

COVID Reports

Introduction:

Oral History During the Pandemic

ALISTAIR THOMSON

Alistair Thomson is President of Oral History Australia and Professor of History at Monash University.

Like many oral historians, I stopped interviewing when the pandemic hit. I had been interviewing elderly Victorian men and women who worked for General Motors Holden, and even before lockdown it was clear that it was not safe to interview in person. Our Holden interviews were conducted with the National Library of Australia, which decided that remote recording was not an appropriate alternative. In the circumstances, I agreed.

Several of the authors in this provocative collection about oral history during the pandemic make a persuasive case for not conducting their interviews via remote recording. Katherine Sheedy from the professional history enterprise Way Back When explains that most of their interviews are used for audio-visual productions of one kind or another, and that the quality of a remote recording is usually not good enough for such outputs. The pandemic is having a serious impact on the livelihoods of our professional history colleagues.

Others highlight the importance of rapport in oral history and worry about the loss of the communicative clues of an embodied relationship in a shared place chosen by the interviewee. As Ruth Melville explains, ‘talking with someone, listening, is more than the sum of its visual and auditory parts. Oral history, at its best with bodies in the same space, allows each pause, moment of silence, inhalation and exhalation of breath’.

For some types of projects, and some groups of interviewees, the limitations of remote recording are especially acute. Skye Krichauff explains that her interviews were abandoned when remote Aboriginal communities were locked down as a safety measure. Skye decided that remote interviews were inappropriate: members of those communities often had limited computing equipment or internet access, and in interviews

with Aboriginal Australians the careful development of rapport, and communication through body language and gesture, was especially important.

Some of our authors highlight the effect of the loss of face to face interviews upon their own well-being. We miss the face to face human interaction; the adrenaline rush of standing on a doorstep not knowing how the next few hours will evolve; the thrill of watching and helping someone articulate a story buried deep inside. Margaret Leask describes her own pandemic experience as ‘an unravelling’ of her life and identity as an interviewer, until she turned to the backlog of less favoured oral history work, such as track logs and documentation, and began to find her working self again. Community historians in Queensland miss the collective engagement nourished by local history events and note that members of the pre-internet generation are among those worst affected by this loss.

And yet... Jessica Stroja reminds us that some oral historians have always conducted interviews using remote recording, perhaps because disability, illness, cost or care commitments have prevented long distance travel; perhaps because an interviewee was only accessible online or by phone. Her commonplace is our new normal and, as she explains, it is perfectly possible to conduct wonderful interviews at a distance.

Newcomers to remote recording explain how they adapted to this new normal, and the challenges they faced. One obvious adaptation is interviewing close to home, with family members or friends sharing a home in lockdown. Students on Phillip O’Brien’s year nine school history elective learnt about oral history through Google Meet and then interviewed family members with their smart phones and discovered extraordinary histories within their own homes. University student Janice Barr had to conduct an interview for her oral history unit and got around social distance rules by interviewing her husband. She made the unexpected discovery that family life in remote, snowbound northern Sweden during the winter was not so very different to coronavirus lockdown in Tasmania. In Newfoundland, Sarah Faulkner adapted her interview research for the new conditions. She invited participants to choose whatever form of remote recording worked best for them; she used photos to elicit storytelling and to break down the awkwardness of the remote relationship and she

joined community virtual spaces such as conversation circles to help develop relationships – though the face-to-face encounters she had enjoyed before lockdown made it much easier to network online.

None of the authors in this collection are conducting interviews about life during the pandemic. There are projects all over the world doing just that, and there are arguments about the pros and cons of collecting personal accounts during this tumultuous period or waiting until it is over and we can reflect on the consequences. But Nikki Henningham has been recording the *sounds* of the pandemic in metropolitan Melbourne, and the transformation of an urban soundscape when there are so few people in the streets. Most memorably, she describes the sound of school drop off time during remote schooling, when only a handful of children still attended her local primary school. ‘I sat and listened to the noise that was all around me. Who knew there were so many birds playing in that playground?’ Maybe birds had filled the empty spaces left by absent children; maybe they had always been there but not been heard. As Nikki concludes, she was reassured that ‘even in the depths of a very dark time for many, there is light and song and hope that things will be OK, when the kids come back’.

As I write in July 2020, with Melbourne now in its second week of its second lockdown, we have no idea how long we will be living with this pandemic, or if and when the old normal of oral history interviews in people’s home will be possible. Each of us will have to decide when we can do that again, depending on our own circumstances and projects. Some of us will decide that we may as well get on with it via remote recording. We will learn from remote recording pioneers like those featured in these writings, and we will learn how to relish stories told in strange times and new ways.

REMOTE INTERVIEWING RESOURCES:

<https://www.oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/>

https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/covid-19/?fbclid=IwAR3OFG_4XK8RyZs0uBII-aETpq-3XUwmVdtHywmluyrPHzCn9p3S5ok6Susk

The Impact of COVID-19 on Consulting Historians

FIONA POULTON

Fiona Poulton is an experienced heritage practitioner and oral historian with Way Back When Consulting Historians.

As consulting historians running a small business, COVID-19 is having a significant impact on us and on the clients and communities we work with. Before the virus hit Australia, we were conducting several oral history projects with hospitals, university colleges and medical and sporting organisations. We were also working on a podcast for a major hospital using oral history interviews with past and current staff. All of these projects have now been put on hold.

