation uses the 'healing power of story' in its work with people who grew up in institutions and foster 'care'. The project team successfully applied for a Community Engagement Grant from the Melbourne Social Equity Institute, a scheme which aims to develop interdisciplinary and community-engaged networks within and beyond the University of Melbourne. Funding was received in December 2020, enabling the researchers to travel from Melbourne to Brisbane (in a quick break between COVID-19 lockdowns) to engage with Lotus Place staff and participants to document the organisation's innovative approach to creative writing and storytelling.

After obtaining ethics approval from the University of Melbourne, we travelled to Brisbane and conducted qualitative interviews with both staff and creative writing participants at Lotus Place. This included Katie, who set up the program, Edwina, who runs the workshops, Helen, who works as a volunteer scribe, and ten participants in the creative writing group, Gloria, Lana, Lynette, Jessie, Pierre, Michelle,

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40 Deveney and Lawson, 'Writing Your Way to Well-being', 3.

41 Stephen J. Lepore and Wendy Kliever, 'Expressive Writing and Health', in Marc D. Gellman and J. Rick Turner (eds), *Encyclopedia of Behavioral Medicine* (New York: Springer New York, 2013), 735–741.

42 Inga Stünzner and Megan Hendry, 'The Power of Storytelling Helps Tania Rewrite Memories of Childhood Abuse', *ABC News*, 21 June 2020. Available at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-22/forgotten-australians-use-storytelling-to-cope-with-trauma/12360902>. Accessed 29 August 2022.

Denise, Cecily, \*Sam and \*Polly. Some participants chose to use pseudonyms and these are indicated with an asterisk. We used a set schedule of questions but allowed participants to decide if they wanted to be interviewed alone or with others. As a result, interviews were with between one and four people – Katie, Lynette and Jessie were interviewed individually; Edwina and Helen, Lana and Gloria, and Sam and Polly as pairs; and Cecily, Pierre, Michelle and Denise as a group. This methodology ensured people felt safe in the interview and also captured some of the social dynamics within the group. These were not oral history interviews per se, but informed our thoughts on the role of memory and creativity in ways that can add to methodological considerations in the field.

We also participated in the creative workshop on one of the two days we were visiting Lotus Place. We did this not so much as formal participant observation but as a way to experience some of the vulnerabilities and pleasures involved in creative writing and to be more present in the happenings of Lotus Place while we were there, which also involved participating in bingo and morning tea. Although unplanned, we reflected that the fact we took part in the workshop in the morning of the first day, before any interviews, also had an effect in changing the power dynamic of interviewer/interviewee as we were quite demonstrably the least experienced and skilled creative writers in the class.

To analyse the interviews, we coded the transcripts for themes and looked for what staff and participants said were the benefits of participating in the creative writing group. In the following sections we describe and analyse the way that Lotus Place's creative writing program differs from existing writing projects that focus on memoir, yet still offers an important therapeutic space for Care Leavers. We quote from participants at length in keeping with their right to speak to their own experiences. Before discussing the interviews, we provide some background on Lotus Place and its program.

### **CREATIVE WRITING AT LOTUS PLACE**

Lotus Place is a dedicated support service and resource centre for Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants, and offers a number of services to those who grew up in out-of-home 'care' in Queensland. These include records and family

tracing services, counselling services, National Redress Scheme support, individual advocacy, assistance and referrals to other government services, and programs and activities including peer support groups, tai chi, art and dance classes, weekly lunch and bingo, movie nights, and the creative writing group.<sup>43</sup> Katie McGuire started the creative writing group in 2015 as a response to service users expressing an interest in improving their literacy. Edwina Shaw soon joined as the facilitator. Edwina is a published author of both fiction and nonfiction and specialises in trauma-informed creative writing.<sup>44</sup>

The creative writing sessions usually begin with a meditation based on the yoga nidra where Edwina also incorporates a visualisation on getting rid of your inner critic. To structure the rest of the session, Edwina offers a series of prompts for creative writing, setting small tasks that are done on the spot one at a time. After each exercise the participants take turns reading out their writing. Prompts in the workshop we attended involved a combination of both remembering and imagining, or doing something creative with memories. For example, in one exercise participants were asked to describe a moment of joy using all of their senses, what could they see, smell, feel, and so on; in another, to choose a portrait from a magazine and make up the life story for the person pictured; or to write about a life event that seemed bad at the time but led to something good. We also did a craft/writing activity, making affirmation cards, where there were the options to make up your own affirmation or draw from an existing set of cards. As we will explain, including such choices is a vital part of the ethos of the trauma-informed workshop.

The workshops are accessible with participants able to attend in person, join by phone, or Zoom in, for all or part of the session. For example, in the workshop we attended one participant joined by phone just for the meditation, and another participant showed up late to miss the meditation. As another important accessibility

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43 Lotus Place, 'Lotus Place: Services' (2018). Available at <https://www.lotusplace.org.au/services/lotus-place>. Accessed 27 August 2022.

44 Edwina Shaw, *Thrill Seekers* (Winchester: Ransom, 2012); Edwina Shaw, *A Guide Through Grief: First Aid for Your Heart and Soul: Practical Tools, Creative Activities and Yoga Exercises to Help You Cope with the Loss of Someone You Love* (Brisbane: Red Backed Wren Publishing, 2020).

aspect of the group, participants with low literacy are paired with a volunteer scribe who works with them to write down their ideas and to read their story out to the group. Each participant has an exercise book that they write in and is stored at Lotus Place. Sometimes Katie selects stories to be published in the Lotus Place Lilypad newsletter, and the group have also produced a zine with selected stories included alongside images.

### **PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES OF CREATIVE WRITING AT LOTUS PLACE**

As we have outlined, the creative writing program at Lotus Place is a significant departure from other Care Leaver projects that use life writing and storytelling. It distinguishes itself from creative projects like Parragirls, or life story projects such as the AFA Life Stories project in that it does not have an overt social justice purpose. Going into the project we were curious about what makes the creative writing program at Lotus Place work and what attracts Care Leavers to participate. While the writing itself was important, the structure and format of the workshop played a significant role in drawing and keeping participants, in some cases across a number of years, including people who described having been reticent to share their life story. The value of the workshop format chimes with established practices in 'group reminiscing' that have been popular in oral history but have somewhat fallen out of vogue. Our analysis of the work at Lotus Place reaffirms the potentials of group memory-work in place of or alongside individual interviews.

In different ways, all the participants noted that an important part of the creative writing group's success was the lack of judgement and the focus on being imaginative. Participants noted their appreciation for getting to imagine a story for themselves beyond their Forgotten Australian experience or the ways they may have articulated their life story in the past. While the Lotus Place creative writing group is a space where participants are free to discuss their experiences if they wish, they can also imagine different narratives that might contain a small part of their experience or extend into entirely different topics. This was evident in Pierre's work which he describes as 'sensual erotic romance' and in the writings of another participant we did not interview but was mentioned several times for his stories about dogs. The facilitator's prompts for stories, such as images, can lead participants to remember or

imagine positive stories about emotional connections between people. In addition, the activity of cutting out images from magazines allows for a creative set of choices in not only telling the story, but deciding its premise.

Sam explained that she preferred to write imaginative stories than to write autobiographically. She said: 'I just don't want to share my story with the world out there. I think everybody else has got a pretty hard life out there, why should I tell everybody about what happened to me? I just feel that way'. Similarly, Pierre said, 'I don't touch on my personal life in my writing'. As Pierre and Denise explained, the creative writing prompts mean that participants can choose to disguise little pieces of their life story or leave it out altogether. This, in addition to adopting different authorial styles, was felt to be therapeutic:

**Pierre:** It's coming from within, whether it's an experience, and as Edwina said, you know, you can either write about your life experience, or if you don't want to write about that life experience, put that experience under the banner of a character [...] so you're sort of pushing it out.

**Denise:** You're releasing it.

**Pierre:** And there's different forms of writing which I've learnt from coming to classes. We get to write in first person, second person, third person. Third person is basically what they call a guide looking down, so to speak, so you can say you're looking into someone's window and they're doing that.

As Pierre and Denise note, creative writing is no less cathartic or empowering than writing that explicitly describes traumatic experiences, and can be so in a different way, by offering ways to assign or resculpt events via point of view and characters. Malyn et al. write about how creative writing can help people to gain increased insight into themselves by providing an 'intermediary object' between the person and their problems.<sup>45</sup> Writing about the Parragirls Memory Project, Hibberd makes a similar claim, that 'the production of an artwork permits the institutionalised subject to set her or himself apart from victimhood, to tackle difficult experiences and memories

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45 Malyn, Thomas and Ramsey-Wade, 'Reading and Writing for Well-being', 717.

from a distance'.<sup>46</sup> Creativity allows Care Leavers to take a break from activism and advocacy, to express themselves and define their identities without having to refer to public understandings of abuse and justice that we have become more used to hearing when we think about people who grew up in 'care'. Encouraging imaginative writing can thus enable people to put some distance between themselves and their traumatic life stories, and allows them to work through painful material in a less direct way.

While Denise sometimes does write about her life, she noted that Edwina's focus on positive prompts meant that she was able to recall and describe parts of her life that were otherwise overshadowed by bad memories. Interestingly, Denise used the language of 'triggering' to describe the experience of recovering forgotten good memories:

**Denise:** [...] I've had really bad memories as a child, sometimes it will bring a good memory, so that good memory will come up and it will pop back into your system. That's really, it gives me tears just thinking about it. [...] it's a really nice memory, and you'd only get that from being in that class at that time. [...] So it's mindful writing for me. [...] because you remember the bad ones. The good ones only slip in through something triggering it. Especially in creative writing.

The fact that participants felt welcome both to write or not write about their experiences in 'care' or after was an important part of what attracted them to the group and created an environment where they felt able to take creative risks in following the prompts. Their experience as Forgotten Australians was already recognised within the group and was not required to be the main focus of their writing if they chose to write about other topics or memories. As we will discuss further, participant choice in the structure of the storytelling program, not just its content, was a defining factor at Lotus Place, and guarded against the entrenchment of a prescriptive approach.

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46 Hibberd, 'Negotiating uncertain agency', 79.



In this sense, the creative writing program works in a way that is trauma-informed to decentre trauma from participants' narratives. A 'vital paradigm shift' towards trauma-informed practice (TIP) in organisations providing services to people who have experienced past or current abuse was discussed by Harris and Fallot as early as 2001.<sup>47</sup> Trauma-informed practice is a way of working that acknowledges the lifelong and serious effects of trauma and seeks to reduce the likelihood of people having stressful, retraumatising interactions with an organisation.

Over the last 10 years, TIP has grown in popularity in Australia, although the Australian Institute of Family Studies noted in 2016 that it was not yet entrenched, highlighting the need for a consistent national framework to implement trauma-informed systems in child/family services.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, in the early 2020s, TIP is no longer confined to the 'caring professions', and is being adapted to sectors as diverse as journalism, the law and archives.<sup>49</sup> TIP is applicable in a wide variety of settings: as Russon highlights, in the broader Australian population, one in four people are survivors of childhood trauma, including abuse.<sup>50</sup> Recent work in oral history has also begun to consider how TIP shapes the design of interview projects, though many of the premises would be considered part of oral history's methodological foundations, such as empowering narrators.<sup>51</sup>

One of the principles of trauma-informed practice is to give people choice, for example, as already discussed, the choice to not participate in an activity. Edwina

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47 Maxine Harris and Roger D. Fallot, 'Envisioning a Trauma-Informed Service System: A Vital Paradigm Shift', *New Directions for Mental Health Services*, no. 89 (2001): 3–22.

48 Liz Wall et al., 'Trauma-Informed Care in Child/Family Welfare Services' (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2016). Available at <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/trauma-informed-care-childfamily-welfare-services>. Accessed 3 October 2022.

49 See for example, DART Center for Journalism & Trauma, 'Journalism & Trauma' (5 February 2009). Available at <https://dartcenter.org/resources/self-study-unit-1-journalism-trauma>. Accessed 2 October 2022; Kirsten Wright and Nicola Laurent, 'Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment: Trauma-Informed Archival Practice', *Archivaria* 91, June (2021): 38–73.

50 Penni Russon, 'Beyond Trigger Warnings: Working towards a Strengths-Based, Trauma-Informed Model of Resilience in the University Creative Writing Workshop', *TEXT* 21, Special 42 (31 October 2017).

51 Kae Bara Kratcha and Taylor Thompson, 'Talking trauma-informed oral history project design with Gabriel Solis', *OHMA* (blog), 10 May 2021, <http://oralhistory.columbia.edu/blog-posts/talking-trauma-informed-oral-history-project-design-with-gabriel-solis>; Kelly Flannery Rowan, 'Trauma informed Interviewing: Interviewing with Empathy and Protecting Oral History Narrators' (2 December 2022). Available at <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/glworks/122/>. Accessed 1 June 2023.

emphasised that choice and autonomy were a key part of the design of her workshops, where participants could feel confident to make decisions themselves. Her approach highlighted the flexibility offered around giving participants different options within any one prompt, particularly if it might be challenging:

**Edwina:** Here the focus is on fun, expressing ourselves, and trying to sneak in some of that transformative stuff. And you have to be very careful also. The main thing is you don't know what people's triggers are, and it could be, you know, so if you want to go in and do one of those transformative ones you have to be very, very gentle and give multiple options. The most important thing is you don't have to do anything, you know, you don't have to do this exercise.

This kind of sensitive facilitation was crucial in the reasons that participants gave for attending the group. The autonomy to make decisions about what activities to do or not was inclusive of participants who, for example, may have shied away from participating had they been asked to focus on describing their lives directly. The choice to write about whatever came to mind on the spot allowed people to exercise the power of being a storyteller, not within the confines of a set life narrative elicited by others, but in determining the genre, tone and content of the story itself.

As Edwina explained, part of her method was to prompt people away from telling the same story and give them the confidence to tell alternative stories with a range of affects. As an example, Edwina discussed one of the long-running participants, Sam, who had recovered her imagination through creative writing, with the help of a volunteer scribe Helen. '[Sam] used to say, when we first started, that she didn't have an imagination. I used to get that a lot, "No, I don't have an imagination", and people would get stuck telling their sad stories. But getting them to do the imaginative stories has really, really worked. I mean, you saw [Sam] today, she's on fire [laughs]'. Edwina's workshops are designed to help people open up their repertoire of stories by working with imaginative prompts that are carefully designed in a trauma-informed way to avoid triggering. Following these sensitively designed prompts, participants

could give their experiences to characters in ways that helped them gain distance from their trauma and exercise agency over their story. As Edwina added:

**Edwina:** It's not just focusing on me and my life and all the sad, bad things that happened to me. [...] You know it's very freeing, all this, the imagination's fabulous because it opens up every world. [...] So when we did the exercise today, pick a character and you can make something bad happen to it, it can be something that happened to you, that's actually very empowering. Give it to somebody else. [...] So that's, the imagination is very, very powerful, and it's about getting people to remember that they do have it and to use it.

As an outcome of the creative writing program, participants spoke about gaining a sense of accomplishment and replacing others' negative assessments of their aptitudes with positive proofs of their creative talents and capability. This was especially important, as several participants noted, given many Care Leavers were not provided with adequate education. The creative writing group offered a chance to improve literacy, and several participants told us they were initially drawn to the program with hopes they would learn the 'correct' way to write, deploy grammar, and so on. While they then found that the group was more about play and creative expression, the outcome nonetheless bolstered confidence and a sense of accomplishment in both literacy and composition. Michelle spoke about learning processes of drafting and editing rather than expecting first attempts to be 'right', she explained:

**Michelle:** And like Denise said, you become more expressive and articulate, you can articulate more, express yourself. I suppose though, one of the things I came to understand with writing was I probably wanted it to be just right. I didn't realise there was a technique in it, you have to do drafts and revise your drafts, and that was and still is a big learning experience for me. [...] ...And again, with Edwina's help, it's sort of just practising the six senses. And I notice that when I'm out and about now I can do that and I sort of create little mind stories or stories, like a little narrative.

As Michelle says here, the skills she learned in the creative writing group could be carried into everyday life. She found herself more comfortable with making mistakes and experimenting rather than being 'correct'.

