

Reports

Scaling Up: Working on Large-scale Oral History Projects

LUCY BRACEY AND KATHERINE SHEEDY

Lucy Bracey and Katherine Sheedy are both part of Way Back When Consulting Historians, a team of professional historians who have been researching, writing and producing history for over 15 years.

Over the last five years we've noticed and experienced a rise in large, stand-alone oral history projects commissioned by clients to record and document lived experience. These clients seek to create oral history archives without specific plans in mind for using the stories that are gathered, but with the potential for many different uses in the future. In recent years we have been contacted again by some of these clients and asked to work on specific projects using these archives, such as creating web content, including digital media.

This is positive news for historians, but these projects can be challenging. What are the implications and responsibilities for us as oral history practitioners? Drawing on examples from our work with clients such as City of Boroondara, Royal Melbourne Hospital, St Mary's College, Friends of the Royal Botanic Gardens and the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria, this paper explores issues around the creation and use of large-scale oral history archives, including ethical considerations and questions of responsibility and accessibility.

BACKGROUND

Way Back When is a team of four professional historians, based in Melbourne and Ballarat in regional Victoria. We've been operating for 15 years and, naturally, in that time we've noticed some changes in the work we do. About a year ago we were updating our website, specifically the section that includes our past and current projects. It became clear almost immediately that one area of work – oral history – was by far the most prevalent, running through the majority of our projects. This got us thinking and led us to look more closely into what had changed. It also prompted



Katherine Sheedy presenting at the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference.

us to consider what this means for us as oral historians and the implications for our practice. What we noticed was really quite surprising.

Since the start of Way Back When in 2004, we've seen a significant jump in the number of commissions we've received for stand-alone oral history projects – meaning projects where the primary outcome is an archive of oral history interviews. From 2004 to 2010 we had just four stand-alone oral history projects, but between 2011 and 2019, we saw this increase to a significant 17 projects. These included collections for the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria, Royal Melbourne Hospital, Burnet Institute, Trinity College, City of Boroondara, Friends of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Royal Children's Hospital, St Mary's College, Jesuit Social Services, Mornington Peninsula Shire, and the Australian Garden History Society (among others).

Of the projects we were working on at the time we presented this paper at the OHA conference in October 2019, over half of our current work was oral history projects.¹When we started doing commissioned histories – large-scale projects, usually in the form of a book – we undertook oral history interviews for research. These interviews were transcribed and the written transcript became the key source for our research. We used the transcripts for quotes, but we did not make any use of the audio. In the first six years that Way Back When was operating, we completed seven

commissioned histories. We undertook oral history interviews for all of them, but as an avenue of primary research only. One history that covered a 30-year period involved a staggering 50 oral history interviews. None of the interviews for any of these projects were used for anything other than research. And, it's actually possible that the oral history material for some of these projects was never handed over to the clients, since at the time neither we nor the clients saw the interviews as anything other than necessary to obtain the transcripts.

In the last decade, however, we've seen a steady increase in the number of commissioned history clients that have wanted us to do something else with our oral history interviews. Of the commissioned history projects we've done in the last eight years, just over 40 per cent had a secondary outcome – like an audio documentary or digital story – created with the oral history interviews. We have also seen a significant and steady rise in the number of oral history projects over the years. As technology has become more accessible and oral history has become more popular, organisations are becoming increasingly interested in creating an archive of interviews for future projects, capturing history while people are still alive to tell it.

We have completed 13 projects that were solely commissioned for the creation of an oral history archive for future preservation and use. We have undertaken 10 projects that were focused on oral history and included outcomes such as audio documentaries, websites, digital histories, short films and, in one instance, an exhibition of interviewee profiles paired with hand-drawn portraits. We were able to revisit one project we did for the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria that started life as an oral history archive, and is now part of a virtual museum with photos, written profiles and audio clips from 55 of the original oral history interviewees.

CASE STUDY: THE ROYAL AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY OF VICTORIA

The Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria (RASV) oral history project is particularly interesting and worthy of further investigation. We began this project in 2011 with the aim of creating an oral history collection. We were to interview and collect the stories and experiences of different people connected with the organisation to add to the already rich RASV archive.

Over the following eight years we undertook 55 long-form interviews, which were recorded and filmed. In 2019, RASV decided to create a virtual museum to better showcase its impressive archive, including the oral history collection. We were engaged to revisit the interviews and create a written profile of each interviewee, as well as an audio clip from their interview and a still image taken from the filmed interview. It was really exciting to be able to revisit this project but it also presented a number of challenges, including the fact that some of the interviewees had died during the intervening years. The original interviews had been recorded at broadcast quality, which meant that creating audio excerpts was no problem, but producing still images from the film footage was not as ideal.

REFLECTIONS

There is no denying the appetite for oral history today. Not only is there a growing awareness of the importance of gathering testimony, but with the ever-increasing availability of technology, we are seeing a rise in digital content being produced using oral histories including podcasts and digital stories.

So what does this all mean for us as oral historians? There are a number of interesting challenges that this presents us with. First and foremost is the quality of our recording. We are all now aware of the importance of recording in extremely high format. This includes equipment, file format, sound environment and being careful to eliminate ourselves from the recording. To revisit projects or enable the audio to be used in a meaningful way, we need to be recording at the best quality that we can. For us today, this sometimes means working with sound engineers and other creative professionals.

Another major challenge for us at Way Back When today is the administrative burden. We now need to allow significantly more time for simply administering these large-scale oral history projects. As well as using a professional transcriptionist, we engage the help of an administrative assistant for the number of transcripts to be sent for review. Logistically too, the audio files we work with are extremely large, and when they're multiplied many, many times over, this requires adequate file storage. Handing over material to clients has also become a much more considerable task, and as much as possible, we now allow time at the conclusion of a project to prepare files for handover.



Katherine Sheedy recording audio for a podcast.

Another really important consideration is ethics. How can we acquire consent from our interviewees for future projects when we don't necessarily know what these will be?

What happens if interviewees die or become uncontactable in that time? It is important to ensure adequate and flexible consent (as much as possible). While we can't know what these projects might look like in the future, ensuring that permission is secured for possible future use of oral history material is something we need to be active in. However, future access is reliant on the collection policies of where these collections are stored. This is why it's important that we select repositories that have the ability to safeguard these collections into the future.