While we would love to make use of video conferencing technology to continue to record interviews during this time, in our case we have to carefully consider the purpose and potential outcomes of our oral history projects. As wonderful as it is to be able to connect with people remotely, there is no getting around the fact that recording an interview online without proper audio equipment results in much lower quality audio. These interviews therefore won't be as versatile. Many of the oral history projects we work on are stand-alone, with the intention of creating an archive of interviews that can be used in many different ways in the future. While the interviews conducted remotely during the current pandemic may be great for quoting in written material, or using as an historical source, they won't be so useful for creating digital histories, such as audio documentaries, podcasts and digital stories.

In the case of the podcast project we were working on, we have been partly able to continue using the oral history interviews that had already been conducted, and by recording narration in a careful, socially-distanced manner. However, the ongoing collection of new interviews is now on hold. If the podcast was focused on the experience of the global pandemic itself, it would likely be a different story, as the lower



Way Back When team : Lucy Bracey, Fiona Poulton, Sarah Rood and Katherine Sheedy. Photography by Catherine Forge Photography.

quality audio would in that case be appropriately reflective of this time and the world we are living in.

For us and for our clients, postponing our oral history projects is the best option right now, until we can safely record in-person again. Unfortunately, this means living and working with a lot of uncertainty, and has ongoing financial implications for our business.

Depending on how long the pandemic lasts and how the restrictions change, we may have to adapt these projects and think about different ways of capturing oral histories. For some communities with ageing interviewees, time is of the essence, and in some cases it may be more important to capture these memories in a lower quality format than risk losing them all together.

Lockdown Revelations

JANICE BARR

Janice Barr is currently studying Family History at the University of Tasmania and is a published author of short stories and poems.

I needed to conduct an interview, write a transcript and complete a 1000-word essay for an oral history unit at the University of Tasmania. I planned to interview a relative with a rich life story and I was looking forward to delving into Australian life in the 1930s. Then along came the COVID-19 lockdown and all those ideas evaporated. I couldn't visit my elderly relative and telephone conversations were not an option because her hearing was compromised.

What to do? Delaying the course was an option that I seriously considered but, after discussions with my family, I decided that interviewing my husband and writing on the topic of Swedish migration might be an option. There were challenges with this concept. His first language is not English, his knowledge of his grandparents and great grandparents is limited and my awareness of Sweden in the 1950s is mediocre.

I conducted a preliminary short interview and soon realised that writing about Swedish migration was not workable. Not only was there scant information available on Swedish migration to Australia in the 1970s, but my husband's journey to Australia was more of a travel adventure than a conscious decision to migrate in search of a better life. I moved on and recorded the details of his childhood years and unlocked some vivid images and a strong sense of place. During the transcription process I realised that life in northern Sweden in winter had many challenges and similarities to the COVID-19 lockdown.

The Olofsson family were often confined to their house in Kristineberg when temperatures were minus 30 or minus 40 degrees Celsius. Family in distant towns could visit but they usually did not because heavy snowfalls made roads dangerous to navigate. The five children stayed indoors and entertained themselves playing games like Monopoly and chess, building model ships and jigsaws and watching



Hans Olofsson photographed by Janice Barr.

television (no internet then). There was some impromptu singing around the piano but apparently no dance performances that would be worthy to post online on today's TikTok.

The underground cellar in the family house was stocked with jams, dried reindeer meat, ham, pickled herring, cranberries and potatoes. Lily Olofsson (his mother) created family favourites like *palt* (meat dumplings), *kanel bullar* (cinnamon buns), macaroni with cream and meatballs (my husband's favourite comfort food), and pancakes with lingonberries and whipped cream.



Northern Sweden in winter. Photographed by Hans Olofsson.

During lockdown I've expanded my repertoire of Swedish dishes, but my cinnamon buns need more time to perfect. More importantly, I completed an oral history

project and gained a deeper understanding of my husband's early life in Sweden and recorded his story for future generations. It has showed me the benefits of pausing for a moment and contemplating my own backyard, instead of always rushing around searching for external inspiration for stories. And, despite all the initial hiccups, I did eventually receive positive feedback from the university on my oral history project.

Conducting Overseas Fieldwork during a Global Pandemic: Challenges, Changes and Lessons from the Field.

SARAH FAULKNER

Sarah Faulkner is a PhD candidate within the Law and Society Division at the University of South Australia. Originally from Newfoundland and Labrador, she lives a transnational sense of home across Australia and Canada.

By examining the role of place-belonging within the context of regional settlement, my research draws attention to settled refugees' evolving relationship to notions of *home* and *place(s)*. Having already begun the eight months of my ethnographic fieldwork on the island of Newfoundland in January 2020, however, a change in sociological imagination had to be acknowledged in order to accommodate 'the new normal' of a COVID-19 world. While the world came to grips with its collective 'anticipatory grief',¹ I had to reflect on whether it was possible to continue my data collection. Examining the settlement experience of Syrian refugees as it relates to their sense of belonging and home relies on the personal narratives of the Syrian people themselves, in which opportunities to share their story must still be realised. Navigating the potential ethical, methodological, and communicative challenges to adapting traditional face-to-face methods into virtual techniques, I had to consider how such adaptations would affect the sharing of personal narratives and people's stories of *home*. Within this report, I reflect on just some of the lessons learned in adapting overseas ethnographic research to accommodate a diversity of virtual methods in the wake of a global pandemic.