Katie explained to us that prior to the creative writing group, people were already interacting at Lotus Place but their interactions were 'a bit functional'. They would have some knowledge about each other, 'which Homes they were in and what happened to them as children, but they didn't know a lot about each other's lives and what was important, what amazing things have happened, what was their best day or worst day'. Katie saw the kinds of rich conversations that were opened up by doing creative writing together as more akin to friendship. As she noted, 'people were just more connected with each other after the creative writing because they had shared things, and sort of broke down barriers with each other'. This did not mean that participants never mentioned their experiences in 'care', but rather that for those who did not wish to focus on that aspect of their biography, the support and collegiality on offer did not rest on mutual disclosure solely about traumatic experiences. The creative writing group allowed for but did not structure itself around disclosure, thus providing opportunities for participants to construct their selves and identities as more than their 'care' experience.

Several of the participants spoke about positive, potentially healing, effects of doing creative writing. Lana reflected that the creative thinking provided purpose and knowledge that was often withheld from children in 'care'. 'You're getting knowledge', she said, 'To know and have knowledge is the biggest thing you could want. [...] and all the stuff that Edwina gives us makes our brains think, it gives us a reason to try, what can I say, it's fantastic'. For Jessie too, creative outputs where her skills were instrumentalised by other people helped her to overcome negative comments and abusive experiences:

**Jessie:** I was told all my life I could only do what I could do for others and what they could use me for, and I was a worthless piece of shit, and I'm not. [...] I'm learning to be creative in all of these ways, and who would have thought, me, that I could write songs. Like I can write songs! And I can be in plays and I've

been in a few films, a few people's movies, and yeah, now I'm writing as well. It's like wow, that's cool. If I can do it, anybody can do it. I think it's amazing, yeah.

As these reflections from Lana and Jessie show, the accomplishment of producing a piece of writing had the effect of giving back a sense of capability and confidence that was withheld in earlier contexts of their life in 'care'. It was not necessarily the content of the piece but the process of writing and sharing of it – providing the recognition and self-recognition that they are creative – that had a positive effect on the participants' wellbeing. Like the experience of participants in the Parragirls art projects mentioned earlier, creative practice provided a way for the creative writers to reclaim and redefine their own identities.<sup>52</sup>

Staff and participants at Lotus Place spoke about the work of creative writing in developing imaginative skills that could be used beyond the class context to think differently about both past experiences and future paths. Both Edwina and Katie described the transformative potential of imaginative activities, beyond the outcomes of traditional talk-therapy or support-group settings. Katie elaborated on how imaginative skills can be used as life skills:

**Katie:** I think it's also about developing an imagination. That's a big one. [...] People that grow up in low socio-economic circumstances, or in Homes especially, often haven't had conversations as children that are anything outside of functional conversations. Like 'Get down there and scrub the floor. Have you showered? Come and eat', you know? There's very minimal language and imagination is a waste of time. And so saying imagination is actually really a great skill and tool, developing that imagination so that you can develop an alternative explanation for something that is happening, [...] it can be actually a coping skill that is being developed.

In Katie's description the creative writing is empowering not only because it is a chance to tell a story but because imagining exercises a skill that can be used beyond

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52 Hibberd with Djuric, *Parragirls*, 50.

the class, it recovers a mode of learning and creative sense-making that was often denied to people in 'care'.

### **CONCLUSION: CREATIVE WRITING AS TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE**

It could seem counterintuitive that a writing program for Forgotten Australians would not focus on telling about their experience in 'care'. However, the writing group at Lotus Place demonstrates that imaginative and creative writing which prompts participants to write beyond their own experience can be a trauma-informed, healing and community-building exercise. Indeed there was great value in moving away from a focus on deficit or trauma narratives. As we have noted, some participants only attended because they had the freedom not to write about themselves and their memories. In addition, several participants had developed their own genres of writing, such as erotica, pet fiction, or poetry, or branched out into other creative modes, such as songwriting and dance. Other participants reported that the imaginative skills learnt went beyond the telling of stories in the class and became a way to engage with the world more generally, creating alternative narratives for the present and future.

Life history projects have played an important role in reshaping the Australian public's collective understanding about the history of institutional care and raising awareness about the experiences of Care Leavers, and have been an important tool in advocating for making changes and providing services to those who grow up in out-of-home 'care'. But life history storytelling does not suit all Forgotten Australians, particularly those who are not able to produce a coherent life story. Conventional oral history and life history storytelling projects may shut people out and this means that there are many Care Leavers whose experiences are not being recorded. Creative writing and imagination provide new possibilities for Forgotten Australians to express themselves and reflect on their lives. Lotus Place's creative writing program provides a way for Care Leavers who have experienced complex trauma to avoid these inherent challenges of storytelling. Participants can also step outside the expectations of the dominant Care Leaver life story genre and the testimony model.<sup>53</sup> At Lotus Place,

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53 Douglas, *Contesting Childhood*, 108.

the purpose of the program is not to bear witness, or to amplify stories, to 'write the unspeakable' or even to write your own life story with a coherent plot. The storytelling is of the moment, and most exercises, while recorded in the participants' journals at Lotus Place, are created for the immediate experience of the creative process. Its focus on creative writing, rather than life writing, opens up additional modes of expression for Forgotten Australians.

The creative writing work at Lotus Place offers a new mode of storytelling that departs from the focus on sharing a life history but nevertheless provides a way for Care Leavers to talk about their lives. The program provides an alternative way for Forgotten Australians to express themselves, to work through trauma and develop life skills and have positive experiences that improve their sense of wellbeing. This indirect way of working with memory raises interesting methodological and ethical considerations for scholars and practitioners of oral history and life writing, where a traditional focus on recording a linear life history still dominates as the mainstream form. For oral historians, being aware of the possibilities and potential of creative writing and imagination could provide some new insights and practices to life story work and invite new voices into oral history. As Thomson reflected, 'The continuing challenge to community oral historians is to consider our own blinkers, and to constantly reflect on if and how our work may still be excluding or silencing'.<sup>54</sup> The facilitation of memory work with a group such as Lotus Place creative writing group includes people who would otherwise not participate in telling shared stories, but who feel comfortable working with prompts and creative expression. Particularly when working with groups who have experienced complex trauma there could be value in allowing for a diversity of forms where memory could play a role in narration but not always be at the centre of the story that a narrator wishes to tell.

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54 Thomson, 'Oral History and Community History in Britain', 98.

# Molly, in Her Own Words

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LESLEY SYNGE

*A founding member of the Queensland Oral History Association, Lesley Synge collected three interviews from Central Queensland subjects for the Australia 1938 Oral History Project in 1982 then resumed her career as a high school teacher of English and History. She is now a widely published poet, fiction and non-fiction writer. She has found joy in revisiting two of her original interviews and developing them.<sup>1</sup>*

‘Contraception!’ my grandmother Molly exclaimed. ‘Never heard of it...not for years and years.’

It was a winter’s night in Mount Morgan, Central Queensland, in 1982. I’d tucked my three-year-old boy into bed and we were settled on her Art Deco three-seater Genoa lounge, the tape recorder between us, when I reached the topic of contraception and childbirth on my questionnaire.<sup>2</sup> Molly Doherty, almost 80, had been widowed for more than 30 years when I cajoled her to take part in the Australian 1938 Oral History Project.<sup>3</sup> I was almost 30, her oldest grandchild, visiting from Brisbane. Molly (Mary Ellen O’Keefe), born in 1902, had already lived through most of the twentieth century. The voice of a working-class woman from an Australian mining town was just what the oral history project needed, I believed, to have a rounded picture of social life before World War Two. Her daughter and only child – my mother – had been dead for four years. While my grandmother still suffered

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1 The interview with Violet O’Keefe, the sister-in-law of Molly, by the author, took place on 11 May 1982. <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/930420>. Lesley Synge, ‘Fortunato Stabulum: the fortunes of an Italian mining labourer and the puzzles of oral history’, *Queensland History Journal* 24, no. 9 (May 2021): 858–870.

2 Quotes have been extrapolated from the transcript of the interview with Mary Ellen (Molly) Doherty (1902–1990) conducted on 10 May 1982 for Australia 1938 Oral History Project, the National Library of Australia ID 937920. Other information has been sourced from various government and newspaper records.

3 The Australia 1938 Oral History Project is a collection of over 500 oral history interviews held in the National Library of Australia with people talking about their memories of Australian life before and during 1938. The project was one of the many historical initiatives created in preparation for the Australian bicentennial celebrations of 1988.



heartbreak about it, the loss bonded us in a woman-to-woman sort of way that would not have otherwise occurred.

Molly generally had a quirky way of talking, a reflection, perhaps, of the mix of voices from many backgrounds and nationalities that had surrounded her in childhood, first in the goldmining town of Ravenswood in North Queensland then here, in Mount Morgan where she had lived since her teens. In the intimate sphere of family, her mother Elizabeth (Lizzie) Dennis was colonial-born and raised by English parents (Lizzie's father was from Dorset). Molly's father Philip O'Keefe was an Irishman from county Cork and William (Will) Hancock, the stepfather who took over the family, was colonial-born whose parents had immigrated from Cornwall. A rich mix – and one that reflected the earliest years of the post-colonial, national tongue.

Although her expression was quirky and 'old-worldly', Molly was also naturally low-key and reticent. By the time I reached the intimate subject of contraception and childbirth mid-interview, I registered that her responses were often a confetti of stumbles. Without realising that I was witnessing the onset of age-related dementia, I felt faintly disappointed in her.

Molly had already disclosed to me that she had innocently fallen pregnant at 21 and joined the ranks of Queensland's sole parents at 22 when she gave birth to my mother Estelle on 11 November 1924. As anticipated, Molly was reluctant that evening to record much detail about the events that resulted in this traumatic experience. I knew of the context to the biggest drama of her life from other occasions: the man who immediately left town to avoid his responsibilities; the mother who packed her off to a nunnery on the Capricorn Coast to escape the prying eyes of Mount Morganites, with the order that Molly must give the baby up for adoption. The gossip that circulated in whispers – that these nuns often killed babies born out of wedlock; that they delivered them, then buried them behind the convent, including the offspring of liaisons between nuns and priests.

Although she quickly dispensed with the topic of contraception as something she'd 'never heard of', Molly happily elaborated on the next focus – the birth itself. She

explained that it lasted two days and was riddled with complications. ‘That’s why I never had any more children...They [the nuns] never, ever, used to get you a doctor.’

Did they give you pain-relieving drugs? I asked.

‘No drugs.’

Does she remember the pain?

‘I’ll say.’

When her daughter arrived, Molly would not ‘give her up’.

‘I wanted a girl.’

Why?

‘Cause I wanted one, that’s all. When I had her...I wouldn’t part with her.’

Instead, Mary Ellen O’Keefe left the convent with her newborn – marched out, she’d declared to me on one of those earlier occasions – and caught the train that then ran from Emu Park to Mount Morgan via Rockhampton. As I conducted the interview, I recognised that, without my grandmother’s gutsy courage and loving heart, I would not exist.

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‘He wasn’t much [of a father], I can tell you that,’ Molly said bluntly of Philip O’Keefe in the earlier part of the interview. ‘He was a bit of a bombastic sort of fellow,’ often out of work, and ‘used to drink a good bit, too.’

Irish Philip was a Roman Catholic, Lizzie followed the Church of England. Molly’s younger siblings were Frank, Florence, Elizabeth (known as Pearl) and George, the last of the five, born in 1911. They were sectarian times and the religion of the father determined the religion of his offspring. All the same, the O’Keefe children attended the state school in Ravenswood.

According to Molly, her father provided next to nothing for Lizzie to raise the children on. 'She used to buy a few soup bones and cut off the meat to make a curry out of them.' Frank, the oldest boy, did what he could to help. He 'used to get a bob [a shilling] or two out of fighting...down the gully near the creek up at Ravenswood School...Dad would always give him a bob for doing it.' Frank handed the coins he earned from boxing over to their mother. Lizzie also maintained the family with washtub toil.

Lizzie Dennis had two sisters and five brothers (one of whom enlisted at the outbreak of World War One) but Molly rarely spoke about her Dennis grandparents, aunts and uncles. Her father's influence seemed more enduring.

In the early twentieth century, conflict between Catholics and Protestants was widespread. 'The kids used to call each other names over the fences [of the schools]. Catholic dogs, go like frogs, jump into the holy water, or something like that.'

Hers was a short walk to Ravenswood State School 'across a creek'. There she played tiggie, pass the handkerchief, and marbles. She was good at marbles and used to 'win 'em all'. As she reached her teens, she saw the transition of Ravenswood from prosperity to hard times. The town 'had been a big place' but after 'the miners' shutdown' most of the population left. Lizzie moved too, south to Mount Morgan. Mother and daughter would spend the rest of their lives there.

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I asked Molly why her mother had settled in Mount Morgan. Molly answered, 'My father was dead...He was killed on a railway trolley [the means of transport used by the workers who mended the line]. We came down to Mount Morgan after that... My stepfather [Will Hancock] was going to work down here.' Lizzie and the kids caught the steamer *Canberra*. 'Will came down in one [vessel] and we came down in the other. She had a hard time...looking after us. The other four kids went to an orphanage [down the range from Mount Morgan near Rockhampton for a time but] she always kept me with her...before she married Will.' Molly added that her

younger sister Florrie ‘cleared out of the orphanage once. She was a beauty [i.e., rebellious], that one.’

Molly didn’t name the year or the orphanage but it was the Meteor Park Orphanage (later renamed Neerkol Orphanage) and the year was 1916.<sup>4</sup>

Molly found the well-resourced Mount Morgan State High School ‘very nice’ although it appears that she left at the end of the year when she turned 14. The Wauchope family who ran one of the town’s many butcheries employed her. She did domestic work in their ‘private house’ and sometimes helped in their butcher shop.

Molly was aware of Aboriginal people who camped along the Dee River that the town straddled – we know them as Gangulu Nation today. She recalled ‘some coloured folk doing some dancing and that, and having songs and that’ – a corroboree – and knew a woman called Mary Ann considered to be the last ‘full-blood [tribal] Aborigine’. Molly recalled that Mary Ann – who on other occasions she’d called the queen of the tribe – was around ‘for years and years...She used to go around. She was just an ordinary person...a loving person...had a big family and she was good to them all.’

As usual when she spoke of Mary Ann, my mind clung to a childish stereotype of a barefoot woman dressed in kangaroo skins outside a bark hut. It was not until a 2022 visit to the Mount Morgan Museum that a photograph of the elderly Mary Ann Lamb put paid to that. The undated photograph on display depicts a woman dressed in a long button-down dress, shoes, a handbag and a rather fancy hat adorned with an artificial flower – attire typical of her peers in the early 1930s. The caption read: A well-known identity...she died in 1947 having lived for many years with close relations in bag humpies at the lower end of Race Course Road.

Did the community accept Aboriginal people? I asked.

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4 For how the remaining four O’Keefe children fared in the orphanage, see Lesley Synge ‘Ruptions and Resilience: A Family Crisis and the Meteor Park Orphanage, 1916’, *Hecate* 44, no. 1&2 (2018): 175–188.

‘Not much...in the early part.’ Molly continued, ‘We had a lot of Chinese people here. In shops and looking after [their vegetable gardens] and taking around vegetables and that [to sell].’ As for other ethnic groups, ‘A lot of new ones came around after the war.’ She was probably referring to the first World War but it seems true for both.

A couple of years into her employment, when the expanding Hancock family had settled in a house in James Street close to the town centre, Mount Morgan was rocked by the arrival of Spanish Influenza. The pandemic had been spreading around the world in the aftermath of World War One and arrived in Australia in 1919. In the first six months the toll for the nation as a whole was about 15,000 people, half of whom were in their twenties and thirties.

Because of the ‘plague’ as Molly called it, ‘We had to look after our neighbours with a bit of soup and that. Put it on a post. We couldn’t get in because it was so bad with this flu. And they died by hundreds too.’

Molly had told me on other occasions that she dreamed of becoming a nurse. Because the Mount Morgan Hospital employed quite a number of ‘domestics’ and wardsmen, she initially applied for the position of domestic worker to increase her chances of selection. She had ‘worked for seven years’ for the Wauchope family...‘After I left [around 1923], I went to the hospital to work.’

Domestic work? I clarified.

‘It’s all I ever did.’

Molly’s duties included looking after the nurses’ quarters and doing the washing. There were no unions or 40-hour weeks. ‘You just had to work,’ whether it was for eight hours, or longer. ‘You started at 6 a.m. and finished when you finished your work.’ She had to answer to Matron Ayland.

By this time, her O’Keefe brothers Frank and George had left Mount Morgan to take up work, Florrie had married young, and Pearl went teaching in Byfield on the Capricorn Coast where she met her future husband.

‘I was always quiet,’ Molly said of herself as she recalled her life before her ignorance about sex and contraception changed its course irrevocably. ‘They reckoned I used to look as if I had all the worry of the world on my shoulders.’