So where are we now? The skills that we have as oral historians can translate and enable us to create new forms of history that are consumed aurally (podcasts, audio tours and soundscapes for instance). Sometimes, when budgets allow, this can mean working with other creative professionals. We need to be more flexible in our work, not only ensuring that our interviews are recorded in the best quality and form (following best professional practice), and that we fulfil the primary aim of the project, but also that the interview content has the ability to be used in the future. It's an exciting time to be an oral historian.²

2 Well it was, and will be again, post COVID-19.

Cowra Voices

MAYU KANAMORI

Mayu Kanamori is a photographer, performance maker and arts producer based in Sydney.

Cowra Voices is an oral history app with a geo-locative feature, much like a heritage trail app, with voices of local people sharing their personal tales about places in Cowra. Cowra Voices has recently won the 2020 Oral History NSW Community History Award.

Cowra means ‘rock’ in Wiradjuri, the language of its traditional custodians. It is a town with a population of just under 13,000 on the banks of the Lachlan River, with many ancient rocks. It was the site of the famous Cowra Breakout, when more than 1,000 Japanese prisoners of war attempted an escape from the Cowra Prisoner of War (POW) Camp, making the Cowra Breakout of 5 August 1944 the largest prison escape and effectively the only Australian land based conflict during World War Two.

Four Australian guards and 234 Japanese prisoners died as a result of the Breakout. The Japanese prisoners were buried locally near the Australian War Cemetery, and their graves looked after by some members of the Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL)’s local sub-branch. In 1955 the Japanese Embassy in Canberra initiated a survey of Japanese graves around the country, with the possibility of repatriation of the remains. Eventually it was decided to bring together all known Japanese remains at Cowra, and in 1964, the Cowra Japanese War Cemetery (Japanese Cemetery) officially opened. This is now the resting place of Japanese POWs, airmen involved in air raids over Darwin, and civilians interned in Australia as ‘enemy aliens’ during the Pacific War.

As a result, Cowra has become a place of symbolic significance in Australia-Japan relations. Today Cowra is home of the World Peace Bell, and their Peace Precinct includes the former POW Campsite, the Cowra Italy Friendship Monument, the Japanese



Cowra Peace Precinct. Image courtesy of Mayu Kanamori.

Garden and Cultural Centre, Sakura (cherry blossom) Avenue, the Saburo Nagakura Park and Bellevue (or Billy Goat) Hill. With annual Breakout commemoration ceremonies at both the Japanese and Australian War Cemeteries, and festivals such as the Cowra Festival of International Understanding and the Sakura Matsuri (festival) at the Japanese Gardens, Cowra's civic leaders have promoted the community's contribution to grassroots peace building, providing an ethical foundation for its identity.

While the Peace Precinct and War Cemeteries are considered symbolic centrepieces in this post-war peace and civic reconciliation story, the personal stories of individuals in the Cowra community central to these grassroots endeavours, as well as the personal stories of the people buried in the Japanese Cemetery, remained virtually unknown. Cowra Voices, and its sister project, The Cowra Japanese War Cemetery Online Database, both facilitated and produced by members of Nikkei Australia, addressed this dearth of knowledge. Nikkei Australia is a loose group of individuals interested in the research, study, arts and cultural practices of the Japanese diaspora (Nikkei) in Australia.

In May 2019, the Cowra Japanese War Cemetery Online Database was launched. Funded by the Japanese government, and created by members of Nikkei Australia,

this online portal documents data about all POWs, airmen and civilians buried at the Cowra Japanese War Cemetery. Cowra Voices built on this resource by giving it a 'human face', providing context and interpretation utilising actors' narration to tell stories of individuals buried at the Japanese Cemetery.

Individual stories of those buried at the Japanese Cemetery were chosen to demonstrate their diversity, such as stories of Jiro Muramats, a businessman who had become a British subject before the war; Masu Kusano, a woman who worked as a prostitute on Thursday Island; Liong Tjwan Kang, a Taiwanese merchant who was forced into internment by Dutch authorities, because at the time Taiwan was a Japanese colony; a POW who died during the Breakout after blowing his bugle that signalled its start; and a POW who died of illness in a camp other than Cowra, but whose remains were later moved to Cowra then, more recently, partially repatriated to Japan. Unlike some heritage trail apps, the recorded texts were written from a third person viewpoint to maintain a degree of authenticity, so that the actors became storytellers of oral histories, rather than playing the dead.



Japanese Cemetery. Image courtesy of Australian War Memorial 073487.



Entrance to Japanese War Cemetery, Cowra. Image courtesy of Mayu Kanamori.

The oral histories of the local community were recorded and edited by an award-winning feature and documentary radio producer Masako Fukui. Her skills in storytelling allowed 19 storytellers' voices to be arranged and compiled to create 13 different stories connected to 11 different locations in Cowra. The app begins with Welcome to Country by a local Wiradjuri educator, Albert Murray, followed by an overview narration by a local historian Lawrance Ryan.

Fukui created sound designs by recording nature sounds in Cowra, then collaborating with local musicians Graham Apthorpe and Peter Reeves, as well as Chor-Farmer (a Japanese choir that has visited Cowra 21 times in the last 42 years to commemorate both the Japanese and Australian dead with their singing). The app also includes other music, sound effects as well as contemporary photographs of storytellers, landscapes and historically significant people and events, either taken or curated by Mayu Kanamori, the author of this report. Full transcripts of the stories are provided.

Because of Fukui's prior work with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the project was able to enlist the support of ABC Central West and use



Masako Fukui in Cowra Japanese Cemetery. Image courtesy of Mayu Kanamori.

their high-quality recording equipment as well as their recording studio in Orange. ABC's support came to full force during the lead up to the launch, when they ran many of the stories on air throughout NSW. Editing and compiling oral history interviews into stories with sound design allowed the ABC to air high quality stories, and in turn, allowed the app to be given wider recognition.

The local stories on Cowra Voices focuses on first-hand accounts and memories of the residents, which were not part of the available literature on Cowra. These oral histories were collected through interviewing and recording the voices of a range of members from the Cowra community.