During the time of COVID-19, academics from across the globe came together to share in their experience of conducting research through a variety of distance methods; an area of scholarship relatively under-utilised by oral-historians and

1 Scott Berinato, 'That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief', *Harvard Business Review*, 23 March 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>.

sociologists in the past.² Having the benefits of joint Canadian-Australian citizenship – in a time when borders became increasingly re-drawn – also permitted me to stay in the field, affording the benefits of mutual time-zones and physical proximity needed to ‘read the room’. Noting the affective atmosphere of the people and place was not only key to protect my wellbeing and that of my research participants, but also to determine if such methods were appropriate for the research question being explored. Engaging in a consultation process with key members of the community was therefore integral to determine the viability of adapting my research to include more virtual methods. Other considerations included updating ethics applications and noting some of the potential issues to using online methods. Perhaps the most notable challenge, however, was adapting my original methods of face-to-face ethnographic fieldwork and participatory mapping to the virtual space.

Key to my research focus was receiving participants’ own narratives to notions of place, home and belonging.³ Despite the challenges of adapting my research process to include more virtual methods, this experience became a valuable moment in reflective research. The application of video-technology, such as Skype, has been used to conduct qualitative interviews in the past and can notably meet challenges of spatiality, participant values, and financial limitations.⁴ Phone interviews can support the use of narratives as a discourse analysis,⁵ while the additional visual element of ‘webchat’ software can provide for some level of ‘face-to-face experience while preserving the flexibility and “private space” elements’.⁶ For my interviews, participants were given the

2 Charlie Morgan, Rob Perks, Mary Stewart and Camille Johnston, ‘Advice on Remote Oral History Interviewing During the COVID-19 Pandemic’, *Oral History Society*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/covid-19/>.

3 Erene Kaptan and Nira Yuval-Davis, ‘Participatory Theatre as a Research Methodology: Identity, Performance and Social Action among Refugees’, *Sociological Research Online* 13, no. 5 (2008): 1–12; Oscar Curry, Charlotte Smedley and Caroline Lenette, ‘What Is “Successful” Resettlement? Refugee Narratives From Regional New South Wales in Australia’, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16, no. 4 (2018):430–448.

4 Paul Hanna, ‘Using Internet Technologies (such as Skype) as a Research Medium: A Research Note’, *Qualitative Research* 12, no. 2 (2012): 240; Valeria Lo Iacono, Paul Symonds and David H.K Brown, ‘Skype as a Tool for Qualitative Research Interviews’, *Sociological Research Online* 21, no. 2 (May 2016): 103; Janet Salmons, *Cases in Online Interview Research* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2012).

5 Amanda Holt, ‘Using the Telephone for Narrative Interviewing: A Research Note’, *Qualitative Research* 10, no. 1 (2010): 114.

6 Hanna, ‘Using Internet Technologies as a Research Medium’, 241.

choice to use whatever virtual method they felt most comfortable with, which ranged across Skype, Google Meetup, Zoom, Facebook Messenger and Facetime. To address the loss of spatial mapping as a visual element in storytelling,⁷ other visual techniques were considered to enhance the participatory element of the research process.⁸ The use of photo elicitation was therefore used to support participant narratives and circumvent some of the challenges presented by a physically distanced world.

In the initial months of my ethnographic fieldwork, I noted how frequently members of the migrant community would use smartphones to share photos as a method to help bridge barriers in communication and support informal conversations about people and place. Despite its benefits, qualitative interviewing has limitations in its reliance on the talk and text that is generated through the refined context of an interview.⁹ The use of photos to support the narrative process has been noted in a variety of disciplines, in which its methodological strengths have been acknowledged.¹⁰ Photos of the participants' choice were therefore sent to me prior to the interview, which the participant and I simultaneously went through on our own devices. The use of photos was intended to not just act as a source of data, but rather as 'tools' to help facilitate the narrative discourse.¹¹ Similar to what was intended with mapping, the process of virtual

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- 7 Jack Jen Gieseck, 'Where We Go From Here: The Mental Sketch Mapping Method and Its Analytic Components', *Qualitative Inquiry* 19, no. 9 (2013); Tobias Weidinger, S. Kordel and J. Kieslinger, 'Unravelling the Meaning of Place and Spatial Mobility: Analysing the Everyday Life-worlds of Refugees in Host Societies by Means of Mobility Mapping', *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2019).
- 8 Somesh Kumar, *Methods for Community Participation: A Complete Guide for Practitioners* (United Kingdom: Practical Action Publishing Ltd, 2002); Julia Kieslinger, Stefan Kordel, Tobias Weidinger, 'Capturing Meanings of Place, Time and Social Interaction when Analyzing Human (Im)mobilities: Strengths and Challenges of the Application of (Im)mobility Biography', *Forum, Qualitative Social Research* 21, no. 2 (2020).
- 9 Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2002).
- 10 Douglas Harper, 'Talking About Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation', *Visual Studies* 17, no. 1. (2002); John L. Oliffe and Joan L. Bottorff, 'Further Than the Eye Can See? Photo Elicitation and Research with Men', *Qualitative Health Research* 17, no. 6 (2007); Marisol Clark-Ibanez, 'Framing the Social World with Photo-Elicitation Interviews', *American Behavioral Scientist* 47, no. 12 (2004); Robyn Sampson and Sandra Gifford, 'Place-making, Settlement and Well-being: The Therapeutic Landscapes of Recently Arrived Youth with Refugee Backgrounds', *Health and Place* 16, no. 1 (2010).
- 11 Elizabeth A. Bates, Joseph J. McCann, Linda K. Kaye and Julie C. Taylor, "'Beyond Words": A Researcher's Guide to Using Photo Elicitation in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 14, no. 4 (2017): 461; Steven Gold, 'Using Photography in Studies of Immigrant Communities: Reflecting Across Projects and Populations' in Gregory Stanczak (ed.) *Visual Research Methods: Image, Society, and Representation* (Thousand Oaks, California; London: SAGE Publications, 2007): 142.