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In November 1924 after the birth that lasted for two days without any pain relief but with insults from the nuns who delivered the child, Molly arrived at the Mount Morgan train station with the baby and walked the short distance to the family home in James Street where Lizzie and Will Hancock lived with three children Myrtle (7), Charles (6) and Doris (4). They refused to accept the mother and child. I remembered Molly saying on one occasion that she’d walked up to the hospital to seek refuge with her fellow workers. She resumed scrubbing the hospital floors as if nothing had happened while her pals kept the newborn quiet and out of sight by feeding her condensed milk out of a tin. They didn’t fool Matron Ayland for long – when Molly collapsed on the job.

‘I had septic poisoning.’

The condition, also known as postpartum or maternal sepsis, develops within six weeks of delivery and is life-threatening. Without urgent medical attention, it can cause death. Molly re-approached her family for help.

Overcoming their shame about the scandal, Lizzie and Will Hancock accepted the pair and Molly moved back home. She did not register the birth, presumably because she balked at the space on the form requiring the details of the father. (She didn’t ever divulge the details and took the mystery of his identity to her grave.) Although Molly recovered, she could not have any more children ‘because of the care not taken, when she [Estelle] was born.’

There was no government assistance. No Commonwealth maternity benefit. ‘Not a penny,’ Molly clarified. Three months passed before she made a full recovery from maternal sepsis and returned to work.

‘The nurses were always good to me. They gave me lots of clothes and I used to cut them up for Estelle.’ While Molly scrubbed and laundered, ‘My mother looked after her. And I used to come home...when I finished my work...I used to give her ten bob a week for looking after her.’ At some point, Lizzie Hancock considered that the ten shillings payment was insufficient so Molly increased the payment to ‘15 bob... She was a bit tough, poor old mother was. But she was a good mother just the same.’

In mid-1925, eight months after the birth, Molly underwent ‘an operation’, a hysterectomy. ‘Mount Morgan always had free medicines. We never had to pay for anything...that operation up in the hospital – I never had to pay for it.’

She took six weeks off then ‘back at work again I went. Well I couldn’t get any money anywhere. I didn’t have money in those days.’ The Hancock family wasn’t able to help out – ‘They were poor.’ Due to Mount Morgan Mine company closures, ‘We lived on social service...or whatever [it was called, while Will Hancock] did a bit of work on the roads to get money...from the government.’

After recovering from surgery, Molly enjoyed good health and kept her job as a domestic worker for Mount Morgan Hospital for seven years. ‘I was never sick...I never went near a doctor.’ Her diligence, strength, endurance and confidence in the domestic sphere remained a lifelong source of pride.

Estelle’s health was a different matter. ‘She used to vomit a lot, my little girl did, poor little thing...she had a weak stomach...Mum took her to the doctor’s because I had to work.’ The Hancocks continued to raise Estelle alongside Myrtle, Charlie and Doris. They were technically her aunts and uncle but must have felt more like older siblings. Myrtle, Doris and Estelle remained close all their lives.

Molly lamented how gossipy Mount Morgan could be, finding small-town disapproval a challenge. ‘They used to give you a terrible time if anything went wrong with you [i.e., a pregnancy out of wedlock]...They talked about you...Gossip...I don’t think I ever had a fight with anybody until I had your mother. And if they said anything about my kid, oh, didn’t I tell them off. Told them what I thought about them, too.’

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Estelle started school in 1929. Some years before the interview night, Molly habitually declared that she married Bert Doherty ‘to give my baby a name’. Clearly she felt angst about her daughter’s lack of a family name, a lack which made her the subject of schoolyard taunting. She avoided voicing this motivation on the interview record but the absence of romantic detail about the courtship with Herbert (Bert) Doherty before she married him in 1931, is telling.

Herbert Doherty (registered at birth as Bertie) was born in Mount Morgan in 1900 to Kate and Robert, the fourth son in what would be a large family of six sons and three daughters. Bert initially followed in his father’s footsteps as a miner employed by Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company Limited. When ‘the mine shut down a bit’ – Molly might have been referring to 1927 when the company went into liquidation, although mining resumed sometime later – he found a new employer in the Mount Morgan Shire Council.

The council labourer and hospital domestic worker became interested in one another in 1929. In October that year, the Wall Street Stock Market crashed, the Roaring Twenties ended, and the Great Depression began. They met at a place ‘where they were playing piano music. And I started going with him later on.’ There wasn’t much time for courting or going to dances – ‘only work, I did.’ Bert Doherty may have said the same of his life.

The Dohertys followed the Methodist faith as did Molly’s stepfather Will Hancock. When Lizzie married him, she stopped identifying as Church of England and ‘went Methodist’. The O’Keefe siblings remained staunchly Roman Catholic but at some point, Molly switched to the Methodist Church – all that she’d generally say to me about the transition was that she’d had a dispute with a priest. I know now that my sisters found her more forthcoming. To them, Molly claimed a priest had ‘talked dirty’ to her, asking if she kissed boys. When she told her mother, Lizzie gave her a thrashing.



Bert's mother 'didn't like the idea of him getting married,' Molly commented, 'because he was her breadwinner...one of the sons that worked hard...and earnt a bit of money.' Nevertheless they married in March 1931, Molly at 29 and Bert at 31. Bert must have known that due to Molly's 'septic poisoning' and consequent hysterectomy that they'd never be able to have children of their own. He had a physical disadvantage too – he suffered from stomach ulcers. They honeymooned in Yeppoon while Estelle stayed with her grandparents Will and Lizzie Hancock. Having spent her life with them and with her playmates Myrtle, Charlie and Doris, my mother might not have been looking forward to the prospect of living with Bert Doherty.

The newlyweds rented a place and Molly left the hospital to keep house, as was the tradition. In 1934, they bought the cottage in Ganter's Gully on the east side of town, towards the Mount Morgan Dam on the Dee River, the very place in which we now sat engaged in the dance of question-and-answer. (The location would have been named after an early prospector who'd camped up that way; it wasn't renamed Ganter *Street* until the 1960s.)

Their home – like most in the town – was on Crown, not freehold land. It was made of wood and fibro, with a lounge and dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and verandas that wrapped around three sides. It came with 'a bit of furniture' Molly said, and 'we gradually bought some other stuff – all the furniture we needed.' An ice chest kept perishables fresh; they later bought a refrigerator.

There was always enough food. 'We always had money. I never went short of money in my life. Not much, but we always had it.'

As Molly spoke about her marriage, my mind easily dredged up a memory of Bert stretched out in his 'squatter's chair' on the front veranda, looking skinny and unwell, although I must have been barely five at the time. I also remembered a specific occasion when he came home after a day's work of road maintenance and edged the council 'grader' off the dirt road to straddle the top of their sloping driveway. His Chevrolet was parked further down under the dual shelter of a tin shed under a mango tree. I asked why there was a canvas bag slung on the front of the grader and

was told it held his drinking water for the day. It was always impressed on me that I must not disturb him in any way.

From the beginning of their relationship, he had suffered from stomach ulcers and these were clearly worsening. (Molly usually described the situation as ‘my old man was always terrible sick.’) In 1959 Bert Doherty died at the age of 58 and is buried in Mount Morgan cemetery where his parents and several other family members are also interred including his older brother William who’d served in the Light Horse Regiment of the AIF in World War One. Private William Doherty was wounded in Gallipoli and Egypt but survived his injuries and predeceased Bert by a year. Like her son-in-law, Lizzie Hancock also died in 1959.

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There was a marked contrast between Molly and Bert’s Ganter’s Gully working-class household and the continuing household consumerism that has become the norm. Furniture was built to last a lifetime. Most of the purchases they made in 1934 when setting up a home are – from my point of view – still useful, and even beautiful. When visiting my grandmother’s home regularly through childhood and beyond, I could not fail to notice that nothing much changed from year to year or decade to decade, and that this seemed true, not only for Molly’s house, but for all the Mount Morgan houses of her generation. The Hancock house in James Street where Molly’s half-sister Doris Hancock continued to live – she worked as the secretary to the manager of Mount Morgan Mine – was stuffed with items that were originally purchased when the Hancocks set up a home. After their initial outlays, families didn’t bother with ‘make overs’ or with following fashion trends. ‘Waste not, want not’ was the motto. New inventions like washing machines and television sets were added to the original purchases but only after a great deal of ‘saving up’. A somewhat stultifying stability perhaps but case studies in sustainability.

In her eighties when Molly faced her decline, she encouraged each of us three granddaughters to stake a claim on our favourite pieces. It was accepted that I would inherit the ‘good bedroom’ set in Queensland maple manufactured by James Stewart & Co in Rockhampton: double bed, wardrobe, duchess and bedside cabinet. I still



Figure 1 1930s Queensland maple duchess. Photograph by Lesley Synge

have half the set, minus the wardrobe which was too narrow to be practical and the bed. I have also ended up with the Art Deco Genoa lounge on which we sat in 1982, talking into the night. My youngest sister initially bagged the three-piece set which included two single armchairs, each roughly the size of an electric car. When she replaced it, something made me beg her to send it on to me. I had it re-upholstered but its springs are definitely the worse for wear at it approaches its ninth decade of service. Still, nothing beats it for lolling around on it with a book.

I'm also grateful to Doris Hancock who noticed when I was a teenager that I liked a child's rocking chair hanging on a rafter under the James Street house. As she had no children of her own, she gave it to me, telling me that her father had made it for her. Will Hancock, who died the same year I was born, therefore bequeathed me an item that has served both my sons and their teddy bears, and my granddaughter. At time of writing, it looks set to serve my first grandson. It occurs to me as I write about it that my mother, who was four years younger than Doris, must have rocked in it too.

I also claimed the red cedar storage chest that Bert Doherty made, since bequeathed to my older son who stores books in it; it's a fixture in my granddaughter's life.

No-one else in the family goes to the trouble of recovering, restoring and nurturing the pieces like I do, but nonetheless each of us values the items that once meant a lot to our ancestors. Perhaps the gap in my life made by the loss of my parents in my early twenties has made the preservation of these tangible links with my ancestors especially vital for me, as the oldest.

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Bert Doherty's working life was demanding, as was typical of the times. Molly 'got up...about five o'clock to get him off to work. Mostly he got himself off...he used to come home about three in the afternoon.' While he laboured on maintaining the town's dirt roads – later using machinery to do so – Molly 'cleaned up the house and tidied it up.' She had milk and bread delivered, a service that endured into the late 1960s. The main evening meal was 'always meat and vegetables. And a pudding.' Several times a week Molly baked cakes and scones in her wood stove oven. In the evenings she listened to the wireless, did fancywork and 'a lot of sewing'. She made most of the clothes. 'Always kept plenty of clothes. Didn't cost much in those days.'

Estelle played with 'the kiddies around the neighbourhood'.

In his spare time, Bert 'worked around the house, he tidied up...the yard...[kept busy] building things and getting things into shape. He was a good worker, Bert was.'

Their main family entertainment was to visit their families of origin and other relatives. Molly – and I presume Estelle – went to the Methodist Church every Sunday to join her parents and Myrtle, Charlie and Doris. 'I was in the Methodist Maids... doing fancywork for the bazaars.' She was also in the choir. Molly had a fine soprano voice and I could imagine it lifting above the other voices.

As she answered my questions, I realised with some surprise how very central the Methodist Church had been in her life before the Second World War. Sunday church services, the Methodist Maids sewing circle *and* choir practice!

In 1940, according to the *Morning Bulletin* newspaper printed in Rockhampton, my mother was dux of Mount Morgan High School – but I did not know that in 1982. I knew only that she left at 16 to attend teacher's training college in Brisbane in 1941 and returned to find that Molly had converted to the Jehovah's Witness sect. (Estelle stuck with the Methodists.) At the time of the interview and into her eighties, Molly was a stalwart of the sect, ranked as a Christian faith but far from the mainstream. Her soprano voice intact, she attended two or three 'Witness' gatherings weekly until hospitalised. She would notch up some five decades of intense spiritual practice! In

adopting such a spiritually oriented life, was she still proving to neighbourhood gossips that she had atoned for the sins they judged her as having committed?

Returning to the economics of the household, I asked if Bert handed his whole wage over to her.

‘Whole wage. He did.’ She was emphatically in charge of the household budget. ‘If Bert wanted anything, he always got it. But I always looked after the money.’

‘He was always sick, poor old fellow. For years he was sick with a...gastric ulcer.’ He died because of this ailment. ‘People didn’t go to the doctors so much those days. They used to look after them at home...They’d give them a bit of Scott’s Emulsion.’ Its active ingredient was cod liver oil.

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Her mother and stepfather were Labor voters. But on the night of the interview, Molly didn’t recall discussing politics with anybody. She claimed, ‘As long as we [her generation of women] were looking after our husbands and children, that’s all we wanted to have to do...That’s all we thought about.’

I pointed out that the strikes and mine closures that affected Mount Morgan in the late 1920s must have created a political atmosphere but Molly’s uninterested rejoinder was that there were a lot of ‘red-raggers [Communist Party of Australia members identified by their scarlet banners] around at the time, fighting’. I knew that being a Jehovah’s Witness required a dedication to ‘the scriptures’ and an apolitical orientation. Much to my modern disappointment, I had to accept that my grandmother’s focus always had been the domestic sphere and that she craved no other.

Conscious of the framed coronation portrait of Queen Elizabeth II that leaned out from the tongue-and-groove hallway wall above us, I asked Molly if the British royal family interested her. The royal child Elizabeth, who became Queen in 1953, was born in 1926, nearly two years after Estelle.

‘I...didn’t bother with the Royals. As long as they left me alone...they were all right.’

Had the abdication of King Edward VIII in 1936 bothered her?

‘It didn’t seem to worry us.’ In the late 1930s, the global political climate was of more concern. ‘It looked like [there was] going to be another war. Things were in a bit of turmoil...[And in the end, the] second world war was worse than the first one.’ Enlistment records show that Bert’s younger brother Thomas James signed up, as his older brother William had for World War One.

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‘I wouldn’t have changed [my life] for anything,’ Molly claimed as we wrapped up. ‘It was hard trying to keep your mother and...give her the best of everything. But Bert always...gave me the money and I was able to do anything [I needed to].’ With these rose-coloured glasses, she continued, ‘He was always...good to her [Estelle]. We had our ups and down, but still, he was good to her. Never denied her anything.’

It had been *much* harder for her mother Lizzie, Molly believed. ‘I don’t reckon I’ve had a hard time,’ Molly reiterated with a sense of contentment. On that upbeat note we ended our session.

I packed up my equipment, humbled by her youthful audacity. In her own understated and plain way, Molly had stared down her family, the Roman Catholic Church and the disgrace the town itself had foisted on her, to take charge of her life – and she had never regretted it.

There were several times over the course of the evening when her voice had risen with passion. On a recent re-listening to the interview, I was struck by the tigress in my grandmother when she said vehemently:

I can honestly say I don’t think I ever had a fight with anybody until I had your mother. And if they said anything about my kid, oh, didn’t I tell them off. Told them what I thought about them, too.

What was then called 'gossip' we might call bullying and discrimination – and we also understand the damage it can do to a young person's psyche, for life. Through it all, Estelle could never have doubted her mother's courage, determination and love.

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My immediate priority soon after recording my grandmother's oral history in 1982, was to provide for my little son. Just as Molly had faced sole parenting of her daughter in 1924, I too was caring for a child solo, having returned to Australia after a couple of years with his father in London where the marriage broke down. I longed to continue with writing projects but circumstances demanded that I accept a high school teaching job. A few months after my visit to Mount Morgan I was teaching history and English subjects to teenagers in Brisbane.

In the years that followed, Molly loved nothing more than to visit me for weeks at a time and to pass the days making my place as spick and span as hers had always been. 'Domestic work – it's all I ever did.' We tend to think our relations will live forever but she died eight years after the interview, three days shy of her 88th birthday in 1990. Molly had lived continuously in 10 Ganter's Gully from 1934 until the late 1980s when she was admitted into Mount Morgan Hospital, the former workplace that witnessed her most challenging years.

# Reports



# The Latest Oral History Challenge: The Ever-Expanding Technology Toolbox

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JUDY HUGHES

*Judy Hughes is a PhD candidate at La Trobe University who is currently researching the 1980 Australian national journalists strike and related issues of identity and activism. A journalist and communications professional by background, Judy is an experienced oral historian and current web manager of the Oral History Australia website.*

In the film *Mary Poppins*, the prim but fun nanny charmed the children under her care with her magical carpet bag. This object of wonder contained a seemingly endless supply of useful objects – a hat stand, two mirrors, a lamp and a tape measure – although how one bag could contain all this was a complete mystery. Luckily, Mary Poppins had it all under control.