Some of the stories and places featured include: Wiradjuri stories of scar trees and childhood memories at Billy Goat (Bellevue) Hill, told by a Wiradjuri Elder and a younger Custodian; a coming of age story told by a high school student including her experience as an exchange student in Japan; reflective thoughts of the current caretaker of the Japanese and Australian War Cemeteries; a powerful story of a camp guard who fired the first alerting shots just before the Japanese POWs broke out, told by his son; a moving account by a resident, who remembers his childhood, accompanying his father, one of the local RSL members, to tend the graves of Japanese escapees when anti-Japanese sentiments were still the norm; and much more.

Identifying the locations to include in the app was not difficult as they were mostly already promoted in Cowra areas of interest for tourists. However, identifying and selecting those to interview proved more difficult. Although local recommendations

were followed, some who were interviewed about a specific place actually had more knowledge of other places. Not all locations had strong stories, whilst others had too many. Many people had stories to tell, but not all could tell them well, however once they were interviewed, it was difficult not to include them in the final app because of a sense of ethical obligation considering that the interviewees, by agreeing to be interviewed, had trusted us to value their stories.

The process of creating audio stories from oral histories often requires transforming interviewees into good storytellers. We often intuit a fine line between appropriating personal histories to meet the aims of a project and helping to bring out the best in their stories. Like all successful community projects, relationship-building and honouring trust became paramount, especially when the project team members were from Sydney, not Cowra.

Cowra Voices was managed by Jacqueline Schultze, the former Director of the Cowra Regional Art Gallery, who had lived in Cowra for five years. For Cowra Voices, she worked with Irene Ridgeway, a local Indigenous artist, who liaised with the Wiradjuri community. Chie Muraoka, our designer and web developer, had been working with Cowra Council for our sister project, the Cowra Japanese War Cemetery Online Database. I too had worked with the Cowra community on a number of site-specific arts projects, and as a result, had a history of working with local people who had relayed to me their personal stories of friendships and reconciliation with Japanese people prior to working on Cowra Voices. These relationships, prior to the commencement of the project, contributed to mutual trust – the key element to ensuring a successful outcome for everyone concerned.

To build on this trust we clarified from the very outset that the copyright of the original oral history recordings, its edited stories, and the codes for the Cowra Voices app's update, belong to Cowra Council, ensuring local stories stay in Cowra. We clarified community ownership of their heritage, and sought collaborative processes, taking into account peoples' connection to community and place, and through validation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous community Elders. Consensus-building, through time-consuming and detailed step-by-step consultations, was one of the

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WAR PRISONERS ESCAPE FROM CAMP

Wide search by troops, police

From Our Special Representative

Armed soldiers and civilian police are scouring the Cowra district for prisoners of war who escaped yesterday morning.

The men broke away from the prisoner-of-war camp near Cowra at 2 a.m.

Residents in homesteads and isolated districts have been warned to keep their children and womenfolk indoors at night.

Some prisoners have been recaptured by police and soldiers.

By tonight were reported to have reached points 10 to 15 miles from Cowra.

They were moving in different directions.

People living in and near Cowra were warned yesterday in a special broadcast that the escapees might attempt to secure assistance.

They were told to inform military or police authorities if they were approached by escapees and to keep a sharp watch for strangers.

The number of prisoners who escaped from the camp or their nationality has not been announced.

They carefully planned their escape by first setting fire to their huts and running out into the open compound.

They carried blankets and clothing and tore these over the barbed-wire entanglements to break them down and climb over.

The alarm was given and the Australian guards rushed to stop the escaping prisoners.

Guards On Roads
 Guards were able to stop some of the prisoners from getting away.

Roads, bridges, and rail crossings were placed under armed guard and police and soldiers are stopping cars and vehicles and questioning drivers.

Patrols are searching the bushland round the camp and district.

Motor cyclists are scouring by-roads and back-tracks.

As the prisoners are probably without food, they may attempt to steal by night.

Last night convoys of military trucks loaded with reinforcements of servicemen moved out in bright moonlight to replace other soldiers who had been searching all day.

These prisoners were recaptured in a bush fox-hole yesterday afternoon.

They were taken by First-Class Constable A. B. McGovern, of Mandurama, and Constable Cooper, of Woodstock.

Constable McGovern said last night: "They were out hidden when we approached the spot."

"We approached cautiously, but found the prisoners quite mild."

"After we had captured them we found they were armed with knives."

Constable McGovern and Cooper also recaptured another escapee during the day.

Tonight I spoke to Mrs. Walter Weir, who "entertained" three of the escaped prisoners at morning tea.

Mrs. Weir lives beside her sister-in-law, Mrs. Robert Weir, at Homestead, six miles out of Cowra.

Mrs. Weir said that three prisoners had apparently slept in the woodshed during the night and emerged soon after breakfast.

They came up to the house about 9.30," she said.

"They were first seen by my little girl, Margaret, aged 13. She was very frightened."

Well-behaved
 "My husband was down in the cattle paddock at the time."

"The prisoners were well behaved, friendly, and sat down on the side verandah."

"I got them scones and tea, which they ate ravenously."

"In the meantime we had got to touch with the prisoner-of-war camp and asked guards to hurry out to the homestead."

"Mr. Weir and his boy help had returned in the meantime."

"Thinking that there might be more escapees in the woodshed, they went down to investigate."

"At the same time, the three men who had finished their morning tea"

shook us and returned to the woodshed again."

"Soon afterwards military police arrived and took the prisoners in charge."

Prime Minister Curtin, who as in Melbourne, and Army Minister Forde, who is in Queensland, were immediately informed of the escapes.

Before full particulars of escapes of prisoners of war can be published, an official Governmental report must be made to the enemy country concerned.

This report, under international agreement, is made through the consular representative of the protecting Power.

New Zealand Escape
 A number of war prisoners have escaped in ones and twos from Australian prison camps during the war.

At Featherstone, New Zealand, in February last year, 45 Japanese prisoners of war were killed or died of wounds during a riot in a prison camp.

In an official statement New Zealand Prime Minister Fraser said the riot began when Japanese POWs refused to obey orders, and attacked the guard with stones and tools.