St John's, Newfoundland. Courtesy of creativecommonsstockphotos.

photo elicitation provided a focal activity that the participant and I could share in together as a way to build a shared story 'of mutual exploration' across the virtual space.¹² Engaging in an activity that drew people's attention in a spatial way provided opportunities to engage physically in the research process.¹³ On initial reflection, talking through photos notably provided an opportunity for people to expand on their own stories, drew attention away from some of the discomfort that the virtual conversations could present, as well as created a greater medium for self-expression. During an interview, one participant noted that 'pictures, pictures let you talk much'.

While moving to the online space had its challenges, the ability to include a diversity of virtual methods to enhance people's storytelling was a notably unexpected benefit. Some other challenges to conducting qualitative research, however, included the risks of online saturation. After a number of months of virtual calls people can lose the capacity and will to attend any more online meetings. Another notable challenge existed in the domain of relationship building, in which being able to take the time necessary to cultivate relationships was confronted when the ability to be in the same

12 Giesecking, 'Where We Go from Here', 716.

13 Kumar, *Methods for Community Participation*, 333.



Remote cove in Newfoundland. Courtesy of needpix.com.

physical space was not available. One tactic used to mitigate this challenge was to take the time to participate in many virtual spaces, such as online conversation circles, community meetings, and ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. Taking the time to conduct preliminary phone, text, and Skype conversations prior to conducting the formal interview was also done for some participants, in order for a deeper level of trust to form. One advantage to having the first few months of physical presence in Newfoundland was that I had already engaged in some face-to-face encounters, which made it easier to network at a later date. Closely following the advice of community members towards people's capacity to participate was also critical to engaging with participants virtually during this time.

Largely, this process taught a key lesson in what it means to develop and refine a research process while in the field. William C. Van den Hoonard argues that fieldwork researchers must enter a research situation with an open mind, in which 'you should not end the research where you start'.¹⁴ By reflecting on what could and could not be compromised within the research process, I attempted to navigate and adapt to meet the challenges of my present circumstance. Definitely not without its

14 William C. van den Hoonard, 'Ethics on the Ground: A Moral Compass', in Deborah Hoonard (ed.) *Qualitative Research in Action: A Canadian Primer* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2019), 62.

'messy-bits', this process was filled with a number of key moments of reflection that were no doubt experienced by other researchers in the field. Through the support of both my academic community and the community of my participants, however, my fieldwork was able to soldier on; albeit in a different space than where it started.

Abandoning oral history interviews during COVID-19 restrictions

SKYE KRICHAUFF

Skye Krichauff is an ARC Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide, President of the History Council of South Australia and Joint Editor of Studies in Oral History.

Between December 2019 and February 2020, I conducted twenty oral history interviews with elderly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who live in the Adelaide and southern Fleurieu regions of South Australia. These interviews were commissioned by the University of Adelaide's Indigenous Oral Health Unit (IOHU), who recognise the value in learning about people's experiences as a means of improving the provision of dental care.

In late February I travelled overseas for two weeks, arriving home on 4 March. While I was travelling, the spread of COVID-19 intensified, as did awareness of the disease's contagiousness and deadly effects. Although I arrived back in Adelaide prior to the Australian government's requirement to self-isolate, I postponed pre-arranged interviews for two weeks.

I was booked to fly to Ceduna on 30 March for a week of interviewing West Coast Aboriginal people. I was to have three days in Ceduna and two in the community of Yalata (approximately 100 kilometres north west of Adelaide). On 17 March, when I had nearly finished two weeks of self-isolation, my contact at Yalata warned me that access would likely be denied in the coming days. On 20 March, the Project Manager at the IOHU cancelled my flights, car and accommodation. She had received official notice that Aboriginal communities across the state were in lockdown for an indefinite period.

I never considered conducting remote interviews for this project – either through Zoom, Skype, Messenger or telephone. There are a number of reasons why. First, on a practical level, few of the elderly Aboriginal people I have interviewed for this and

previous projects had laptops or computers. And while most have mobile phones, they are not necessarily smartphones. Most of my interviewees are on prepaid mobile plans and tend to communicate by text – particularly with people they have not previously met or don't know well. In addition, in regional and remote areas such as Ceduna and Yalata, telephone and internet reception is often patchy or non-existent.

Second, when conducting semi-structured, qualitative interviews using a life history approach, for deeper and more meaningful responses to be given, it is crucial that a rapport develop between interviewee and interviewer. I have found face-to-face meetings essential in building a rapport with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have good reason not to trust strangers who ask them questions and record their answers. The interviewee can more readily scrutinise and get a sense of an interviewer's motives, sincerity and personality when in close physical proximity to that person. Body language, facial expressions, the nodding or shaking of heads – all are missed over a telephone.