Since 2020–21, the worst years of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the technology toolkit available to oral historians has evolved into something like the magical Poppins' carpet bag with seemingly endless useful options and gadgets. Keeping abreast of changes in recording equipment, online interview platforms and AI-generated transcription services has become the new challenge for oral historians, such has been the rapid rate of technological innovation in a few short years.

New technology has provided opportunities to record interviews in high quality within an expanded range of circumstances, but there are concerns about the complexity of options available and the new skills required as well as unforeseen risks such as the potential impact of remote interviewing on the interviewer–interviewee relationship. In this report, I provide an overview of the technological changes currently transforming oral history practice and some of the opportunities available. This work has been informed by my own personal experiences as a professional historian and postgraduate student.

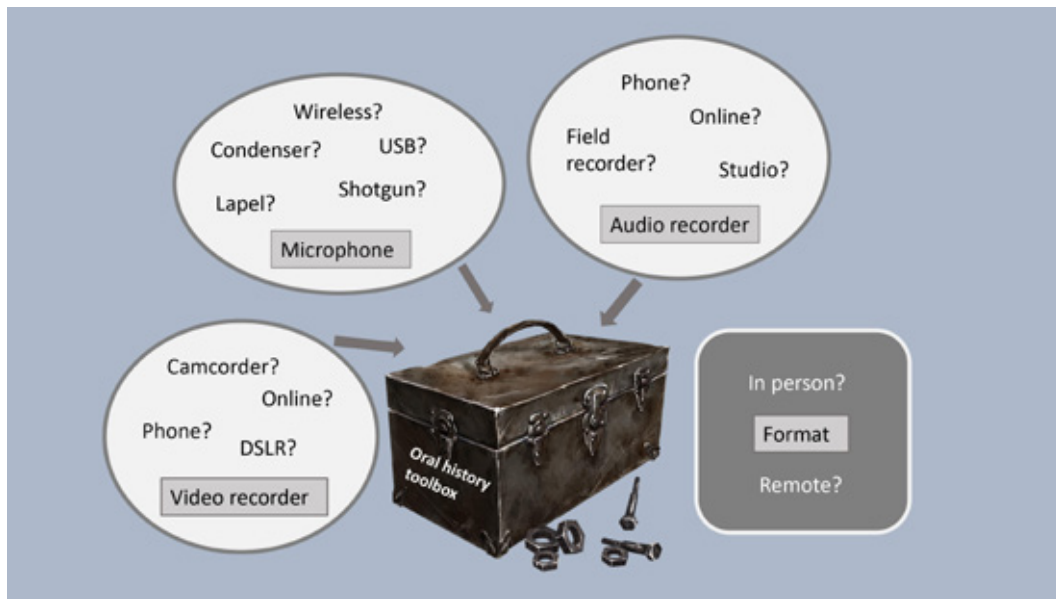


Figure 1 The oral historian's toolbox. Graphic by Judy Hughes.

## THE COVID YEARS

Pre-COVID, a standard oral history interview generally involved an in-person exchange with two microphones and a field recorder. A particularly well-resourced project team or tech-savvy individual interviewer might contemplate a video interview, but for many practitioners, conducting an audio-only interview remained the preferred course. Phone interviews were pretty much a no-no due to poor audio quality, a technique of last resort.

Then everything changed.

The extraordinary circumstances of the global pandemic with heightened fear of infection, escalating deaths (particularly among the elderly and immunocompromised) combined with frequent lockdowns, forced many oral history practitioners to put their interviews on hold. In Melbourne, Australia, where I live, the repeated and lengthy lockdowns – a total of 262 days from March 2020 to October 2021 – were particularly burdensome.<sup>1</sup> As it became evident that the pandemic would not be over in a matter of weeks, oral history professional bodies and collecting institutions

1 Ian Macreadie, 'Reflections from Melbourne, the World's Most Locked-down City, through the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond', *Microbiology Australia* 43, no. 1 (28 April 2022): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1071/MA22002>.

initially urged caution and then reluctantly started facing the prospect of a turn to remote interviewing.

The Oral History Society in the United Kingdom, like other oral history professional bodies, posted a guide to remote interviewing to its website, which at February 2021 was up to version 7. At that time the focus was still on postponement, if possible, but the guide presented considerable information about the efficacy of emerging technologies including online interview recording platforms such as Zencast, Squadcast and Cleanfeed.<sup>2</sup>

In Australia, the 2020 issue of this journal, *Studies in Oral History*, documented the experiences of oral history practitioners during the pandemic. Oral History Australia (OHA) president Alistair Thomson said he, like other oral historians, had put planned oral history interviews on hold for safety reasons. Other oral historians, however, for a range of reasons had continued to conduct interviews using remote recording techniques, weighing up issues of urgency, recording quality and the rapport between interviewee and interviewer.<sup>3</sup>

### THE RISE AND RISE OF ZOOM

The pandemic years certainly played a role in driving technological change. The online meeting platform Zoom, little known before COVID, exploded in popularity not just for working from home arrangements, but for exercise classes, workshops and even informal catch-ups with family and friends.<sup>4</sup> The use of Zoom became so commonplace that many oral historians turned to it for interviews, reasoning that it imposed little technical burden on interviewees.

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2 'Covid-19 Remote Recording – Oral History Society', 2 October 2020, <https://www.ohs.org.uk/covid-19-remote-recording/>. Accessed 9 August 2023.

3 'COVID Reports', *Studies in Oral History*, no. 42 (2020): 163–195, <https://oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/journal/issue-no-42-2020/>.

4 Melody Brue, 'Zoom Gears Up For Post-Pandemic Growth As Competition Heats Up', *Forbes*, 3 March 2023. Available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/moorinsights/2023/03/03/zoom-gears-up-for-post-pandemic-growth-as-competition-heats-up>. Accessed 9 August 2023.

Easy to use and widely understood, Zoom is very useful for pre-interviews. It is not necessarily, however, the best choice for recording oral history because it compresses the audio as a default and does not provide for uncompressed WAV recording. Oral historians interested in remote interviewing would do well to explore options beyond Zoom. It is also worth pointing out with regards to any remote interviewing that the recording is only as good as the microphone and camera being used. Many inbuilt webcams and microphones are poor quality. It is better to use a USB microphone connected to the computer and a webcam if video is being recorded.

Due to the rise in popularity of podcasting there are now a range of online recording platforms available offering high-quality audio capture and audio production features. Some offer free plans such as Cleanfeed (no video interface) and Zencast (MP3 recording only) but a subscription is often needed to get all the features required. These platforms are evolving quickly. During the COVID years, Zencast initially offered audio recording only, but it quickly developed a video interface so the interviewer and interviewee could see each other. Video recording is also now available.

The company Hindenburg Systems, which initially offered a recording and audio editing program specifically designed for voice, has now further developed its product to include AI-generated transcript and even audio editing via transcript. This is a great option for oral historians, but the service is subscription-based and pricey so may be better suited for larger projects or short timeframes.

### **STATE OF PLAY**

In 2023 Oral History Australia (OHA) conducted a technology survey to better understand the technology-related needs of members and how oral history practice had been impacted by the pandemic. As expected, survey results showed a drop in oral history practice during the main pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. Less than half (45.8 per cent) of respondents had conducted oral history interviews during the pandemic years. Two-thirds (66.7 per cent) had conducted interviews in 2022–23 and slightly more, 70.8 per cent, had conducted interviews before the pandemic.

The survey showed that while oral historians were prepared to use remote interviewing their overwhelming preference was still for in-person interviewing.

## RECORDING EQUIPMENT

For those conducting in-person interviews the range of recording equipment available has also changed substantially. The technology survey showed field recorders such as the popular Zoom H5 and Zoom H4N remained preferred, but some respondents had also used dictaphones, mobile phones and tablets and wireless recording systems such as the Rode GO. Even phone recording is now emerging as a viable option for oral historians who need high-quality audio. This includes both recording a phone interview and recording an in-person interview using a mobile phone or tablet.

The Australian-based Rode company has developed a range of products aimed at delivering high-quality audio and video recording. In addition to dedicated recording apps and microphones for mobile devices, Rode also offers the convenient AI-Micro, a tiny device, just 4cm square, which combines with two lapel microphones and a mobile phone or tablet to produce high-quality WAV audio recordings.

A device, designed primarily for podcasters, but with potential application in oral history is the Zoom Podtrak P4. Released in August 2020, this field recorder contains four XLR inputs and specifically provides for recording high-quality phone interviews. This particular device has been reviewed favourably by United States-based oral history technology guru Doug Boyd on his Digital Omnium blog.<sup>5</sup>

## TRANSCRIPTION

Oral historians have longed for an alternative to expensive transcription and thanks to Artificial Intelligence (AI), a solution is closer than ever. Automatically generated transcript has been improving in recent years and is substantially cheaper than human transcription. Services such as Rev, Otter.ai and Temi offer affordable automated transcription in a user-friendly online interface where the transcript can also

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5 Douglas A. Boyd, 'Zoom Podtrak P4 and phone interviews', *Digital Omnium* (blog), 21 May 2023, <https://digitalomnium.com/zoom-podtrak-p4-and-phone-interviews/>.

be edited. These services offer a high degree of accuracy but are still not as accurate as transcription by a real person.

The latest offering is Whisper.ai produced by OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT. Whisper is free and provides for amazingly accurate voice transcription, in different languages, conducted locally on the user's computer rather than online, but has some drawbacks. It is open-source software and the steps to installing it on a personal computer are not straightforward. It also does not automatically provide speaker names, which need to be added manually later. For those without a suitable IT friend or relative the best option currently is to use an application that provides an interface to Whisper. Such apps will most likely have some cost.

## **CONCLUSION**

Like the Poppins' carpet bag, the oral historian's technology toolkit is magical, mysterious and constantly changing. While navigating the many options requires a learning curve, the potential rewards are substantial. Oral historians now have the opportunity to conduct interviews remotely without sacrificing audio quality. Their recording kit could fit into a small handbag if necessary and they have access to highly accurate transcription at low cost. While it is clear there is still a strong preference among oral historians for in-person interviews, technology is delivering choice and flexibility. This can only benefit interviewees and oral history practice.

# Deindustrialization and the Politics of Our Time

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ELIOT PERRIN

*Eliot Perrin is a History PhD candidate at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. His research focuses on the impacts of urban renewal projects and deindustrialization on a historically Francophone neighbourhood in a Northern Ontario mining town. He is also the archives coordinator at Concordia's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling.*

Since 2021, I have had the privilege of being a student affiliate of Deindustrialization and the Politics of Our Time (DePOT). This seven-year (2021–27) Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada–funded partnership project aims to address the ongoing political and economic legacy of deindustrialization. From the 1970s to the present, millions of jobs have been lost in industrial ‘heartland’ regions throughout Europe and North America, as well-paying unionised jobs were traded for economic precarity and wage stagnation. Following years of neoliberal policies, traditional political parties have been abandoned by many voters as evidenced by the rise of Donald Trump, the popularity of Brexit, the continued support for Marie Le Pen’s Rassemblement National, and the election of Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy. Attempting to understand how deindustrialization factors into these present circumstances provided the impetus for this project.

Earlier studies of deindustrialization sought to understand this process from within local, regional or national parameters.<sup>1</sup> Building upon these important works, the DePOT project seeks to bridge the international and the local by making transnational comparisons across North America, Western Europe and beyond. With that in mind, DePOT is grounded in 33 partner organisations and 24 collaborators found primarily in six nations: Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France,

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1 See Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt 1969–1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

Italy and Germany. Joining these partner institutions are a range of affiliated trade unions, museums, publishers and Indigenous organisations, as well as a number of students, faculty members and independent researchers based in Europe, South America and China. In bringing together these many affiliates, DePOT has built an international community of researchers for collaborative work.

Six thematic initiatives frame DePOT: the politics of industrial closure; gender, family and deindustrialization; race and the populist politics of deindustrialization; the politics of industrial heritage; deindustrialization and the environment; and working-class expression. These initiatives are guided by a group of affiliates who map out the research outcomes, including the publication of an edited volume on the subject. Highlighting the early success of DePOT's collaborative approach, the first volume – the *Politics of Industrial Closure*, due 2024 – is mostly comprised of co-authored, transnational chapters. Each initiative will also be the subject of an international conference that includes project outcomes as well as presentations from outside researchers. Conference sites reflect the contrasting areas in which deindustrialization occurs, from both historically major industrial hubs like Germany's Ruhr Valley and Glasgow, to a more hinterland location such as Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Oral history is central to the research being undertaken for this project. Studies of deindustrialization often speak with those left behind in communities following the closure of a local industry.<sup>2</sup> As Jackie Clarke argues, local and national narratives of deindustrialization work towards rendering both the industrial past, and the remaining industrial present, invisible, seemingly indicating the arrival of a post-industrial society.<sup>3</sup> Oral history helps to remind us of the ongoing existence of a working-class community. These testimonies help uncover the hurt, pain, and suffering that impacts multiple generations of residents who have suffered following

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2 For examples see Kathryn Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Steven High, *One Job Town: Work, Belonging and Betrayal in Northern Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002); Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

3 Jackie Clarke, 'Closing Moulinex: Thoughts on the Visibility and Invisibility of Industrial Labour in Contemporary France', *Modern & Contemporary France* 19, no. 4 (November 2011): 443–458.



factory and plant closure. But there are also stories of resiliency, defiance and community solidarity in facing down some of the worst consequences of the economic collapse of their region.

In addition to the work currently underway, the project is also calling attention to already compiled oral history archival holdings. These collections highlight the prominence of oral history practice in the field throughout the past few decades.<sup>4</sup> The publication of this information is intended to help identify existing collections for both project affiliates and other researchers. In addition, the project is creating a SharePoint-housed ‘research commons’ by which oral history transcripts can be shared between affiliates. Following the project’s completion, newly compiled oral history collections will be housed at relevant institutions for consultation by future researchers.

Oral history also helps us to broaden our understanding of the field. At the outset deindustrialization studies frequently forefronted male factory/mine/mill workers. Works on traditionally female-gendered manufacturing spaces have since grown, although with much more work to be done.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the field must more thoroughly engage with how race and settler colonialism both shapes, and are shaped by, deindustrialization and state/corporate responses to it.<sup>6</sup> The breadth of this project is exciting as it seeks to further integrate industries, communities and processes not always associated with deindustrialization studies, while making transnational connections amongst them. Colleagues studying fisheries, queer community

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4 The project has published two reports that are listings of available oral history repositories in the United States and the United Kingdom: <https://deindustrialization.org/research/publications/>.

5 See examples of works done by DePOT affiliates: Fred Burrill, ‘Deindustrialization, Gender, and Working-Class Militancy in Saint-Henri, Montreal’, *Labour/Le travail* 19 (Spring 2023): 89–114; Andy Clark, *Fighting Deindustrialisation: Scottish Women’s Factory Occupations, 1981–1982* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022); Lauren Laframboise, ‘“La Grève de la fierté”: Resisting Deindustrialization in Montréal’s Garment Industry, 1977–1983’, *Labour/Le travail* 19 (Spring 2023): 57–88; Rory Stride, ‘Women, Work and Deindustrialisation: The Case of James Templeton & Company, Glasgow, c.1960–1981’, *Scottish Labour History* 54 (2019): 154–180.

6 Important publications include Steven High, *Deindustrializing Montreal: Entangled Histories of Race, Residence, and Class* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022); Lianne C. Leddy, *Serpent River Resurgence: Confronting Uranium Mining at Elliot Lake* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

members, female garment workers, nuclear dismantlement and department store closures are all examples by which the field is benefiting from an expanded focus, including ideas, theories and methodologies from other disciplines. Projects also interrogate gentrification, the adaptive reuse of industrial structures, local heritage regimes, and municipal fascination with cultural economies as responses to deindustrialization, and what impact they have on existing communities. These few examples demonstrate the growing depth of the field, as we gain a fuller picture by which to understand deindustrialization as an ongoing process.

Mirroring many of the faculty investigators, students frequently hail from cities and areas facing deindustrialization and have stories of their own familial experiences with this process. Throughout the project, we are given spaces through which to collaborate both with project investigators and amongst ourselves as well. Despite the challenge of being located throughout many nations, we have strived to remain connected over the course of the project. Monthly Zoom student caucus meetings have helped to foster a sense of camaraderie that is bolstered by our annual meeting. Immediately preceding the project's yearly conference, students hold their own summer institute by which to showcase their own research and workshop ideas. The result of our ongoing communications and discussions are scholarly collaborations that will be published alongside faculty affiliates in our upcoming volumes. It has been an increasingly rewarding experience to be working alongside colleagues such as these.