After a warning shot was fired by the officer in command, the guard fired on the prisoners of war.

Sixty-three prisoners of war were wounded in addition to the dead.

None of the prisoners escaped.

Shooting of 50 Allied air officers in a German prisoner of war camp was reported in an official German communication last April.



Allies move swiftly on French ports

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH SERVICE AND AAP

LONDON, Sat.—American forces thrusting south in France are expected to reach St. Nazaire and cut off the whole Brittany Peninsula by tomorrow.

U.S. spearheads today advanced 18 miles in five hours to Pipriac and Derval.

They are now only 30 miles from the coast.

Their advance threatens to cut off thousands of German troops in the tip of the peninsula.

Capture of the peninsula will give the Allies the great ports at Brest, Lorient, and St. Malo, as well as those at St. Nazaire and Nantes.

Already the B.E.C. reports fighting in St. Malo.

The Germans are throwing in their tanks in an attempt to prevent the Americans reaching the port.

Another American force is pushing up the peninsula towards Brest.

But the most important U.S. drive continues to be from the great road and rail terminus of Rennes captured on Thursday towards the Loire River.

Allied forces from Rennes are within artillery range of both St. Nazaire, port at the mouth of the Loire, and Nantes, big river port.

Nazis Pack Roads
 R.A.F. planes report all roads in the vicinity clogged with retreating Germans on foot, on horseback in trucks and cars, and in any other vehicle they can pilfer from the French.

Daily Telegraph war correspondent Sam White flying with an R.A.F. plane above the fighting Germans said:

"The Americans are so close on the heels of the retreating enemy they have sent messages to our planes advising them to ignore the usual 'bomb-line'."

"The bomb-line" is the safety line between our own and enemy troops.

"The Army told the Air Force to 'just bomb where you can see Germans'."

"So our planes are sweeping down to 'see-top' height to identify our transport from the enemy."

"Fortunately flying weather is ideal, and it is not difficult to select nice fat German targets for nice fat British bombs."

E. W. Macalpine, Sunday Telegraph London Editor, says:

"The Americans are roaming through Brittany Peninsula almost at will."

"The only determined and organised section of the German front seems to be opposite the British. Opposite the Americans there is no indication of any determined co-ordinated resistance or of any line on which the Germans might stand."

"They may attempt to regroup in country south of a line running roughly from Fouquier to Argentan but more probably they will have to retire beyond the River Loire."

Enemy Surprised
 Capture of Rennes, population 90,000 and largest town in France to fall so far gives the Allies an immense strategic advantage.

It is the centre of a vast network of road roads along which the Americans can drive in any direction, they choose.

In the central Normandy front the Germans have withdrawn from Villedieu Boscage.

British troops who entered the town today found it deserted.

The Germans' sudden cover of Geste counter-attacks are making an orderly withdrawal from the old Vire River-Orne River salient.

They are leaving behind dense minefields to delay the pursuing British forces.

Heavy fighting is continuing between the British and Germans south of Caumont.

Heavy fighting is continuing between the British and Germans south of Caumont.

STARVING PARISIANS LIVE ON CARROTS

From DAVID McNICOLL

LONDON, Sat.—Tens of thousands of people in Paris are living on carrots because there is practically no other food, refugees from the capital state.

Many people who have fled from the city have reached Allied lines in Normandy and Brittany.

They did because they expect civil war with great bloodshed to begin at any minute.

The refugees say that many thousands of French civilians have hidden arms, and are awaiting the signal to rise against the Germans and Vichy collaborators.

When the revolt begins some un-

parallelize since the bloody Revolution are expected to take place as loyal French take their revenge on traitors.

In the meantime conditions in the capital are appalling.

There is very little food, no enough water, no gas, and no electricity.

Newspaper article describing the POW breakout. Australian War Memorial 044570.

most important processes of the project development. Team members constantly asked, then listened to key local persons, storytellers, partner organisations, funding bodies and each other.

The model for our community consultations was based on the team members' past experiences of working with Indigenous Australians on arts projects. Although the majority of the story tellers were non-Indigenous Australians, and the majority of Cowra Voices' team members were from the Japanese migrant community, the guiding principles for a non-community member to create with a specific community heritage is similar to those guidelines for working with Indigenous stories.

I have often found cultural productions that involve the Japanese experience in Australia disappointing because of the lack of, or only perfunctory, consultations between the producers and the Japanese community. Although it is difficult to know how to consult adequately in any project, cross-cultural or otherwise, an effort was made from the beginning and throughout the project to ensure authenticity and integrity.

Process is important. After all, Cowra Voices is a free app with no commercial advantage for increased usage, and thus the desire and the power to disseminate these oral histories is left to those who remember the process and believe in the validity of the stories in Cowra Voices.

Cowra Voices was funded nationally by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 Australia-Japan Foundation Grants; internationally by the Japan Foundation, Sydney; locally by the Cowra Council and the Cowra Breakout Association; and privately by Quakers Australia through the Nancy Shelley Bequest Fund, and The Bruce and Margaret Weir Trust. Bruce and Margaret Weir's mother May Weir performed Cowra's first reconciliation act by refusing to hand over two Japanese escapees from the Breakout who wandered into her property to the military guards until she had fed them tea and scones. Both Bruce and Margaret Weir have spent much of their lives telling their mother's story to visitors and school children in Cowra. Cowra Voices is dedicated to the Weir Family.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Many people have contributed to the making of **Cowra Voices**. They are:

<http://www.cowravoices.org/acknowledgements/>

Cowra Japanese War Cemetery Online Database:

<https://www.cowrajapanesecemetery.org/>

Nikkei Australia: <https://www.nikkeiaustralia.com/>

Cowra Voices can be downloaded via:

<https://www.cowravoices.org/> or directly from Apple Store and Google Play

More information on **Cowra Voices**: <https://cowravoices.wordpress.com/>

Tangled Memories: Reflections on the Challenge of Dementia in Oral History Interviews

CHRISTEEN SCHOEPF

Christeen Schoepf is an independent historical archaeologist and community historian. Her recent interviews have given a cohort of men diagnosed with dementia a vehicle through which to tell their own life experiences to their families and descendants.