And while physical gestures may be visible though video link, other things are missed. Long pauses and silences – often significant and readable – that may be companionable and respectful when two people are sitting together, may be perceived as uncomfortable voids needing filling over the telephone or internet. When interviews are conducted in a person's workplace or home, photographs, paintings and objects on display are part and parcel of the interview. Such items can trigger memories and conversations. Pets, unexpected telephone calls, family members who drop in, all are readily accommodated in face-to-face interviews. Rather than being a cause for ending the interview, such interruptions provide insights into aspects of an interviewee's life that may not have previously been considered by the interviewer.

Another reason I did not consider interviewing people remotely for the Dental Oral History Project is that, at the conclusion of the interview, interviewees are reimbursed for their time with a gift card, recipe book, toothbrush and toothpaste. While these items can indeed be posted, it is a simple and immediate process to provide them at the end of the session and helps develop trust.

Finally, for this project, recruitment was largely through snowball effect. My interviewees seemed to enjoy the interview experience and, at the end of the session, many of them contacted relatives and friends asking them if they would also like to be interviewed. They provided me with the contact details of interested people then and there. I am not sure this would be such a straightforward process over the telephone or internet.

PS Since writing the above, I have travelled to Ceduna and conducted 27 interviews. At the time, Yalata was (and continues to be) closed to non-essential visitors.

‘Why Would You Want to Do That?’ Recording Soundscapes of a Global Pandemic

NIKKI HENNINGHAM

Dr. Nikki Henningham is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Arts, where she is Executive Officer of the Australian Women’s Archives Project

‘It looks like a cat. IT LOOKS LIKE A CAT!’ said an interested bystander as he approached me. It was the third time in five minutes I’d had to stop recording because a member of the public wanted to know what I was doing as I stood in Little Bourke Street on Mother’s Day 2020, apparently holding a cat on a stick in front of me. My response – ‘I’m recording soundscapes of a global pandemic’ – invariably gave rise to more questions of the ‘why would you want to do that?’ variety, my favourite being, ‘why would you do that with a cat?’. Why indeed!

A few days prior to this, Dave Blanken (Sound Preservation Manager at the National Library of Australia) and I discussed the idea of recording soundscapes of Melbourne during lockdown to create an aural document of a truly extraordinary time in history. What are the sounds of a city when the city goes into hibernation? As time was of the essence, given there had recently been discussion of the easing of lockdown restrictions, Dave quickly put together a specialist recording kit and immediately couriered it to me. The gear consisted of the Sound Devices 722 two-track digital recorder coupled with a Mid-Side (M-S) microphone array housed in a specialist M-S outdoor field recording mount, which was covered in a particularly ‘furry’ windsock. The cat and I went out and about for the first time on Mother’s Day.

Little Bourke Street in Melbourne’s CBD was chosen as the first stop because it is normally a bustling hub on a late Sunday morning, especially on Mother’s Day, as people come and go from the yum cha houses and Asian bakeries that line the narrow passage from Exhibition to Swanston streets. That morning it was the sound of scooters picking up takeaway orders and the clanging bells of trams in empty



Nikki Henningham recording outside the MCG. Photographed by Leigh Henningham (@leighhenningham Instagram).

streets that dominated the soundscape. The cat and I then travelled to the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG), where an AFL (Australian Football League) game would ordinarily be played, via a protest at state parliament. I'm not sure how Tracey Chapman would feel about her song *Talkin' Bout a Revolution* being used as an anthem for COVID denialists! I moved on very quickly as it seemed to me that neither social distancing nor mask wearing were practices many of these protestors felt obliged to adopt! An empty MCG awaited. Yarra Park sounded the best I'd ever heard, as birds returned to a space given over to cars full of footy fans every weekend during the winter.

Over a month between May and June 2020, I took train trips and tram rides, wandered around public spaces and recorded the sound of a council officer cleaning a parking meter! I visited the Arts Centre on a Friday night and stood outside Caulfield Racecourse listening for the thundering of horses' hooves coming down the straight with no one to cheer them on. I recorded outside the ground at the MCG when the AFL season started back, moved by the silence when players and umpires took the knee in support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and amazed by the sound made by players that comes from the oval and goes unheard when 70,000 spectators are there. I listened to the sound of a choir locked inside St Patrick's Cathedral as the voices soared and escaped through spaces in the doors and windows. I stood outside a golf



Nikki Henningham recording in Melbourne's Chinatown district. Photographed by Leigh Henningham (@leighhenningham Instagram).

course the day after rules were relaxed recording the noise of happy golfers teeing off. When they saw me, green keepers turned on their noisy leaf blowers, jealously guarding even the sounds that come from a private golf links!

My favourite morning was when I sat down to record the sound of school drop-off time, when remote schooling was the norm, at a school where a handful of families still needed to attend. It's the primary school I went to, and my own children attended many years ago. I sat listening to the noise that was all around me. Who knew there were so many birds playing in that playground? Having spent over a decade in that space across two generations, it was a sound that truly surprised me! I asked the principal if the birds were there all the time, even when the children were; she didn't know for certain. 'I guess we'll find out when the kids come back'.

I guess we will. In the meantime, I'll treasure that morning, when I listened to the noise made by the birds in the playground, vaguely reassured that even in the depths of a very dark time for many, there is light and song and hope that things will be OK, when the kids come back.

Optimism vs Pessimism – An Oral Historian and the COVID-19 Pandemic

MARGARET LEASK

Margaret Leask was for many years an arts administrator, music agent and events' organiser in Sydney and London. She has worked as an oral historian, performing arts historian and researcher since 2004.