For those of you who are working on studies of deindustrialization – professor, student or community member – we highly encourage you to contact us. As noted earlier, while we are 'grounded' in the aforementioned six nations, we have affiliates from a number of other countries and are always looking to add scholars from other areas. In addition to our annual conference, the project has workshops, roundtables and presentations throughout the year that would be of interest to scholars. Please have a look at our website ([www.deindustrialization.org](http://www.deindustrialization.org)) and reach out to us at [deindustrialization@concordia.ca](mailto:deindustrialization@concordia.ca).

# The 100 Project – A Celebration of Australian Centenarians

JOHN WINTER

*John Winter is an Australian filmmaker who has produced and directed Australian films for over four decades. His latest endeavour is The 100 Project, a series of documentary short films each comprising a video interview of an Australian aged 100 years or older.*

The 100 Project is partly crowdsourced; we encourage families, carers and friends of 100-year-olds to follow our online tutorials to use their smartphones to interview centenarians. We then professionally edit the video for free, integrating the video interview with family photos and archival video, audio and photographs. The short films are screened on The 100 Project website ([www.the100project.com](http://www.the100project.com)), YouTube Channel and Facebook page.



**Figure 1** The 100 Project banner featuring the first four centenarians on the website: William 'Bill' Bartolo, Stefan Kulesza, Molly Cummings and Julia Kenny. Photos by David Bartolo, Joanne Donahoe-Beckwith, John Winter and Ros Walker. Graphic by John Winter.

## THE JOURNEY

In 1998 I sought funding for a documentary series about centenarians for the new millennium. I wanted to give voice to, and hear the perspective of, the people who had lived through the entire twentieth century. It was going to be a relatively expensive production requiring broadcaster funding as professional camera and sound recording equipment would be needed, and the crew would have to travel around

Australia to film the centenarians. A broadcaster was also required to screen the series. However, with no funding forthcoming, the idea was parked.

In 2019, still keen on capturing the stories of Australia's oldest citizens, I teamed up with friend and documentary film producer, Roslyn Walker. Having failed previously to finance the project, we decided to explore something different from the standard film industry production model. Extraordinary recent technological developments in smartphone videography and post-production paved the way for us to pursue a new approach to creating the series.

### **CROWDSOURCING ORAL HISTORY**

Our core concept was simple: reach out to people throughout Australia who have connections with centenarians, help them record video interviews of Australian 100+-year-olds to capture their diverse stories and upload the files to us. We then professionally edit the material to create a quality, lasting record for audiences in Australia and around the world.

### **PRODUCTION**

In the years since 1998, digital technology has revolutionised cameras and the internet has democratised film production. Smartphones recording 4K video are now readily available and they produce surprisingly good quality images and audio which are acceptable to most audiences, if not to broadcast engineers!

By making it possible for the community (families, friends, carers, oral historians and so on) who know a centenarian, to interview and video them now, instead of us travelling to each centenarian, we can outsource, or more correctly, crowdsource, the filming so that anyone, anywhere in Australia can get involved. However, editing the video and turning the rushes into a short documentary requires professional skills, and this work is done by The 100 Project.

The 100 Project website ([www.the100project.com](http://www.the100project.com)) is the portal for centenarians and their interviewers to learn how to make their video, register and complete essential

documentation, and the place to upload content to our cloud so that we can edit the material.

Our mantra is: ‘You film an interview of a 100-year-old and we’ll edit it for free’.

Capturing reasonable video and audio from a smartphone is relatively simple but not necessarily obvious, so we created video tutorials and guidelines to help our crowd contributors achieve the best results possible. There are also interviewing tips and, because the films are significantly enhanced by including photos, we also give suggestions about how to best scan or photograph old family photos. As the source video and audio are unlikely to be of a professional standard, the film editors will then need to ply their trade to make the most out of the provided materials. Interviewing the very old has its particular challenges: including English language captions on all the films is one of the many tricks used to make the final films as good as possible for our online audience.

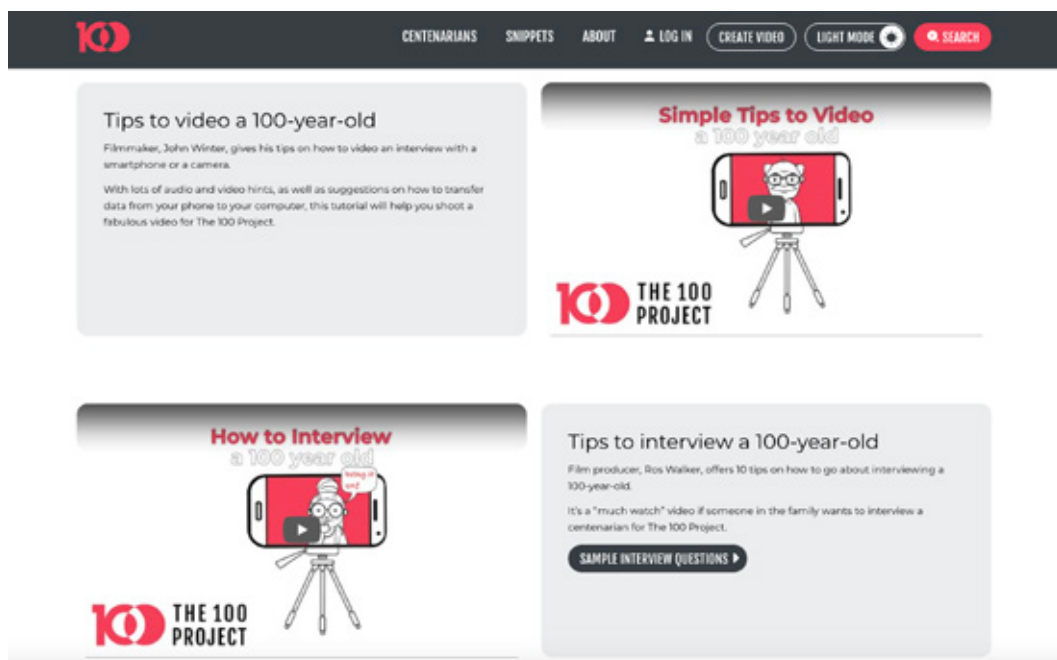


Figure 2 Screenshot of The 100 Project website featuring tutorial videos. Graphics by John Winter. Website design by Jala Design.

Early feedback such as, ‘But I don’t know what questions to ask’, has led us to spend considerable time developing a list of sample questions for interviewers. We continue to review the question list and have even used artificial intelligence (AI) as

a tool to improve our questions. Our aim is to grow the crowdsourced component of our videos but we always have the option to film the centenarians ourselves.

## **POST-PRODUCTION**

Post-production (audio, video, special effects, titles, music) is a skilled craft that generally takes years of experience to master, so editing the videos is done by The 100 Project professionals. Thankfully, democratisation has also hugely impacted post-production. Expensive post-production suites and facilities to edit, audio mix, title and finish a film are no longer essential for this kind of project. Software such as Premiere Pro and a Mac or PC meet our needs for a fraction of the cost. Furthermore, dramatic improvements in data upload and download speeds and cloud storage have enabled us to handle the amount of 4K video and hi-res photographs required to edit, archive and screen high-quality videos.

## **PATHWAYS TO AN AUDIENCE**

The ways audiences watch films have changed: the internet and social media channels have eliminated our dependence on broadcasters, thereby 'solving' our screening issue. Our website, [the100project.com](http://the100project.com), is the heart of the project. We created a DIY 'proof of concept' website and it soon became apparent that we needed a very skilled, creative web development team to build the multifunctional website we needed whilst keeping the interface simple, welcoming and stylish.

It took almost two years to achieve what we wanted. The resulting website allows our audience to search for and view content. Each centenarian has a personal profile with biographical details and family photos accompanying their video. In addition, the website features short-form 'snippets' which are video compilations featuring multiple centenarians offering insights on historical events or social topics. The website is supported by our YouTube channel and Facebook page. We are 'screen agnostic' with the potential to later add new paths to different audiences such as a museum installation, library exhibition, TV series, school and tertiary curriculum or academic study.

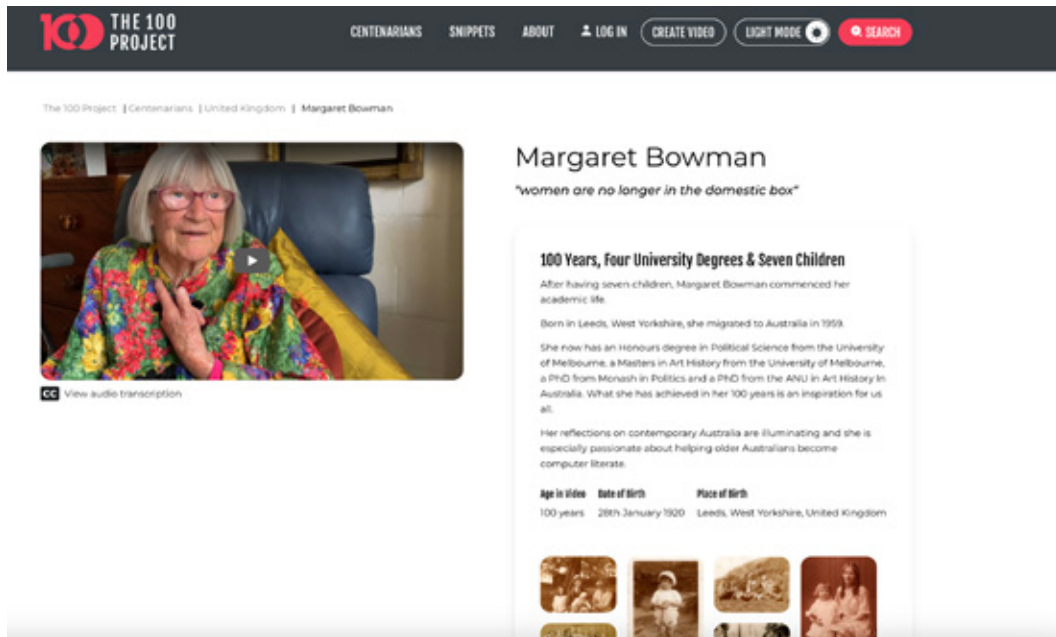


Figure 3 Screenshot of The 100 Project website featuring Margaret Bowman's Centenarian Profile. Photo of Margaret Bowman by Ros Walker. Other photos courtesy of Margaret Bowman's family. Website design by Jala Design.

To grow our audience, our focus has been on building communities – especially within the aged care, education, diversity and oral history sectors. We have put a lot of emphasis on website and social media SEO analytics to maximise our audience. As the project matures, we hope that future funding will allow us to engage publicists to significantly extend our audience reach.

### OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

From a filmmaking perspective, with its crowdsourced content and online screening, The 100 Project cannot be easily 'pigeon-holed'. That resulted in early barriers to funding support. There was a perception that the internet is for the young and that a web series with social media outreach about old people would not work, and there was concern that we would fail to find and video more than a small handful of centenarians. When embarking on our journey, Ros and I soon realised that we needed to build the project ourselves and that meant largely self-financing it. Rather than talking about our vision, we had to show it and that's where we are now.

## THE 100 PROJECT ONE YEAR ON

As the videos do not have an ‘expiry date’, content builds over time: the more centenarians, the more videos, the more interesting and valuable the project. With 18 centenarian stories published in our first year, we are starting to reflect today’s diverse Australia. Given the current life expectancy of First Nations Australians, we are fortunate to have interviewed and created four videos of Uncle Wes Marne, a Bigambul man, Aboriginal elder, storyteller and poet.

To date, The 100 Project has stories from centenarians who have migrated from Greece, Poland, Netherlands, China and the UK. In 1923, the population of Australia was under 5.7 million so it is not surprising that many of our current 100+-year-olds were immigrants to Australia. Interviewing non-English-speaking centenarians presents special challenges, especially given our funding constraints.

The Australian-born 100+-year-olds hail from both the cities and the ‘bush’, recalling a simple childhood without electricity, telephones or cars, and often defined by Depression-era and wartime experiences. Whilst each centenarian offers a first-hand journey back in time, with some even offering stories from their grandparents, they are living in modern Australia and we have been mindful of this in telling their stories. Given their 100 years of life and experience, their thoughts and insights on the present and the future of Australia and the world are equally relevant:

‘I like the idea of us belonging to the land, belonging to the universe, not owning it for God’s sake.’ (Guy Warren, artist)

‘The one thing that older people need nowadays is that, before you retire from work...you should be given the opportunity of actually becoming computer literate because if you’re not computer literate, you’re f\*\*\*\*d.’ (Margaret Bowman, academic)

‘Without an education, I believe that we’re nothing. And you can be whatever you want...I have never seen an Aboriginal kid who didn’t have the ability to do something.’ (Uncle Wes Marne, Aboriginal Elder and educator)



### **WHERE TO FROM HERE?**

Building communities remains our guiding principle. We are as committed as ever to the importance of The 100 Project, the value of capturing oral history in this way and the power of technology to share the stories of 100+-year-olds with the widest possible audience.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Roslyn Walker – Co-Founder, The 100 Project

Bronwyn Elliott – Contributor to this report

Jala Design – Website design and development

### **THANK YOU**

Inner West Council – Community History and Heritage grant

The centenarians and their interviewers, videographers and translators who continue to provide material for The 100 Project.

# The South Australian Frontier and Its Legacies Project: Some Unanticipated Difficulties

SKYE KRICHAUFF

*Skye Krichauff is an ethnohistorian who combines the methodologies of history, anthropology and oral history. She is interested in colonial cross-cultural relations, the relationship between history and memory, and how societies live with historical injustices (in particular how Australians live with the enduring legacies of colonialism).*

I am currently working as project manager and research associate for ARC Linkage Project ‘The South Australian Frontier and its Legacies’. The project stemmed from the release in 2017 of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, in which the authors of the statement ask for a First Nations Voice to be enshrined in the constitution, and a Makarrata Commission ‘to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history’.<sup>1</sup> Based at the University of Adelaide (UoA), the project’s partners include the State Library of South Australia (SLSA), State Records of South Australia (SRSA), the History Trust of South Australia (HTSA), the South Australian Museum (SAM), and Reconciliation SA. The project’s outcome is a website that hosts a digital story map, and this will be publicly launched later this year.

All on the project team strongly support the need for truth-telling; we are compiling a comprehensive register of violent interactions between Aboriginal people and colonists that were a direct result of European occupation of Aboriginal land.<sup>2</sup> From the earliest stages of the project, the project team has been guided by the advice of the project’s Aboriginal team members, Aboriginal Reference Group and South

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1 Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017). Available at <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/>. Accessed 23 August 2023.

2 Other chief investigators are Amanda Nettelbeck and John Carty. I use ‘Aboriginal people’ rather than ‘First Nations’ in accordance with the preferences of the Aboriginal participants of this project.

Australia's Aboriginal Heritage Committee (a body made up of Aboriginal representatives that operates through the South Australian Government's Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation) regarding best practice in contacting, engaging with and working with Aboriginal communities and individuals.

There are two components to the research, namely, an extensive examination of archival material (which Rob Foster and I have undertaken) and the collection of oral histories. It is important to the project team that, in addition to publishing our findings, we enable relevant sources to be made available to the wider public. The topic of colonial violence is confronting for many and has, in the past (i.e., during the so-called 'history wars' of the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries), been politicised. By making our sources accessible, the public can see for themselves the evidence we are basing our findings on, and evaluate our summaries accordingly. As such, project partners SLSA and SRSA are scanning any historical documents that Rob and I identify as relevant. Digital copies of these documents will be accessible for viewing through the website. Similarly, with regard to the oral histories, website viewers will be able to hear excerpts of interviews conducted with Aboriginal people and the descendants of colonists.

The project is in its final stages: the archival research is concluding, the development of the website is nearing completion, and numerous oral history interviews have been conducted. As the project manager and sole oral historian on the project team, I have been responsible for organising, conducting, transcribing, editing and gaining final approval for the oral history interviews. As such, it seems timely in this report to reflect critically on problematic aspects of the oral history component of the project.

## **HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HREC) REQUIREMENTS**

### **CONTACTING ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES**

It was important to the project team that as many Aboriginal people as possible be informed about the project and invited to participate. Previous experience has taught me that the best way of ensuring an introduction to potential Aboriginal participants is through personal connections, and the best means of initially communicating

with and engaging potential participants is through face-to-face meetings. However, in accordance with the requirements of the UoA's HREC, it was not possible for any member of the project team to initiate contact with individuals. Instead, we could only provide information about the project to organisations, and this was to be in writing. (This requirement is in recognition that community leaders tend to be volunteers who are overstretched and often bombarded with requests they may feel awkward refusing).