Working as an historical archaeologist and community historian, my previous papers have focused on how oral history has assisted me to add new layers and fresh perspectives to the biographies of objects. I have interviewed past mayors for my research into the life course of the Mayoral Chair of Port Pirie; revisited Beth Robertson's interviews examining the lives of South Australian women during World War One that have given a voice to some of the objects and operations of the Cheer Up Society; and currently, I am involved in a film project recording the memories of past racing identities who drove on some of South Australia's earliest raceways. During the past three years, however, I have also been recording the life stories and memories of men who have been diagnosed with one of the many forms of dementia. Each has challenged my understanding of the theoretical and ethical considerations that underpin best practice oral history interviews. In contrast to most oral histories, the final products are not for public consumption, but are intimate family items to be treasured by the immediate family and future generations.

This overview of my paper presented at the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference reveals just some of my experiences compiling these life stories, and the ethical and methodological issues that can be faced by the oral historian interviewing people living with dementia. All interviewees and partners/carers asked to remain anonymous, and only one permitted his voice to be heard, so instead of presenting the reflections of individual interviews, I melded them into one narrative featuring the metaphorical personas of Bob, my interviewee, and his wife and carer, Judy.

Except that each life story and the completed project differed in content and style, the issues were almost identical: the building of a comfortable relationship and trust; providing a safe and quiet place in which to undertake the recording; keeping the sessions short because of tiredness and confusion; issues of memory; consent; and, of course, the interviewee's declining health and well-being.

At first, the interviews were of personal concern because I am the carer of a man who was diagnosed with dementia over five years ago and every day is a struggle. At my initial meeting with Bob and Judy, I declined because I thought I would be too close to the subject matter, but after intense discussion and reflection, was persuaded to record the interviews. Judy determined that I was a good choice for their project, firstly because I knew of the tiredness, irritability and behavioural changes that would be exhibited by Bob, but also his obvious trust in me because he had not been so chatty with anyone for a very long time! Bob also proudly presented me with several pages of his written memories noting 'I have prepared what I want you to know for your project' like I was writing an essay for university and he was my subject. I courteously took the paperwork and perused the contents that would indeed form the foundation of my further research. Permission forms were designed not to be too complex but still cover the ethical needs of each party. These were signed by Judy as Bob's guardian and we agreed that she be present and contribute to the interview when Bob became tired.

It was soon obvious that many practices that formed part of my quite flexible oral historian's methodological toolbox did not apply. For example, it is not my usual practice to record preliminary interviews as I have always seen them as a way of getting to know the interviewee and build trust and confidence. But this was one of the best discussions we had together. Bob's voice was strong, his mind was active, and he told me things that he never did again. So, while I had written what he had told me, we did not have him saying it on the recordings. At every preliminary interview since, I have sought permission to record the time spent with the interviewee and the practice has paid off. Some parts of the recorded interviews were structured while others more closely resembled a two and sometimes three-way discussion because Bob's mind wandered easily and frequently drifted back to previous conversations. Morning interviews were

more productive, when Bob was fresh and keen to converse, but this was not always possible, especially when he began clinical trials of a new dementia treatment and our time together could only be late afternoons. By then he was tired, irritable, and sometimes just downright cranky! On several occasions he was ‘sundowning’ and could only manage a few words.¹ This made for a difficult flow of interview where his replies came as ‘Well, I hope we have answered your questions and made it worthwhile for you?’ or ‘Anyway, that is enough for now or you will get bored’. I soon determined that this was his cue for ‘I have had enough and I bid my farewell until our next meeting’.

Several afternoons were spent with Bob and Judy going through old photograph albums and were also recorded. The purpose of the sessions was to identify and scan those photographs and documents that might be used in a later publication or DVD for the family and to provoke Bob’s memory and reveal more details about his childhood. The sessions were conversational and informal but also fruitful. As I was scanning each photograph, I was asking Bob questions about them. The photograph of his first car took his fancy, and he became extremely excited and spoke rapidly:

Christeen: Bob, can you tell me about this car so I can ...

Bob: [excited] Purchased second-hand and think I paid about twelve dollars for it or thereabouts.

Christeen: Twelve pound?

Bob: Yes, twelve pounds, twelve pounds and it was owned by an old fellow who did not want to keep it, too hard to drive he thought, so I bought it, my first car.

We had discussed his cars on several occasions, however, on the day we were scanning the photographs, Bob was very keen to talk for long periods about all of them.

1 Sundowning can occur in late afternoons or early evenings. Behaviours include but are not limited to confusion, restlessness, insecurity. See: <https://www.dementia.org.au/about-dementia/carers/behaviour-changes/sundowning> accessed 19 September 2019. For further information regarding dementia see: <https://www.dementia.org.au/>.

Without the session, the finer details about the cars would have been lost. Judy had also contributed to each session and gave Bob a gentle nudge when he was struggling to remember things. It was also obvious that she had heard the stories many times as she was able to correct him and get him back on track on more than one occasion. Examples include several from his time at boarding school:

Christeen: How old were you when you went to boarding school?

Bob: Early teens.

Judy: [corrected Bob] Eight.

Bob: Yes, eight!

Judy: Oh, he has lots of stories about food. Big tomatoes, the cabbage boiled for three hours!

Christeen: Can you tell me a story about the food Bob?

Bob: Cabbage boiled up all day in tap water ... the chlorine ... not very good.

Christeen: You always hear stories about bread and jam or bread...

Bob: [cuts in] White bread ... and it was stale ... stale white bread.

Judy: [to Bob] Say why they always gave you stale bread.

Bob: To economise...the school was cutting down on expenditure.