My last oral history interview was recorded on 9 March 2020 for a Heritage/Development Application project for Parramatta City Council prior to the demolition of the city's town hall stage. This venue had provided a platform for performances, mayoral and citizenship ceremonies, school award ceremonies, dances and many community activities for more than 80 years. Six representative people were interviewed (and a seventh interview was cancelled due to COVID-19), but there were time pressures, a lack of interest in the outcomes (getting the Development Application was the principal purpose of the project commissioners), and some goal post moving moments as the project got underway. Given that it may be some time before I record further interviews, I am pleased to have worked with fellow oral historian, Sally Zwartz (with whom I co-edited Oral History NSW's journal *Voiceprint* between 2011–2014) on this project; sharing the frustrations (as well as the good bits) was important given the need to feel positive about our process and outcomes despite the lockdown. My other interview plans were then put in abeyance and we re-located to our farm near Yass, feeling grateful for some rain after a long drought, bushfire anxiety and stress.

Watching the many creative artists I have interviewed, or hope to interview, making the best of communicating their talent and ideas via Zoom, Skype and other online facilities during COVID, it seems the hardest things to achieve are genuine eye contact and good sound quality. While I realise many oral histories may now be told and recorded using these means, I'm afraid I need to be in the same room with an interviewee – which, given the on-going and insidious nature of this virus, and my reluctance to experience it, means interviewing for me may be some time away. What happens to my confidence and energy in the meantime? Like so many others,



Margaret Leask presenting at the 2013 Oral History Australia Conference in Adelaide.

I soon realised I need a full diary and deadlines to focus. An English friend has described her similar experience as ‘an unravelling’ of her life and this is what it has felt like. I know I am not alone!

I was determined to catch up on a backlog of track logs and to sort research material as a way to stay focussed. (There’s a reason that there is a backlog – it’s my least favourite part of the work and is best done in between interviews as a useful and constant reminder of one’s interview technique, the need to listen and follow

up on comments.) And, even though I can’t ask questions of others at present, my default position is asking questions, so there have been many. This is an unprecedented experience for practically everyone, and life-changing for many. Besides, it is a time when I perceive that many older people are sorting archives and memorabilia, being reminded of better or different times. What a good time it would be to interview them!

I have a great need for live performance (particularly theatre, music and dance), and the communal experience of being in an audience, which raises and provokes questions for my interviewees about their process, way of working, social and personal relationships and situations which impact on that way of working. This need is tied into the interaction involved in preparing interviews: discussion with colleagues, curators, archivists, and ‘commissioners’ of interviews, about what research will be necessary, the reasons for interviewing a particular subject in relation to the intended collection destination, the preliminaries of talking to interviewees and the anticipation combined with nervous energy that motivate and focus me. I am, it seems, always in quest of the interviewee’s interpretations and stories – which are also our stories.



Margaret's farm near Yass, New South Wales. Photographed by Margaret Leask.

What do I love most about the oral history interview? The learning I experience as others share their perspectives: everyone has a great story, everyone has contributions to make as we face challenges, achievements and find our place in our community. How lucky we as oral historians are to have access to this immediacy – and how I miss it! I have found myself making contact with some past interviewees during this time. Having been made aware of their situation (many are older, living alone, not able to see family), I have felt compelled to say hello, that I am thinking of them and remember the time we spent together.

Since this 'lockdown' experience began, I have been considering the positives and negatives and vacillating, like many others, between optimism and pessimism. I am very lucky to have a comfortable, safe place to be, but I am not ready to stop preparing and asking questions, so I have to hope to be able to re-engage with the oral history community and interviews as soon as possible.

PS I have completed some long track logs but there is still a backlog!

Hands on History: An Active Approach to Creating Oral Historians in the Secondary Classroom

PHILLIP O'BRIEN

Phillip O'Brien is a teacher from Melbourne with experience in a variety of different educational settings. He has written and presented with a number of professional bodies, including the History Teachers' Association of Victoria and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

History is not simply the story of what happened in the past. It is an active process of enquiry, and what we are able to discover depends on the questions we ask.

– Tracey Loughran¹

History is a discipline like few others; one of the greatest challenges teachers face is not in generating an interest in the past, but in developing in students the mindset and skills to actively do so. Seeing learners evolve from passive students of history to active historians is immensely rewarding, but the *how* of such a goal is readily forgotten in the *why* and *what* of curriculum design. The perception that rote-learning of dates, people and places is the core requirement of history students is an ongoing hurdle to overcome with students, parents and indeed other key learning areas at a whole-school level; balancing the historical knowledge essential to understanding the modern world with the skills to 'do' history is the real goal of the classroom history teacher.² With this in mind, our school offers a Year Nine elective unit: 'Hands on History', which focuses on active historical skills and knowledge without adhering to a specific mandated chronology or period. This allows for significant course tailoring: to date, students have explored community history, local history, individual areas of interest, national history and, most recently, oral history.

1 Tracey Loughran (ed.), *A Practical Guide to Studying History: Skills and Approaches* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

2 Glenn Whitman, 'Teaching Students How to Be Historians: An Oral History Project for the Secondary School Classroom', *The History Teacher* 33, no.4 (2000): 469–481.

By sheer kismet, our unit on oral history aligned almost parallel to the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent transition from the physical classroom to online learning. This brief essay aims to shine a light on the teaching of oral history in a secondary context via remote learning, as well as sharing some of the challenges and successes along the way.