Accessing the names and contact details of position holders in Aboriginal organisations is not necessarily straightforward. However, the Aboriginal Heritage Committee provided the project team with contact details of all the Aboriginal Public Body Corporates (PBCs) and organisations and associations listed on their register. Each group was contacted by email and/or post, but the response was disappointing. We feel that there are several reasons for this. Some addresses were outdated – emails bounced and letters were returned unopened. A number of PBCs have administrators – often Adelaide-based lawyers. Although they acknowledged the receipt of my email, there was no way of knowing if it had been read by those for whom it was intended. Additionally, as pointed out by a member of our Aboriginal Reference Group, there is great variety amongst PBCs and other Aboriginal organisations regarding the level to which they communicate with the wider community whom they represent. There is no guarantee that, if the relevant position holders of the PBCs did receive my email, they communicated its contents to the broader community.

#### THE PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET

As is standard across Australian universities, the UoA's HREC required potential participants be provided with a project information sheet approved by the HREC and to have read or been read the information sheet before the commencement of an interview. The template provided by the UoA is over three pages of solid text with numerous subheadings requiring explanatory information. Troublingly, as pointed out by a different member of the Reference Group, the HREC template did not include any reference to Aboriginal intellectual and cultural property rights remaining with the interviewee and/or the group. Including this clause in the consent

form took several months of liaising with the UoA's legal department and delayed interviews.

Although the template recommends using plain language and tailoring it to suit different groups, and despite being modified as far as possible to suit the diverse backgrounds of potential participants, there was a disjuncture between what was acceptable to the UoA and what is readily interpretable to potential participants, some of whom are illiterate or semi-literate. As one of the project's Aboriginal Reference Group members made clear, the recommended wording sounded to her like 'legalese'. Reading or being read the project information form caused some interviewees to switch off, or, ironically, to perceive the University's intentions as sinister.

## **BUDGETING FOR THE TIME AND EXPENSE TO GENUINELY WORK WITH ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES**

### **ENGAGING ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES**

Face-to-face meetings are the best way of engaging potential participants. As such, if an Aboriginal organisation indicated a desire to hear more about the project, where possible I would travel to a place nominated by them, and meet in person to introduce myself, explain the project and the consent and interview process, and (where practicable, i.e., if internet was available) demonstrate the website and story map. I allow plenty of time for potential participants to get back to me if they wish to be involved.

### **CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS AND ENSURING PARTICIPANT SATISFACTION**

If people are keen to participate in the project and agree to be interviewed, I am guided by interviewees as to how much time is needed, where we should meet, and who should be present. With regards to Aboriginal interviewees, interviews tend to be social occasions that may involve several interviewees, and are best conducted on Country. Time is needed for the interviewer and interviewees to get to know each other. This cannot be rushed; it is important to talk, eat and travel together – outside the interview.

Later on, in order to ensure interviewee satisfaction with the process and outcome, I meet up with interviewees and go through relevant transcripts, discussing excerpts

I would like to include on the website. The audio is then edited according to our discussion, and a further meeting held to demonstrate how the audio will be included on the website.

Face-to-face meetings in remote and regional areas take time and cost money (for travel and accommodation) but are the most conducive to establishing interest and gaining trust. In our Linkage application, we budgeted to compensate Aboriginal participants for their time and travel. We adhered to the SAMs recommended daily and hourly reimbursement rates which, in retrospect, are inadequate. We did not adequately budget for the time and travel required to build and maintain trust and rapport with remote and regional communities. Grant funding is competitive, and, as it was, we did not get the amount of funding we requested. A higher budget for interviews may have made our costings appear extravagant to ARC grant reviewers. Project budgets on grant applications rarely take into account genuine and enduring participant engagement – this is a pertinent ethical issue for oral historians.

#### PROBLEMS WITH REIMBURSING ABORIGINAL PARTICIPANTS

Last year, the UoA finance department introduced new processes for engaging non-staff for short-term work and, unfortunately, did not communicate these changes to the project team. Under the new system, any potential interviewees must be assessed and approved by HR for their suitability as ‘external contractors’. This involves filling out forms asking a number of questions that can be perceived as intrusive for Aboriginal people who, historically, have not had positive experiences with government agencies. The UoA’s process of vetting and approving contractors can take months, and does not allow for flexibility with regard to including people who may have relatively spontaneously been suggested to participate in interviews, but who have not been ‘approved’ as an external contractor by the UoA.

Similarly frustrating is the lengthy delays in reimbursing participants. There is a seeming institutional insensitivity or lack of recognition that people from a financially disadvantaged group may be relying on these payments. Equally embarrassing and awkward are bureaucratic irregularities in who gets paid when – with some interviewees being reimbursed weeks before others despite the paperwork being

submitted at the same time. A delay in payment can cause anxiety and feelings of ineptitude among those who do not readily understand bureaucratic red tape, who may interpret the delay in payment as their input not being valued.

## CONCLUSION

Certain well-meaning requirements stipulated by the UoA's HREC in 2021 contained the potential to deter some Aboriginal participants, suggesting HRECs should recognise diverse processes for contacting and informing Aboriginal communities about projects. New processes introduced by the UoA's finance department complicated and delayed the reimbursement of project participants, and the failure of relevant staff members to communicate these changes to the project team could have derailed the oral history component of this project.

Establishing a rapport and building trust with Aboriginal communities takes time, requires numerous face-to-face meetings at places chosen by Aboriginal communities, and cannot be pushed. The time taken and the geographical distances that must be travelled for university researchers to forge genuine connections with remote or regional communities do not fit easily within the expectations of competitive grant applications, funding bodies and administering institutions. If, in the future, long-lasting and meaningful collaborations between universities and Aboriginal communities are to eventuate, the expectations and requirements of funding bodies and administering institutions will need to accommodate more realistic timeframes and budgets.

# Interviewing Veterans of Australia's Offshore Oil and Gas Industry

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BY DAVID GOODWIN AND PAUL BRONSON

*Professor David Goodwin is dean of the University of Nottingham Business School in Malaysia. He is also a Victorian barrister and holds a PhD in Law. Paul Bronson is a lecturer and discipline coordinator of Communication Studies and Writing in the College of Arts and Education at Victoria University, Melbourne.*

The article describes a project undertaken from 2021 to 2023 in Melbourne, Australia, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.<sup>1</sup> The project involved recording oral histories of veterans of Australia's shipping industry, specifically focusing on the early days of Bass Strait oil and gas exploration in the 1960s and '70s. The project resulted in a four-episode podcast series called the 'Offshore Shipping Podcast Series' that allowed industry veterans to share their stories about their experiences during their lives at sea and on offshore platforms as their sector was first developed. This is a neglected period of Australia's industrial history: few oral histories of these early days have been compiled despite their economic and environmental significance.

The project was made possible by collaboration with students. It involved undergraduate students from Victoria University's College of Arts and Education in interviewing, production and editing as part of a capstone unit in their Arts degrees.<sup>2</sup> The students helped identify candidates for interview, based on dialogue with the industry partner which supported the development of the podcasts, Offshore and Specialist Ships Australia (OSSA). The interviews, which were undertaken with four industry veterans in total, were recorded and sound-edited by the students. There was also collaboration with the university's business school, which initially developed the relationship with OSSA. Overarching guidance was provided by academic

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1 The project was made possible by funding support provided by Victoria University as part of a 2021 Small Grants Scheme that aimed to support the development of 'Skills and Jobs for Melbourne's West'.

2 Predominately Angus Cattlin and Isobel McCullagh-Hunter.



staff of the university. Collectively the team decided that podcasts would be the best way to have the stories shared with the public as they could reach a wider audience.

The likelihood of oil and gas in Bass Strait was pointed out to executives of the company BHP in 1960 by a visiting American petroleum geologist, Dr Lewis Weeks.<sup>3</sup> In 1964 BHP, in partnership with Esso, began drilling for oil in the Strait. The dangerous exploration work offshore was performed by a collection of American engineers and geologists and intrepid mariners, supported by a small band of local Australians.

Early development of Australia's offshore oil and gas industry depended on people with a rare combination of attributes – the technical and engineering skills needed to implement complex platform structures, but also the willingness to brave the elements for long periods of time.<sup>4</sup> Dr Tony Krins was one such individual. For three summers, from late 1964 through to early 1967, while a medical student, Tony worked as a roustabout on the *Glomar III* during his university holidays. He went on to become a leading obstetrician and gynaecologist – but he was also present to witness the birth of one of Australia's most lucrative resource industries.

The initial work was undertaken by the self-propelled drilling ship *Glomar III*, built in Galveston, Texas. This ship was able to reach a depth of 25,000 feet. Between December 1964 and March 1966, the *Glomar III* discovered the Barracouta and Marlin gas fields which then supplied Victoria with natural gas for many decades.

Another key interviewee in the series was offshore oil and gas industry veteran Dennis White, who served a 41-year career with the Esso organisation as an offshore construction coordinator and a commissioning manager. He was involved in the fabrication and installation of platforms and the laying down of hundreds of kilometres of pipes. He commenced with Esso in September 1972 and was one of those

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3 Peter Thompson and Robert Macklin, *The Big Fella: The Rise and Rise of BHP Billiton* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 2009), 92–104.

4 A key interviewee, Jim Anderson, was a superintendent of oil rig supply and anchor vessels, from 1969 onwards. Jim Anderson, interviewed by David Goodwin at Owen Dixon Chambers West, Melbourne, Australia, 2 March 2022, Offshore Shipping Podcast Series, Victoria University, <https://offshorespecialistships.com/ossas-podcasts>.

who established the offshore sector from scratch in the early 1970s, working on the installation of more than 10 offshore platforms in Bass Strait.



**Figure 1** *Glomar III*, self-propelled drilling ship, image as it appeared in ExxonMobil, 'The obstetrician at the birth of an industry', *Connection*, no. 136 (Second Quarter): 5. Photograph courtesy of ExxonMobil.

Perhaps the most compelling reminiscences in the series were those of Tony Krins which concerned an infamous 'blowout' of a gas seam that occurred on 18 February 1965. Tony was an eyewitness to this event; one of about 40 individuals who were present offshore on that significant day, and possibly, by virtue of his age, the sole surviving witness.

The incident that occurred in February 1965 was officially reported by Esso at the time as a 'small blowout', 'minor blowout' or a 'gusher'. It was referred to in ExxonMobil's *Connection* magazine in 2020 as 'a blowout like the gushers of the oil industry's early days'.<sup>5</sup>

According to Tony Krins, those descriptions would never have been used by any eyewitnesses. Instead, he describes the events that occurred in graphic language. In Tony's recollection the appropriate descriptors are 'enormous, roaring, spectacular and terrifying':

...all the chemical mud was coming out of under the drill platform at 2,000 pounds per square inch. The plume of mud concealed the whole rig and there was a terrible roar and of course because it was gas and mud coming out it was explosive.

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5 ExxonMobil, 'The obstetrician at the birth of an industry', *Connection*, no. 136 (Second Quarter 2020): 4.

Tony noted that the event took a number of days to control and that the workforce had to be flown off by helicopter. This was not the only noteworthy aspect of the drama, as he explained:

It was a dangerous situation and very frightening. And while we were waiting for the [supply vessel] *Pointe Coupee* to come and collect us, another young fellow and I were training fire hoses on the funnel to make sure there were no sparks coming out from there. And I noticed out of the corner of my eye that one of the men gathered there was shaking in fear and reached into his pocket for a cigarette and lighter. But before he could light up I set him on his backside with a blast from the fire hose and prevented him from blowing us all up.<sup>6</sup>

The historical significance of the blowout event is corroborated elsewhere. Thompson and Macklin's 2009 book *The Big Fella: The Rise and Rise of BHP Billiton* describes *Glomar III* hitting gas on the East Gippsland Shelf-1 (later known as Barracouta-1) at a drilling site 24 kilometres off the coast in a water depth of 45 metres in February 1965 as 'a spectacular hole-in-one that almost blew the drill-ship out of the water'.<sup>7</sup>

Tony Krins' first-hand recollections of the blowout incident were vivid, despite the passage of six decades. He attributes this to the deep impressions created by his experiences, and his passion for the sea.

The Bass Strait is a hazardous working environment. On top of that, construction work is always inherently dangerous. Work in Bass Strait involved significant construction in very hazardous settings. This was affirmed by the interviewees. As Dennis White said, 'A lot of people don't really understand the ferocity of Bass Strait.'

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6 Tony Krins, interviewed by David Goodwin via Zoom, 29 September 2021, Offshore Shipping Podcast Series, Victoria University, <https://offshorespecialistships.com/ossas-podcasts/>.

7 Thompson and Macklin, *The Big Fella*, 103. See also Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, 'History of Petroleum Exploration in Victoria' (2022). Available at <https://earthresources.vic.gov.au/geology-exploration/oil-gas/history-of-petroleum-exploration-in-victoria>. Accessed 23 August 2023; Rick Wilkinson, *A Thirst for Burning: The Story of Australia's Oil Industry* (Sydney: David Ell Press, 1983), 44.

If you discount the North Sea, the Bass Strait has got to be one of the worst bits of ocean in the world'.<sup>8</sup>

Dennis continued with a vivid description:

I have stood on the main deck out there in raging storms and seen as high as seventy-foot waves shifting those platforms...It wasn't really pleasant and it was unsettling. You get monstrous seas in the Bass Strait from time to time...The majority of the time you're in stormy conditions – rain and/or wind and/or pretty significant seas. Twenty to thirty feet, or ten metre, swells would be hitting the platform.

Dennis also had exposure to fatalities, as an investigator:

I led a team on the investigation of a diving fatality and I was also a member of a team in another diving fatality. One was on a drill rig and one was on a construction barge. They were very stressful to say the least, very revealing. The whole objective was to get the teachings from it, so those things never happen again.

When asked whether he had to drive new practices to improve safety Dennis responded:

All the time...You could never rest on your laurels, and that's for a good reason. You might convert a person today but next swing you might have three new people out there that have never been out there before and you've got to go through it all again. Just repetition, telling the same message, showing people you really cared about them, that you wanted them to go home in one piece to their families. All the time, you had to preach that message, you had to be genuine. If you weren't genuine they'd see right through it.

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8 Dennis White, interviewed by David Goodwin at Owen Dixon Chambers West, Melbourne, Australia, 9 March 2022, Offshore Shipping Podcast Series, Victoria University, <https://offshorespecialistships.com/ossas-podcasts>.

Tony Krins, speaking of experiences in Bass Strait a decade earlier, in the early 1960s, was less positive about the standard of safety management that he encountered:

You were sort of trained on the spot...It was obvious to me as just a labourer that there was a lot of improvisation going on and that there was really no regulation as far as safety was concerned...It's not fair to say there was no culture of safety. We did have talks from the bosses about being careful, but they weren't formal.

Tony described a horrific incident he was aware of that occurred shortly prior to the commencement of his service on the rig *Glomar III*:

Just before I went on the rig two hands were lost at sea on [the task of rig shift] when the giant steel buoys that were above each of the anchors broke free and slid across the deck, sweeping the two young men with them into the sea. As I recall either one or both of them were never recovered.<sup>9</sup>

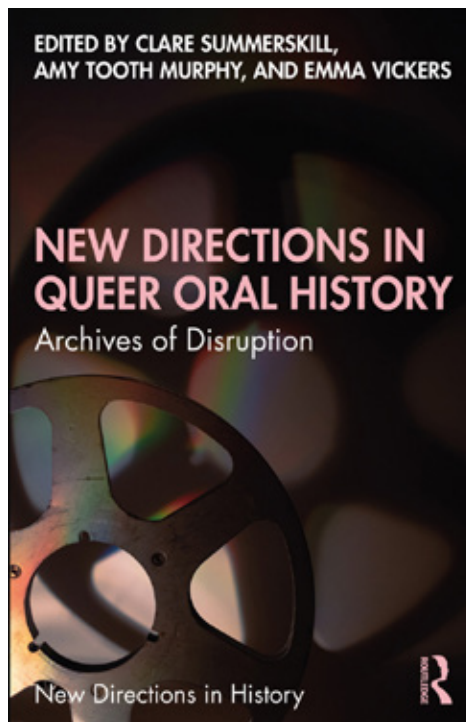
The podcast series, which was broadcast via the OSSA website from June 2023 onward, began as a story capture exercise.<sup>10</sup> It evolved in ways that were not envisioned at the outset. Recognising that there was likely to be broad interest in the recordings, the students and staff involved agreed on organising the material into a number of podcasts. The project unearthed important insights relevant to modern-day safety management, the decommissioning of offshore oil and gas production installations and the looming new era of offshore wind turbine deployment. As interviewee Dennis White predicts, new players in Bass Strait, such as those installing wind turbines, will face exactly the same kinds of challenges as the early pioneers: ferocious weather, logistical complexity and marine skills deficits. Let's hope that the stories and lessons learnt by our industry veterans can help guide future operations in this challenging marine environment, as Australia transitions from fossil fuels towards renewable energy.