Other methods and approaches have significantly informed these interviews including the 'Life Story Method' that is popular in care facilities such as Calvary Hospital and Mary Potter Hospice in South Australia.² The 'Life Story' concept is a useful interview tool that assists people diagnosed with dementia or terminal illness to successfully communicate their life stories and events as they remember them. The completed projects can take the form

² Calvary Biography Service, <https://www.calvarycare.org.au/blog/2016/10/04/the-story-of-your-life/> accessed 30 July 2017.

of a published book, a printed folder, a DVD, or even a memory box. The context and life events are those chosen by the interviewee and not by an interviewer seeking the answers to a set of predetermined questions. These life stories make clear to the audience that the narrator existed in a separate context before being confined in their house, hospital or care facility and had previously led productive lives within the broader community. Academic scholarship is hard to find; however, the four volume online publication *Life Story Research*, edited by Barbara Harrison, contains over ninety articles written by academics across a large spectrum of disciplines, including oral history.³ International projects include the memory and reminiscence work of the European Reminiscence Network with the elderly and those living with dementia, and the pay for use MemoryWell digital storytelling platform popular in United States aged care facilities to record life stories.⁴

This report presents just snippets of my experiences with the real couples that are the Bob and Judy discussed here. It would take volumes to truly give you an appreciation of the joys, the sorrows and the roller coaster ride that has been recording these interviews and creating the final products for the families. From the family's perspective, they have a tangible item through which to remember Bob as he was, and to connect his descendants to his story, their history and perhaps to hear him for the first time. From Bob's perspective, he has had the opportunity to tell his story the way he wanted to, whether this was the one that he had carefully planned, consisting of only the parts he wanted to tell, or, his whole life course. Regardless, his story is now told. His interview may not be part of a public archive, but it is in the family's archive for future generations to hear. Perhaps one day it will be lodged as part of a family collection in a state library or repository. From my point of view, while difficult and confronting at times, doing these interviews has made me very aware of how I need to apply all of what I have learned to my own situation, and to my oral history toolbox. With thousands of people being diagnosed with dementia each year, if you ever get the opportunity to record just one of them, please do so. You will be richly rewarded.

3 Barbara Harrison (ed.), *Life Story Research* (Sage, London, 2008).

4 See: European Reminiscence Network, <http://www.europeanremiscencenetwork.org/>; MemoryWell, <https://www.memorywell.com/> accessed 15 February 2017.

Invisible Footsteps

TONI PALOMBI

Toni Palombi is a writer whose work has appeared in the Guardian, Roads and Kingdoms, and Emrys Journal among others. She is currently pursuing a Masters by Research (focussing on life writing) and has worked in not-for-profit organisations in Asia and the Middle East.

I first met Echlas whilst working in Bethlehem, in the West Bank. She was my Arabic teacher. During our weekly Arabic lessons, I became fascinated by her life story (she is a wonderful storyteller) and this led to undertaking research for this essay. Oral history interviews were used to capture her life story; I interviewed her over three years with most of the recordings taking place at the refugee camp.

In a crowded refugee camp in Bethlehem, Echlas chain-smokes her way through a pack of cigarettes recently purchased by her nine-year-old neighbour. Small for his age, and always smiling, he drops by often to ask whether she needs anything from one of the small shops in the camp. As she talks, smoke fills the small room. Outside, the imam's faithful call to prayer competes with the shouts of the children playing soccer.

Echlas' parents became refugees during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, when they were forced to leave their home in Beit Jibrin. Like everyone else in the village, her parents only took a few things with them, thinking they would return in a few days when the fighting subsided. Days, weeks, and then months passed. No one ever returned.

The keys to her parents' homes in Beit Jibrin sit in her living room, serving as a constant reminder of their displacement. Echlas often wonders who lives there now.

'Do you think they know someone else has the keys to their home?' she asks, rhetorically.

Her father fought for Palestinian freedom with words. An active member of the communist movement, he was a regular writer for a political newspaper. While it no longer exists, it was controversial at the time. When Jordan took control of the West

Bank in 1948, following the British Mandate period, her father wrote about issues affecting Palestinians.

Echlas' mother was around 13 when she became a refugee although her exact age was difficult to determine, as at that time there were no official IDs. Her mother never had the chance to complete school.

Her parents married in the early 1960s when the West Bank was still under Jordanian control. After the birth of their fourth child, her father was arrested for writing articles that criticised the Jordanian authorities. He spent seven years in prison. He never saw his family during this time but he communicated with his wife through letters. Traversing isolated desert areas, they would arrive infrequently. Her mother would read the letters, tears spilling down her cheeks. She would write back, describing how the children had grown: how they could talk, take their first steps, started school. Her mother's scribbled words were her father's only link to his family.

While her father was in prison, Echlas' mother and her four children lived in a single room in a refugee camp in Bethlehem. She had to guard them vigilantly as there was a gigantic hole just outside their room which the small children might fall into if she were not careful. Each time one of them needed to use the bathroom, she had to take them to the only public toilet, situated on the other side of the cramped camp. Over the years, Echlas' mother built additional rooms, as she could afford to do so. She also created a garden. She planted a lemon tree which to this day is brimming with lemons. Strong and stoic, self-pity was a foreign concept for her mother during these long years of being a single parent.

One day, very close to Ramadan, her father was released from prison. He entered the West Bank for the first time in seven years, escorted by Jordanian soldiers. Twenty minutes was all he was given to kiss his children, whom he could barely recognise, and hug his wife. After what seemed like only seconds, the authorities escorted him to Hebron, an hour away from Bethlehem, where he was required to report to the authorities on a weekly basis for a year.

From the moment he was released, her father returned to writing. He began working night shifts at a French hospital and used any moment he could to write. One year after her father's release, one of Echlas' brothers, whom she never had the chance to meet, died of polio at the age of 10. Her parents had seven more children, the last of which was Echlas.

Echlas was born with muscular dystrophy, a disease that causes progressive weakness and loss of muscle mass. While she was never able to walk, the use of a wheelchair gave her independence. With the absence of schools catering for students with disabilities, Echlas spent her childhood being schooled by her family, namely her siblings and cousins, at her father's insistence. She has never seen the inside of a classroom. Regular visits to hospitals were a feature of her childhood.

When Echlas was 10 years old, her father died of cancer. His death devastated the entire family. Without a breadwinner, the family struggled to make ends meet.

Echlas pauses. I offer to light her another cigarette, something which she can no longer do on her own. She smiles at me mischievously, all too pleased I can understand her desire.

'Would you like some coffee?' she asks.

I happily agree to prepare a pot of Arabic coffee. Walking to the kitchen, the sounds of Arabic spill through the open window. Once the coffee has boiled over three times, I remove it from the stove and place it on a tray with two small coffee cups. When I return to Echlas, she is staring ahead, lost in her memories.