Fundamental to the *doing* of historical investigation for the students was embedding a sense of purpose; demonstrating the value of the individual story was the anticipated first hurdle for students accustomed to empires, civilisations, wars, movements and colonisation. Correspondingly, time was dedicated to exploring the 'urgency' of oral history using simple mathematics; if one was fourteen years old (the age of most of the students) in 1914 – when World War One began – they would be 120 years old today. It quickly dawned on them that the chance of finding someone with a living memory of this period of history has now faded. This led to further discussion as they realised that the eyewitnesses of the definitive events of the last century will also disappear as time passes. 'Capturing' their unique stories, experiences and perspectives is, therefore, a matter of urgency. Through a personal lens, if students seek to learn more about the lives of their ancestors, the same sense of gravitas emerges. Further to this was the emphasis on the value of the individual story; the uniqueness of each individual among a global population in the billions; the students did indeed respond well to the concept of personal narrative.³

Having established a sense of purpose and urgency – all via the ubiquitous Google Meet (the remote conferencing platform used by teachers and students for lessons during the COVID-19 closure of schools) – students now worked on selecting a suitable interviewee and an appropriate topic for teacher approval. All students chose immediate family members for the task. Using an effective remote meeting system proved pivotal too, with clear instruction and guidance essential for overcoming

3 Jennifer Gonzalez, 'Voice of Witness: Bring the Power of Oral History to Your Classroom', *Cult of Pedagogy*, 23 September 2018, <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/pod/episode-105/>.

miscommunications and misunderstandings.⁴ Approved topics commonly included a focus on migration or particular life periods, such as:

- migration to Australia in the 1960s via the Turkish-Australian assisted migration scheme
- experience of military service in the Israeli Defense Force
- child migration from the United Kingdom
- growing up in rural Victoria
- working as a surveyor in the Australian Antarctic Territory in the 1960s
- schooling in colonial India
- recollections of a childhood in rural South Africa during the Great Depression
- life in post-independence Ceylon and the exodus of the Burgher community.

Narrowing their focus, students were now well-placed to develop questions that would form the backbone of their interview. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, a significant amount of time had been spent exploring question types (open vs closed questions) and how to ‘draw out’ detail from subjects; with this in mind, students were tasked with preparing six central questions, in addition to obtaining written consent from interviewees and testing their recording equipment. Almost all students used their phones as audio recorders and transferred the recorded files to their computers, although several chose to make video recordings of their interviews. Once everything was in place, students were given a green light to proceed. By the next scheduled Google Meet, all students had conducted their interview, giving us a wonderful base to build on; in fact, the majority of the interviews ran far longer than originally intended.

Armed with their interview, students were now directed to reflect on its content and identify areas ideal for further research and expansion, such as references to particular places, people and events. Using a variety of curated online sources, including the National Archives of Australia and Trove, students were shocked to discover

⁴ Richard Kennett and Hugh Richards, ‘Effective Remote History Teaching’, *One Big History Department*, Historical Association of the United Kingdom, 29 May 2020.

information that couldn't be found via a simple Google search! These sources provided key information to support, expand, verify and enrich their interview. Some students also asked their interviewee follow-up questions or sought information from other family members; conducting research as 'mini-historians' was, in many ways, a departure from the prescriptive nature of the curriculum, but both subject enthusiasm and skill development flourished.⁵ Using their interview, research, information and a brief biography of their subject, students were now guided remotely through the process of writing up their work into an informative and detailed narrative. This was done during the online lessons with the use of writing samples and demonstrations of the passive voice and how one can remove oneself from the piece.

Teaching oral history via the remote learning format proved to be a most interesting exercise. It was certainly fascinating to see students 'run' with their topics; Kathryn Walbert compared it to students 'creating an original sketch'. Using shareable Google Docs, one was able to provide feedback and suggestions remotely, which in turn would spark further lines of inquiry for students in their work.⁶ Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of this task was to see students embrace the value of the individual story. In the secondary history classroom, this story is often lost among the core events and pivotal figures of the past; to see them come to preserve small pieces of the past was certainly rewarding for all involved.

5 Karen Horn, 'Oral History in the Classroom: Clarifying the Context through Historical Understanding', *Yesterday and Today*, The South African Society for History Teaching, no. 11 (2014).

6 Kathryn Walbert, 'Oral History Projects', *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, National Council for Social Studies (March-April 2004): 5.

A Different Kind of Listening

RUTH MELVILLE

Ruth Melville is a writer based in Sydney. In 2018, she presented at the Oral History Northern Ireland Conference on the experience of narrative writers at the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Immersion and collaboration went out the window when the whole thing went online. I was going to Oral History Summer School, Hudson, New York: June 2020. Registration finalised, plane ticket booked, checking accommodation options. And then.

And then the world turns on a sixpence and people show their best and worst selves and the United States isn't the same place as it once was, nor is Australia or anywhere in the world for that matter. We all need to stay put and take a good look at ourselves on Zoom or one or other platform, but it's not the same as being with someone, especially with the time difference and trying to look friendly and interested at two in the morning.

Talking with someone, listening, is more than the sum of its visual and auditory parts. Oral history, at its best with bodies in the same space, allows each pause, moment of silence, inhalation and exhalation of breath. These days the world shifts lens, microphone and recorder, and we with it. Two degrees or ten, fourteen hours ahead or behind. Whatever the latitude and longitude, it's a different kind of listening.



Tweet cancelling summer school. Photographed by Ruth Melville.