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9 Tony Krins interview, 29 September 2021.

10 OSSA, OSSA's podcasts. Available at <https://offshorespecialistships.com/ossas-podcasts/>. Accessed 23 August 2023.

# Reviews



***New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption*, edited by Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy and Emma Vickers**

Routledge, London, 2022. 244 pages, \$75.99  
(paperback). ISBN 9780367551131.

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REVIEWED BY DR JACQUELYN BAKER,  
*Deakin University*

*New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption* is a far-reaching collection edited by oral historians: Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy and Emma Vickers. The editors are all well-placed in their fields of research as well as in their communities. Most notably, Summerskill is an independent academic researcher as well as a stand-up comedian, writer, performer and a self-described 'insider playwright' – a term she uses in her chapter about interviewing older lesbians for a verbatim play (p. 185). Tooth Murphy is a lecturer in oral history at the University

of London and Vickers lectures in history at the Liverpool John Moores University. Tooth Murphy and Vickers are both members of the Oral History Society LGBTQ Special Interest Group which, in part, aims to share knowledge and increase engagement with LGBTQIA+ communities. It is this intersection of academic expertise, non-academic experience and community engagement that contributes to a well-rounded and comprehensive scope. The book contains 19 contributions that reflect on the practice and analysis of oral history interviews conducted with LGBTQIA+ people and queer communities.

The chapters are short and direct, which makes for a quick read. Most contributors adopt a relaxed and conversational tone, which contributes to a sense that the chapters are both speaking to each other and that the contributors are speaking directly to the reader. This well-reflects the book's origins, as *New Directions in Queer Oral History* began as a 'lively conversation around a crowded table in central London' (p. 1). Indeed, the overall tone of the book feels welcoming, and the chapters are inviting. The book is organised in four sections. Part 1 reflects on the narration of LGBTQIA+ histories; Part 2 navigates discourse, composure and intersubjectivity; Part 3 considers embodiment and affect; and Part 4 contemplates identity, shared authorship and creative practice. The way that the book has been organised makes the reading experience feel like a conversation amongst friends.

While Summerskill, Tooth Murphy and Vickers sought to produce a book that shines a light on the work conducted outside of the United States, they do acknowledge the significant contributions made by American oral historians and they pay homage to the feminist historians who, in part, paved the way for the establishment of queer oral history. Despite the criticism that it 'leans toward UK studies and lives' (p. xxiii), this reviewer found it to be reasonably balanced with eight contributions focused on the UK; four chapters from Australian oral historians; four contributions related to the Canadian context; three chapters focused on the United States; and one contribution related to Northern Ireland. A bias toward queer communities and research conducted in the UK should come as no surprise considering that is where all three editors are based. However, this scope does reveal a partiality toward queer oral history conducted in the Anglosphere. In addition, most contributions



focus on white queer communities – and do so uncritically. Only three chapters out of the total 19 contributions discuss, or had worked with, non-white participants and communities: Jacob Evoy's contribution about Jewish children of Holocaust survivors; Dan Royles's chapter about Black AIDS activists in the United States; and Jane Traies's contribution about lesbian and bisexual Ugandan women seeking asylum in the United Kingdom. Traies's chapter is the final contribution in the book and, if read in order, her conclusion about new challenges of race and power that she encountered is one of the last takeaways read by the reader before closing the book. While this felt like a deliberate choice, it does not negate the sense that non-white communities and voices, as well as communities beyond the Anglosphere, were largely absent from this collection.

The emphasis on bisexual women felt intentional given the bisexual erasure and biphobia that continues to permeate queer communities and heterosexual societies alike. I agree with Nan Alamilla Boyd's observation that *New Directions in Queer Oral History* does contain a strong emphasis on lesbians, bisexual women and fem-identified queer people (p. xxiii). As an oral historian who researches lesbian feminist groups and communities in Melbourne, this bias was favourable to me. Lauren Jae Gutterman's chapter on lesbian oral histories and bisexual visibility; Sophie Robinson's chapter about documenting lesbian feminists in Australia; Summerskill's reflection on interviewing older lesbians for playwriting; El Chenier's contribution on oral history interviews as lesbian liberation; and Traies's aforementioned chapter were read with particular interest and gusto. Summerskill, Tooth Murphy and Vickers wrote that all chapters reflect a desire to make a meaningful contribution to the methodology and that all contributors express an 'activist imperative' and are driven by the political and liberating potential of queer oral history (p. 1). For those writing about bisexual women and fem-identifying queer people, it is clear that their intention is to address bisexual erasure and to explore the complexities of finding and writing bisexual histories. Writing this review on International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) makes this intention feel particularly salient. However, despite the way these contributions bring to the fore experiences and testimonies of bisexual women and fem-identifying

people, researchers interested in bisexual men, as well as bisexual masc-identified queer people, may find this book wanting.

*New Directions in Queer Oral History* is well situated in its body of literature, and it thoughtfully builds on the work that has come before it – namely, Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez's *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, which was published in 2012. This book does not end with a concluding chapter, which feels like a deliberate choice that well-reflects the title of this collection. Rather than trying to find neat conclusions or endings, most of the contributions conclude by encouraging readers to reflect on their practice, to consider other questions and to contemplate new problems. In addition, the editors meditate on the limitations of the label 'new' that is often ascribed to queer oral history – even though queer oral history has been practised in the academy for 40 years.

*New Directions in Queer Oral History* will be useful to those new to the methodology and will be enjoyed by experienced oral historians. Furthermore, it makes a valuable teaching tool for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. While I wish that this book had been published at the beginning of my own PhD candidature, I will carry the insights, reflections and calls to action with me and into my next oral history project.



***Becoming a Mother: An Australian History,***  
**Carla Pascoe Leahy**

*Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2023.*  
*296 pages, \$195. ISBN 9781526161208.*

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REVIEWED BY EMMA DALTON,  
*Adjunct Research Fellow, La Trobe University*

In *Becoming a Mother: An Australian History*, Carla Pascoe Leahy uses the stories of her interviewees to provide narratives of women's personal experiences of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood following the birth of their first child. Pascoe Leahy is a lecturer in Family History at the University of Tasmania. Her book, *Becoming a Mother*, was funded by the Australian Research Council. *Becoming a Mother* makes an important contribution to the fields of Australian oral history, international oral history, Australian motherhood studies, and international motherhood studies. By providing access to the specificities of women's lived experiences, Pascoe Leahy avoids

stereotyping her participants. Whilst the mothers Pascoe Leahy spoke to gave birth to their first child in different periods (post-war, second wave and millennial), their experiences vary for many reasons, and not just the birth dates of their children. Pascoe Leahy refers to her interviewees as narrators, and situates herself with her narrators, providing her own stories first.

Pascoe Leahy uses her own stories and the stories of her narrators to consider maternal emotions and maternal experiences in relation to pregnancy, birth and early motherhood. She frames these emotions and experiences with discussions about the historical context surrounding the time of her narrators' first child's birth. She also introduces policies and practices; statistics relating to medical interventions; comments from medical practitioners; and references to texts about pregnancy, birth and parenting young children.

The book *Becoming a Mother* engages with different conceptions of time (p. 26). Each chapter delivers a different message, but follows a similar pattern. Chapter 1 charts the development of 'maternal studies' (p. 12), a discipline also referred to as 'motherhood studies'.<sup>1</sup> Here, Pascoe Leahy explains how she constructed her sample of interviewees (p. 20) and explains that her methodology is 'framed by a commitment to understanding mothering through the words and worlds of mothers themselves' (p. 19). Chapter 2 highlights the complexities of pregnancy and the ways in which perspectives of pregnancy and pregnant women have changed across three periods, the post-war period, the second wave and the millennial period. Chapter 3 considers how discourses surrounding childbirth have changed over the 75-year period considered in this book. It also looks at the opportunities the women have had to make choices about their births. Childbirth is represented as an important experience in a woman's life, and as having potentially significant ramifications for new mothers. Chapter 4 considers early motherhood, including infant feeding, and the ways in

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1 Andrea O'Reilly (ed.), *Twenty-first Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Samira Kawash, 'New Directions in Motherhood Studies', *Signs* 36, no. 4 (2011): 969–1003; Vanessa Reimer and Sarah Sahagian (eds), *The Mother-Blame Game* (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2015).

which new mothers bond with their children. The possibility of maternal difficulties is touched upon in this chapter. Chapter 5 considers where new mothers might find support, and how this has changed across the periods considered. Chapter 6 examines the work that mothers engage in. Interestingly, whilst post-war mothers did sometimes engage in paid work, they often did not acknowledge the work they did as work. They seemed to want to make it clear that their husbands were good providers. Hence, they downplayed their own efforts to bring income to their families. Whilst post-war mothers wanted to be viewed as putting their role as mothers first, millennial mothers felt they were judged when they did not engage in paid work outside of the home. Chapter 7 delves deeper into the possibility that mothers may not find the transition to becoming a mother an easy one.

Pascoe Leahy presents instant bonding and a rush of maternal love for the child as the standard experience of new mothers, describing this as her own experience, and the experience of most of her narrators. Perinatal depression and difficulties in adapting to early motherhood are considered, but not given much attention until the final chapter. This deeper consideration of perinatal depression and maternal difficulties near the book's end seems to frame these experiences as being outside the common experience of new mothers, although Pascoe Leahy does provide statistical evidence which demonstrates that this is not the case (p. 227). Interweaving her discussion of perinatal depression and maternal difficulties throughout her chapters may have served to provide recognition of the commonality of these experiences.

Pascoe Leahy represents a variety of mothers in her study. Pascoe Leahy provides the year and place of birth of her interviewees, as well as the year and location in which they gave birth to their first child. Further, she provides details relating to the cultural and religious identity of her interviewees. For example, 'Adriana was born in 1924 and grew up in a Presbyterian, Anglo–Australian family in Queensland' (p. 254). In contrast, 'Miroslava was born in 1946 to Orthodox, Macedonian–Australian parents' (p. 257). Unfortunately, the stories of only three Indigenous mothers are considered in *Becoming a Mother* (60 mothers were interviewed). Regardless of the rationale, more Indigenous voices were needed.

Pascoe Leahy's text represents 75 years of women's experiences of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood, and acknowledges key scholarship from the fields of oral history, gender studies and motherhood studies. However, she gives Adrienne Rich only two sentences (p. 15), and she mentions only one of Andrea O'Reilly's publications (p. 17).<sup>2</sup> Rich and her text *Of Women Born* have been influential upon the development of motherhood studies.<sup>3</sup> O'Reilly, is a Canadian professor and prolific writer, who is noted to have 'coined' the term motherhood studies.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, whilst she is cited in the footnotes of the chapter in which she is mentioned, she is not included in *Becoming a Mother's* bibliography (this is alarming because her work is so important to the discipline of motherhood studies). Whilst Pascoe Leahy's book *Becoming a Mother* is a book about Australian mothers, its engagement with the discipline of motherhood studies calls for a deeper acknowledgement of the work of our feminist mothers.

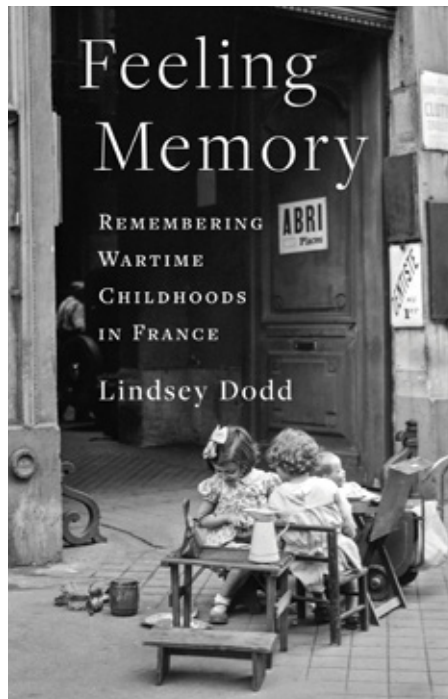
Nevertheless, Pascoe Leahy's *Becoming a Mother* is a gift to readers. Within its pages she invites mothers to share their stories. *Becoming a Mother* is unique, because motherhood studies is still a field that many scholars have not heard of. Pascoe Leahy uses her expert knowledge of the field of oral history, bringing feminism, gender studies and motherhood studies to it, to bring forth the stories of mothers whose voices might not otherwise be heard. These stories will be valued into the future, and, hopefully, Pascoe Leahy's framing of them will inspire more oral historians to engage with motherhood studies.

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2 Andrea O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, Practice* (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2016).

3 Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977).

4 Fiona Joy Green, 'Motherhood studies', *Encyclopedia of Motherhood* (2010). Available at <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412979276>. Accessed 23 July 2023.



***Feeling Memory: Remembering Wartime Experiences in France, Lindsey Dodd***

Columbia University Press, New York, 2023. 400 pages,  
US\$35.00 (paperback). ISBN 9780231209199.

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REVIEWED BY PROFESSOR PAULA HAMILTON,  
*UTS Sydney*

*Feeling Memory* seems an odd title for a book. It knocks the reader off kilter. But one very soon comes to see how important is this way of beginning the journey with Lindsey Dodd's work. Unashamedly academic in approach, it is not for the faint-hearted oral historian and those who just want to enjoy the pleasures of interviewing. Yet it is a complete *tour de force* of theoretical synthesis and imaginative insights that would suit those looking for more in-depth interpretation and studies of meaning.

Initially, this book is about the distinctive perspective of French children's memories from World War Two and their emotional responses to the years of disruption, parental absence, constant movement and violence. It illuminates these memories, largely thought to be inaccessible and limited for the remembering adult. But the book is so much more than this. It is groundbreaking because Dodd has combined not only the literature on oral histories with that on memory studies; but also incorporated recent work on histories of emotion and the sensory as well. Few have achieved this despite scholars in the latter two separate fields of study attempting to do so.<sup>1</sup> Dodd explores the epistemology of history and hermeneutics of memory along the way, laying their methodologies and limitations bare for those who work with oral histories. (Interestingly for example, Dodd is quite critical of memory studies' top-down approaches and lack of attention to the everyday.)

There is considerable explanatory material about the nature of the project which involved 120 people; 52 interviews were recorded by Dodd herself and the remaining data was taken from interviews already existing in French archives all over the country. Not all geographical areas were equally covered, and the author quite rightly eschewed representativeness as a criterion for selection. Interviews were all recorded in French and translated by Dodd herself (My only quibble – what does translation do in this context? What is lost or gained by it) and there are important discussions about drawing on interviews already recorded in archives and their different purposes. Central to the general analysis is Dodd's discussions about both interviewer and listener and their emotions as part of the practice, that is both the *oral* and the *aural* aspects of oral histories.

A chronological timeline is provided at the beginning of the book which starts with the Nazi invasion of France, and runs through events of the twentieth century which influenced the shifts in French public memory, though I did wonder if this was at the publisher's insistence since Dodd herself emphasised the project was driven by

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1 See the small volume as part of the Cambridge Elements series: Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).



memories not history. It was nevertheless useful for those of us who were unfamiliar with the details of the French past and its afterlives.

The structure is unusual. While the broader structure outline is divided into four parts – namely Memories Felt, Memories Located, Memories Told and Memories Lived – within these are ten ‘pauses’ or short pieces of more detailed explanation usually drawing on a single person’s experience. These short pieces are almost asides to the main study but they allow more in-depth study of a particular incident or experience. They add to the richness of the material presented without detracting at all from the narrative flow.

The first section, Memories Felt, focuses on the sensory experiences of the children, a particularly rich way to explore children’s memories and the feelings evoked by both the individual senses such as sound and smell as well as the multisensorial landscape of the past. In her analysis Dodd also notes ‘stories of survival hinge on unpredictability and chance and emphasise agency rather than passivity’. This is a central insight into oral history interviewees who have survived disasters like World War Two and are recounting their stories some years later as adults.