During the late 1980s, the first Palestinian uprising (intifada) against the Israeli occupation exploded in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Echlas and her family lived amid the chaos of war. Israeli soldiers stormed their home on a regular basis, turning their house upside down and, on one occasion, physically assaulted her mother – her sole protector against the mounting violence.

One day, while her mother was briefly visiting one of their neighbours, a group of soldiers pushed the front door open. Echlas was alone watching TV. The soldiers searched the entire house. Kitchen utensils were thrown from the cupboards, furniture was overturned, shelves were emptied of their goods. Feeling utterly powerless, Echlas turned up the volume of the TV, hoping the sound would act as a barrier between her and the soldiers.

During the years the intifada raged, her education with family members stopped. She rarely left her house as it was too dangerous. Her time was spent drawing and writing in her diary.

In 1995, as the chaos of the first intifada was becoming a memory, Echlas was run over by an Israeli settler in Bethlehem while out with her family. Without stopping, the woman fled the scene, speeding to the nearest Israeli checkpoint, heading towards Jerusalem. Echlas was left lying on the road as passers-by, shocked by the event, ran to help her. Her sister-in-law, neighbour and baby nephew – whom only moments before the accident was sitting on her lap – looked on in horror. Two young men who witnessed the accident followed the driver to the checkpoint, alerting the soldiers about the accident.

As Echlas lay on the ground, all she could see were shoes and legs. She could feel the roughness of the road against her skin.

Inhaling her cigarette, Echlas said, 'I could hear people screaming *she is dying*'.

Israeli soldiers appeared on the scene. One young soldier quickly offered his assistance, helping the ambulance attendants as they treated Echlas. Another soldier fired shots into the air in an attempt to control the horror-struck crowd.

She was rushed to a hospital in Bethlehem before being transferred to a hospital in Jerusalem for surgery. While in the hospital, she could hear doctors talk about the potential need to amputate her leg. It was the last thing she heard before going into surgery.

After surgery, she woke up to the strong aroma of medicine. Tubes were protruding from all parts of her body. She could not move. Doctors told her that the accident was so severe that she may never have the chance to sit in her wheelchair again. They expected her to be bedridden for the rest of her life.

The darkness descended when she realised the full impact of the accident. She had to come to terms with how heavily dependent she would be on others, given she could only move two fingers in her left hand. She could no longer brush her own teeth, wash her own face, or go to the bathroom without using a bedpan.

Refusing to be discouraged by the doctors, she spent almost a year in hospital determined to regain the ability to sit in her wheelchair. A physiotherapist worked with her daily. Echlas hid the amount of pain she experienced, especially when she tried to sit in her wheelchair, as she was afraid the physiotherapist would not allow her to continue with the treatment. The first time she sat in her wheelchair, she only managed to sit for two minutes. By the time she left the hospital, she could sit in her wheelchair for 15 minutes. Eventually, after much time and hard work, she could sit in her wheelchair for an entire day.

Describing her time in the hospital she says, 'The days were long and dark. I learned how to paint using my mouth and this saved me'.

Once released from the hospital, she enlisted the help of a foreign live-in volunteer to assist her with daily life. This eased the pressure on her aging mother. What began as an experiment – enlisting the assistance of foreign volunteers – would become an essential part of her strategy to live an independent life.

Over the next two decades, a stream of women from all over the world descended into Bethlehem. These women, most of whom are university students, are thrust into the world of a refugee camp with little preparation for how their life will unfold as they care for someone whose physical independence does not extend beyond holding a cigarette. Spending all their time together, bonds form quickly; Echlas remains in close contact with volunteers who are scattered across Europe and North America.

In 2000, bullets began to rain down on Echlas' house, signalling the start of the second intifada. Unable to run, Echlas was at the mercy of those around her. Curfews, daily shootings, soldiers raiding homes, and arrests were a daily occurrence. One of her volunteers, who arrived just weeks before the war broke out, refused to leave; instead, with youthful energy, she endured the battle of war, side by side with Echlas and her family. The volunteer remained undeterred even when soldiers forced them



Street art by Banksy in West Bank, Palestine. Photographed by Dan Meyers.

to leave the house at gunpoint or when tear gas pervaded every room in the house, and they were coughing uncontrollably and barely able to see through their tear eyes.

However, eventually the volunteer left to return to her studies. Given the intifada, it was impossible to recruit another volunteer. Once again, Echlas had to manage without the assistance of volunteers. This meant a loss of independence and greater dependency on her family. During intense moments of fighting, the family would hide in the one room considered to be the safest. Sometimes there were up to 24 people in this small room, waiting until the shooting subsided, each absorbed in their own activities: children, oblivious to the situation, played games; women prayed; fathers worried about their children in silence.

During the mid-2000s, Echlas travelled abroad for the first time to visit former volunteers in Europe. Far from her family and the brutality of war, Echlas met freedom and security in Europe. There were no checkpoints, tear gas, or soldiers.

While in Sweden she sought asylum, a process that was long and arduous, and ultimately unsuccessful. She spent almost a year in Sweden, learning how to manage alone and becoming acquainted with male nurses helping her with the most intimate and personal tasks (showering, going to the bathroom), something uncommon in her culture. She

allowed herself to become excited at the opportunity of doing all the things she had been denied: the chance to study and to live alone, free from the shackles of war. When government officials, who spent almost a year dealing with her case, broke the news, they cried in sadness and frustration. She returned to Bethlehem shortly after.

Back behind the wall that divides Israelis and Palestinians, Echlas continued to struggle against oppression, conflict, tension, and a lack of services for people living with disabilities. She speaks about disability issues at public events and each year publishes a calendar, filled with art depicting contemporary social and political issues.

When her mother passed away some years ago, she was devastated and retreated into herself. Her family is a constant source of strength and nourishment. Taking a sip of coffee, Echlas explains that she is fortunate to have such a supportive family, as many Palestinians living with a disability do not receive this support. She speaks with frustration about how some families are ashamed of their children who have a disability.

‘Some people with disabilities spend all their lives in one corner of the house never being in touch with anyone except their families who only see them as disabled’.