The Warwick Irish – A Work in Progress

PAT RYAN AND PAULINE PEEL

Pat Ryan migrated to Australia from Ireland in 1978 and has been a member of Oral History Queensland since 2002. Formerly a community radio broadcaster with Brisbane multicultural station 4EB, Pat now focuses on oral history, especially memories of migration.

Pauline Peel grew up around Warwick and has an in-depth knowledge of family and local history, particularly as it pertains to Irish community history.

On 14 March 2020, days before COVID-19 shut down public events, 98 people gathered in the old St Mary's church in Warwick, in the Southern Downs of Queensland, to hear two speakers talk about the history of the Irish in Warwick. The two speakers were Pat Ryan, oral historian and a 1970s migrant from Ireland, and Pauline Peel, family historian and a native of Warwick, whose ancestors migrated from Ireland in the 1860s.



Pat Ryan, Pauline Peel and Chris Ryan (sound technician at the event) in Warwick. Photographed by Jeremy Sollars.

Pat spoke about an oral history she recorded in 2002 with the grand-daughter of Irish migrants who had settled in the area in the 1880s. Pauline spoke about the annual St Patrick's Day parade in Warwick, once a signature local event involving a whole-of-community effort. The presentations were enlivened by historic photographs and documents.

Both talks awoke dormant memories and stimulated conversations, particularly among older residents. Following the presentations, several new and intriguing stories were shared with the presenters. Plans to meet again were made but, within days, COVID-19 restrictions were introduced. Some conversations continued online but for the pre-internet generation, some of whom are residents in care homes, the window closed – for now. Plans for written exchanges, in place of recordings, are now underway. Back to basics!

Oral History and COVID-19: Drastic Changes or Business as Usual?

JESSICA STROJA

Jessica Stroja is an Adjunct Fellow at the Griffith University Centre for Social and Cultural Research.

Life has changed dramatically for the world due to COVID-19. Social distancing requirements, travel restrictions and risks to vulnerable people rapidly became commonplace in reporting as the pandemic developed. Many researchers were quickly required to alter their plans if their projects were to be completed on schedule. Travel was severely restricted, and many found themselves wondering how their work would continue if they could not travel to meet an interviewee. A number of people have adapted their work to reflect this changing situation. Yet there is a proportion of researchers, historians and scholars for whom life has not changed. The anxieties, fears and concerns surrounding COVID-19 of course remained prominent for them, as it did for many people, but oral history in a COVID world is, for some, not too dissimilar to oral history in a pre-COVID world.

I have been fortunate to have worked with a diverse community of historians and researchers, including academics and practitioners, volunteers and staff, oral historians and those who favoured other methods. I have enjoyed the reciprocal sharing of ideas with researchers who focus on local histories, those who work on broader projects, people based in my own region and those who live across the globe. Yet one aspect of their work has often resurfaced – the requirement to travel great distance for work-related research.

As an historian and academic, I have faced barriers that have prevented me from travelling to conduct oral history interviews face-to-face. Indeed, many researchers face such barriers for a variety of reasons including disability, illness, financial strain, and care commitments, among others. Yet through the availability of technology, willing interview participants and supportive colleagues, my work has been

conducted via telephone and video conferencing platforms. We shared photographs and documents via secure methods, and live video allowed us to feel as if we were in the same room. Those who have participated in my research projects as interviewees were quite willing to be part of an interview via this method. As many of us have experienced, the understanding and willingness of these people to participate in our research makes our projects possible. Yet I have often been met with surprise from people who had not realised my research was possible without undertaking travel.

As the COVID-19 travel restrictions increased, many people found themselves turning to technology to make their work possible. This has included oral historians and other researchers. I saw many researchers rapidly sign up for information sessions on conducting interviews and focus groups online, adjusting projects for the online interview environment, and adjusting human research ethics procedures to incorporate these interview processes. Yet for those who already faced barriers to travel, this aspect of their work did not change. Video and telephone interviews continued as scheduled, project planning continued as scheduled and research continued – albeit with many more people now utilising these same online platforms due to the COVID-19 travel barrier. As a result of a pandemic, the method of work already in frequent use by those who face barriers to travel was becoming a much more widespread occurrence.

Several colleagues have expressed to me their belief that this new way of working might well continue after the pandemic. For some, such as myself, this is not a new way of working. Yet the pandemic has made this way of working more commonplace. Yes, there will still be times when researchers will need to travel – but there are many more people who have now seen their research continue and succeed despite their inability to travel during the pandemic. While I have faced barriers to travel, I have not faced barriers in my research. I have conducted successful research that has brought forth new understandings of refugee resettlement experiences in Queensland, much of which is either forthcoming or under consideration for publication. I have worked with numerous local communities to undertake research that has allowed for a greater understanding of heritage and community engagement. I have had the support of colleagues who saw beyond a barrier, and instead saw

projects with potential, and an historian who was going to see each of her projects through to completion. For many people who have faced similar barriers, this was (and will be) life as normal – before and after the restrictions caused by COVID-19.

Importantly, this piece does not seek to diminish the work of those who conduct interviews in person, or those who travel for work-related research. It does not seek to diminish the importance of work that relies on on-site work, such as projects involving an archaeological component. Nor does it does not seek to diminish the severity of the impact COVID-19 has had on the lives of people across the globe. Instead, it highlights the determination of those who face barriers restricting travel and physical meetings to continue in their work, and how a COVID-19 world has made their way of work become more commonplace than ever before.