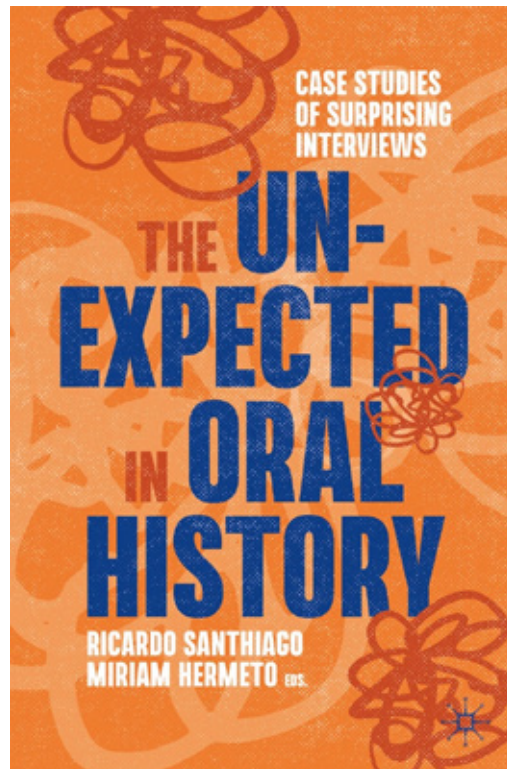
Part 2, Memories Located, examines traumatic memories, often vividly recalled, that are sited through concepts of place, space and time, where Dodd asks what role they play in the constitutions of childhood memories. In this section Dodd also asks questions about listening to these stories as a form of witnessing where ‘memories often dwell on the places of someone else’s trauma’.

Part 3, Memories Told, explores the fixed nature of memory-making through the recording process and also how the memories of wartime children match or are dissonant with the public memory of the war in France and how these have changed over time as ‘regimes of memory’ shift in response to public events.

Section 4, Memories Lived, investigates the way in which the time of the past in the stories unfolds in the present. It explicates the content of the memories of what life was like for the children more closely ‘where quotidian mundanity meets the historically significant’. As a concluding section, it incorporates all of Dodd’s previous

theoretical dynamics and underlines how, above all, the memories produced through oral histories are *felt*, shaped by emotions and affect. This book then leaves you wondering how we ever carried out oral histories and interpreted memories without the recognition of their emotional configuration involved with every aspect of the process.

As a final note, congratulations must also go to the publisher Columbia University Press and the Columbia Oral History Series. In these days of writers and readers who *should-be-grateful-that-they-can-get-any-books-published-at-all* as the usual approach, this one is clearly laid out and beautifully produced. It was a pleasure to touch, smell and read.



***The Unexpected in Oral History: Case Studies of Surprising Interviews*, edited by Ricardo Santhiago and Miriam Hermeto**

*Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, 2023.*  
*274 pages, €70. ISBN 9783031177484.*

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REVIEWED BY ROSA CAMPBELL

As I read *The Unexpected in Oral History: Case Studies of Surprising Interviews*, edited by Ricardo Santhiago and Miriam Hermeto, I thought often of Penny Summerfield's essay 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews'. If you are an oral historian in the English-speaking world, it is likely that you have read Summerfield's essay. In this groundbreaking

piece, Summerfield discusses ‘composure’ and ‘discomposure’ in the oral history interview. Discomposure occurs when interviewees struggle to construct a life that is ‘composed’, and to appear ‘calm and in control of themselves’, constituted as ‘the subject of their story’. If an interviewee is composed, they recount a narrative which is coherent, psychically comfortable and satisfying, free of ‘anger, self-contradiction, discomfort’.<sup>1</sup> Summerfield suggests that we oral historians might be astute to moments of discomposure, and usefully interpret them. In Summerfield’s case, the discomposure of her interviewees – British women who played a role as active combatants in World War Two – points to a lack of cultural representations and silence around the events those who she interviewed sought to relay. Public discourse had little to offer about the role of combatant women and so for these interviewees a narrative was hard to sustain.

But, as someone who uses oral history methodology I have often wondered, what of the discomposure of the *interviewer*? The methodology demands a certain composure from us. As interviewers we must hold the space, ask questions, find our words, give up our expectations and release control of the interview at least enough to give our interviewee a chance to tell their story. The oral historian is not a therapist. But we must, like the analyst, ‘behave ourselves’, remember that it is not about us, refrain from inserting ourselves and get out of the way.<sup>2</sup> How do we maintain our composure when faced with something strange, eerie or shocking that breaks the surface of the interview either at the time, or when we are listening back to the tape? What, in other words, do we do with the unexpected?

As Santhiago and Hermeto who edited this volume suggest, discussion of the unexpected in oral history ‘ends up restricted to hall-way conversations, in which we confide to our colleagues the pains and delights of producing oral history’ (p. 9). But the unexpected is centred in this rich and varied edited collection and the forms that the ‘unexpected’ can take in the interview are grouped into six categories. The

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1 Penny Summerfield, ‘Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews’, *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 1 (2003): 65–93.

2 Donald Winnicott quoted in Janet Malcolm, *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* (New Jersey and London: Aronson Inc, 1980), 144.

first, the ‘unexpected as outbreak’ discusses what happens when an interviewee’s story fully shatters expectations, such as in Steven High’s essay. High recalls interviewing a woman for a local museum project, early in his career. She ‘unsettled the essential goodness of local history’ by putting her experience of sexual violence on the record (p. 36). This was unexpected in the interview at the time, and unfolds into a further unexpected event, when he listens back decades later. High reflexively determines that the questions he asked such as ‘Did you feel angry?’ were based on his own experience of childhood sexual abuse, as much as the material he was being presented with (pp. 33–34).

The second section of the book, ‘the unexpected as falsification’ discusses what to do when an interviewee obscures the truth, or lies outright, such as in Miriam Hermeto’s account, when an interviewee who did not attend an important theatrical production said he did because he felt he should have been present at ‘something that was iconic for his generation’ (p. 60). Sometimes, though, the roots of these falsifications are more structural, such as when race and racism play into memory lapses as discussed in this book in Lívia Nascimento Monteiro’s essay, or when homophobia causes an interviewee who had been in a loving relationship with another woman to deny it, as in Ricardo Santhiago’s contribution. As the editors state in the introduction, the whole volume is ‘inspired by the landmark work’ of 1995 written by Brazilian historian Janaína Amado called ‘O grande mentiroso: Tradição, veracidade e imaginação em história oral [The Great Liar: Tradition, Veracity, and Imagination in Oral History]’, which grappled with what to do when an oral history interviewee turned out to have lied (pp. 8–9). The impact of the essay is particularly felt in the second section. The historians here, like Amado, urge that we should not discard an interview that is unusual or riddled with half-truths, but ask instead what meaning we might make of the incongruities and falsifications we are faced with.

The third section considers how when unexpected events disrupt the interview it is particularly memorable to the interviewer. For example, when Luciana Heymann and Verena Alberti seek to understand the growth of private education in Brazil, they interview a founder of a private university who tells them nothing of the history they are interested in, but recounts a profound, mystical experience where Jesus

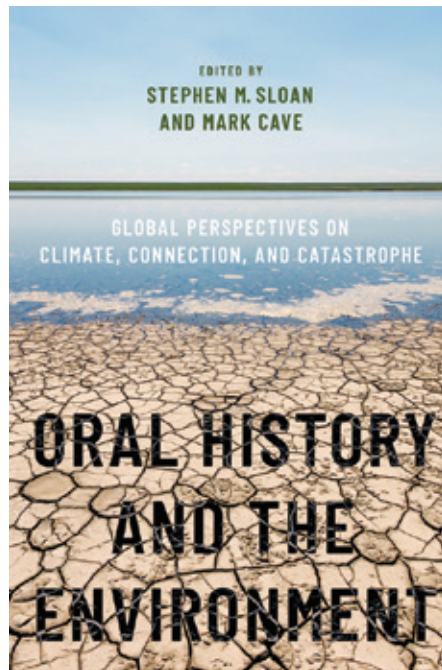
Christ rode in his car, and discusses the subsequent church he was constructing in honour of Christ. The historians conclude that while the mystical experience ‘tells us little about the creation and trajectory of [the University of West São Paulo]’ it demonstrated ‘the overlap between the spheres of politics, of religiosity, of higher education’, all of which were pervaded by the interviewee’s wish to serve the public (p. 116). While it was less useful to the researchers’ project than almost all the others, it was the most memorable.

Much of the book sees unexpected moments in the interview as contributing to oral history theory, while the fourth part considers how the unexpected may be generative to historical research. In Camillo Robertini’s essay, the author describes how he went ‘looking for heroes’ when interviewing those who worked in the Fiat Factory in Córdoba, Argentina during the years of the Videla dictatorship (1976–1981; p. 147). Robertini explains ‘My hypothesis was almost obvious: since the workers had been the victims of the Videla regime, their memoirs would surely convey their resistance to the regime (p. 148). But, instead he found workers who did not recollect engagement in anti-dictatorship activism, but who described themselves as concerned with everyday life, with their homes and marriages, with upward mobility, rather than politics. One worker described the dictatorship as a time where ‘there was stability, there was food, life went on’ (p. 152). This narration, Robertini found, ‘radically mutat[ed]’ his original research question (p. 153). Ultimately the unexpected opened the project out so that he came to explore how workers accepted and consented to the military regime.

Sections five and six concern themselves with how the unexpected does and does not disrupt the method of oral history. In part five, the essays detail the unexpected as ‘a given’, where oral history is precisely selected as a methodology because of the desired presence of the unexpected. It is a methodology that nuances the ‘straightforward story of progress’ desired by an NGO, as the contribution by Indira Chowdhury reveals (p. 182). Contributions also discuss how oral historians must often make changes to methodological design due to the needs of the interviewees, many of which cannot be anticipated. In this way, the unexpected is par for the course in oral history.

As discussed in section six, sometimes interviewers may need to break with the conventional methodology and employ unexpected techniques themselves when interviewing. These essays in the final section trace ‘deviations from accepted practice, which in other cases could be construed as a kind of mortal sin by oral historians but had to be tolerated and accepted’ in these interviews (p. 216). Sometimes interviewers required a lack of formality in order to get to their subjects, such as when Joana Barros interviews homeless people in São Paulo and must do away with the formalities and paperwork in order to capture an interview on the spot, or when Monica Rebecca Ferrari Nunes employs a methodology at cosplay conventions, inspired by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin’s concept of *flânerie*. Nunes wandered until she got ‘lost in the events, approaching young people randomly, following an abductive and intuitive approach to initiating conversations’ (p. 220) a methodology which enabled full immersion in the cosplay scene and warm, meandering, spontaneous interviews with young geeks.

The essays contained here are wonderfully varied and rich, though certainly mixed in quality. Often they employ poetics, and sometimes this works wonderfully to illuminate a point or highlight the surrealism present in the oral history interview, though less so at other times. The categorisation can on occasion seem arbitrary. Overall however, this is a useful volume which centres and explores the unexpected, and reveals that it must be grappled with by oral historians.



***Oral History and the Environment, Global Perspectives  
on Climate, Connection, and Catastrophe, edited by  
Stephen M. Sloan and Mark Cave***

*Oxford University Press, 2022. 320 pages, US\$37.99.  
ISBN 9780190684976.*

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REVIEWED BY RACHEL GOLDLUST,  
*La Trobe University*

For years there has been a lack of considered insight and exchange between the fields of oral and environmental history. The opportunity and promise of oral history to bring local stories, and those that tell a personal yet global perspective are often underutilised in scientific and environmental studies more broadly. This book, a compendium of 12 distinct case studies presented as discrete chapters, argues for the strength and versatility of oral history as a key source for environmental history. Through their eyes, memories and intimate responses to work in nature



and/or cherished natural spaces that change over time, this book unites a global range of varied agents: activists; wilderness conservators; water managers; victims of catastrophe; tribal trustees; reindeer herders; and foresters; among others whose life experience gives them particular insight into human–environmental interaction and adaptation.

Together Stephen Sloan, an associate professor of history and director of Baylor's Institute for Oral History, and Mark Cave, a curator and oral historian from New Orleans, had previously edited *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis*, which no doubt inspired this pivot towards environmental considerations. In the introduction of *Oral History and the Environment*, they align both disciplines as kindred spirits due to their inherent political positioning. Both, they claim, are traditionally activist spheres and tend to have a broad interdisciplinary nature. The opening argument that both fields have long been fighting for legitimacy and the right to tell broad multinational and complex stories will be well-received by readers from either discipline.

As Australian oral historians Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall noted in their 2017 collection *Telling Environmental Histories* – humans have long told stories about the earth but our reckoning (and collective scholarship) with those stories, have tended to have been reproduced in parallel, rather than together.<sup>1</sup> Though there are many regional and colonial crossovers in the way we have treated, then shaped, and finally talked about the landscapes and ecosystems we find ourselves occupying, these stories have traditionally been considered too 'local' to be given the global frameworks and perspectives that this volume is looking to achieve. Therefore, the challenge *Oral History and the Environment* takes up is to assemble a variety of authors and actors, allowing the subjects to speak for themselves and detail the relationships to the environments that their lives have encountered, while simultaneously speaking to issues of climate change, globalism and environmentalism.

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1 Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall, *Telling Environmental Histories: Intersections of Memory, Narrative and Environment*, Palgrave Studies in World Environmental History (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

This book highlights the need for historians of these fields to ‘push back against the textual fetish that generally characterized Western scholarship’ (p. 3). Thus, the case studies selected are each methodologically innovative, as well as texturally and geographically alluring, by complementing traditional archival sources with a range of personal, audio and other sources. Going beyond the ‘disaster or event’ foci common to environmental history scholarship, and also being mindful of the tendency towards declensionist narratives, Sloan and Cave as editors have assembled a range of case studies, depicting landscapes ‘desert to Arctic’ and touching on issues ranging from ‘drought, chemical leaks, oil spills, nuclear disaster, indigenous control of resources, natural resource management, wilderness, and protest’.

Pointing to the effective ability of oral history to address issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality, the ensuing chapters encourage practitioners of environmental history (or environmental studies more broadly) to look to explore these dimensions more fully in their work. Jan Bender Shetler’s chapter on gendered stories of resistance in Tanzania describes how famine and environmental collapse led to the disruption and reformulation of ethnic group identities, rooted in a particular landscape, and these identities are distinctive to men’s stories and retelling of history. Likewise, Caren Fox’s treatise of Maori perspectives on geothermal resources can be seen as a demonstrative example of tribal knowledge and rights being recognised and featured in contemporary industry and legal contexts. Heidi Hutner draws out the stories of Japanese feminists in their resistance to the Fukushima nuclear disaster, highlighting a growing discourse that scholars of motherhood and family have also been exploring, that radicalisation of formerly conservative women through environmental disasters is a new frontier that fosters greater participation in environmentalist causes.

Using more traditional methodologies, chapters such as Javier Arce Nazario’s first-person reflections and interviews that took place in his own village in Puerto Rico combine the data with questionnaires, and water data itself spanning several years to demonstrate that community and government knowledge of water sources can provide equal value. Similarly, Debbie Lee assembles a large quantity of archival material with a ‘live’ history collection to chronicle the human history of an American wilderness area, concluding that the local rivers found therein were more than sites of memory, but memory itself.

In reckoning with environmental histories as inherently political acts, Chapters 2 and 3 describe the spilling of 119,000 tons of crude oil off the coast of Cornwall in 1967 and then an explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Both these events, though taken discretely, can be viewed as ‘bookends’ of a contemporary epoch marked by protest and activism as the primary vehicle for expressions of care over environmental change and destruction. In considering Tero Mustonen’s appraisal of the more subtle changes observable by the Finnish Inuit across the Finnish and Canadian tundras, we can appreciate that activism has also been expressed quietly for decades, and has considered cultural as well as political forces. Likewise, Deb Anderson’s opening chapter on Australian oral histories of drought looks to amplify the dialogue between past and present, while elevating a ‘natural’ phenomenon into a political event.

Although this collection may not directly address the bigger challenges of climate change, or the business-as-usual trajectory of exponential growth and modernity, it does so obliquely by bringing a highly personal, regional and culturally and linguistically diverse collection of environmental histories together to explore change, and the environment. From an oral history standpoint, the book affirms the place of first-person experiences, ideas and observations as equal to, if not more valuable than archival sources, particularly when it comes to events, place and larger, more ephemeral contexts such as landscape and memory. There is also a valuable timeline contained in the introduction and epilogue that traces the rise of the intersection of oral and environmental histories working in tandem. All in all, this collection is a valuable tool for students of either/both subdiscipline(s), and for historians from across the globe who may be looking to feature environmental and first-person experiences in their work.