She has met many people with disabilities, especially women, who spend their lives rarely leaving their house. They never have the chance to make friends or get married.

A look of sadness marks her face. I light her another cigarette, noticing that the packet is nearly empty.

Her new volunteer from Germany, a sociology student, enters the room announcing Echlas has a visitor; it is one of her Arabic language students. Determined to be independent, Echlas makes a living teaching Arabic to foreigners in Bethlehem. Echlas smiles at the young woman, revealing that in a short time, the two have adjusted to the rhythms of living together – 24 hours a day – in a refugee camp.

As I leave, Echlas’ phone rings. She hangs up quickly and says, ‘Make sure you don’t go near the other refugee camp on your way home. That was my nephew. People are protesting and soldiers are firing tear gas into the camp’.

Reflections on *Intimate Stories, Challenging Histories*: Looking back on the 2019 OHA Conference

CHRISTOPHER CHEVALIER AND MADELEINE REGAN

A former nurse and health manager, Christopher Chevalier is a PhD student in the School of Sociology at the Australian National University. His thesis explores oral history and social history in Solomon Islands using life histories, small group biography, and collective biography.

Madeleine Regan has coordinated oral history projects with community groups and a range of organisations. Her PhD research builds on these projects and analyses the Veneto migrants through oral histories and archival research in relation to Australian migration history.

*Audio of this conference report can be accessed through:
<https://soundcloud.com/oralhistoryaustralia/regan-chevalier-16122019>*

INTRODUCTION

This article looks back at some highlights of the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference for two PhD students who escaped the daily grind of thesis writing to enjoy the diversity and complexity of oral history in the warmth of springtime Brisbane. The conference, organised by Oral History Queensland and held at the State Library of Queensland on 10-13 October 2019, was a wonderful opportunity to listen to many fascinating subjects by community, professional, and academic oral historians. The conference was organised into three streams – Aboriginal/Indigenous Oral History, Australian Oral History, and Methodological Issues in Oral History – with specialist sessions on themes such as women, trauma, community and local history. Like any conference, it was difficult to choose between simultaneous sessions and in this small selection, we have chosen presentations of most interest or relevance to our own research. We hope that our reflections will give *Studies in Oral History* readers the chance to remember sessions that they may have missed or provide perspectives for those who could not attend the conference. Readers who would like to listen to more detail can click on the audio links embedded in the text. This issue of *Studies in Oral History* also contains several articles that resulted from presentations at the conference.



State Library of Queensland where the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference was held. Photographed by Judy Hughes.

SOME CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

Alistair Thomson's pre-conference workshop *Interpreting Memories* (audio segment 4.15–7.50) was a highlight and useful for our own research. The three-hour interactive session with a master of the craft combined a presentation on interpretation with examples (audio accompanied by text) and discussion of issues, including:

- 1) factors that shape interviews between narrator and reviewer
- 2) micro-analysis of narrative – language, voice, use of pronouns, how people recount their stories (genres)
- 3) macro-analysis of themes – finding patterns within and between histories, new meanings, and interpretations
- 4) ethical issues – responsibilities at every stage of oral history (preparation, recording, transcribing, and archiving) and to narrator, family and colleagues, researchers, and research.

The workshop reinforced how an oral history interview is an artefact of the present and a resource for the future. The accompanying notes also provided a very useful summary of the complexities of memory and interpretation in oral history interviews.

The opening session of the conference by Canadian oral historian Katrina Srigley, *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing /The Stories of Nbisiing: Relational Story Listening and Storytelling on Nbisiing Nishnaabeg Territory* [audio segment 7.55–12.15], explored the significance of First Nations language and knowledge. Katrina emphasised the recuperative work of oral history and the processes of decolonisation in recovering voices silenced in history. Key aspects of her presentation included the long process of acceptance of outsiders, the influence of feminism in oral history practice, the importance of emotion in oral history, and the ethic of love and listening with love. Katrina also spoke about the need to unlearn to learn – and learning to listen and keep quiet – especially with Indigenous narrators.

Anisa Puri's presentation based on her PhD research, *Youth Migration in Modern Australia* [audio segment 12.20–15.00] resonated with Madeleine's thesis, which also examines migration, including migrants who came to Australia as children and adolescents. Anisa's study of five life stories of migrants who arrived between 1946 to 1973 reveals the importance of age, gender, and ethnicity in migration trajectories. Migrants' oral histories have great value in capturing memories, initial impressions, and how they imagined their futures from when they first arrived, and how those views changed.

Annabel Baldwin's presentation, *Putting the Visual Back into the Audio-Visual in Trauma* [audio segment 17.25–18.45] examined the meaning of gesture and non-verbal communication in Holocaust oral histories. The importance of the visual is more obvious in video recorded interviews, particularly in how much of interviewees' body language, gestures and expressions can be seen in the camera frame. With audio recordings, visual clues still add important interpretive detail at the time of telling but are lost at the time of listening unless noted in the transcript. Visual information from photographs and memorabilia surrounding narrators can also be valuable, particularly when interviewing people at home.

Tangled Memories – Challenges of Dementia in Oral History Interviews by Christeen Schoepf [audio segment 18.50–20.35] looked at the often difficult but important task of interviewing people with dementia who are still able to recall longer-term memories and communicate effectively. Cognitive decline may affect emotional expression as well as anxiety about interview topics and interactions. There are both pros and cons to interviewing a person with dementia with their partner or someone who knows them well to reassure and help them remember. Practically, it helps to choose optimal times of day for the person with dementia and use photographs to prompt questions and recall. The session reinforced the urgency of recording oral histories while people's health and cognitive function still allow.

In *Oral History, Ethnography and Digital Story Telling* [audio segment 20.40–22.10] Janice Hanley and Joan Kelly examined similarities and differences between three overlapping methodologies. Oral history is a discipline (or at least a sub-discipline) that can become confused with other interview-based methods in many other fields and disciplines. Each methodology involves interviews and subjective perspectives but have different processes, products, and confidentiality issues, particularly in ethnography.

'Larna Me' and 'Dem Tru', Oral history in Norfolk Island by Maree Evans [audio segment 22.15–23.20] was notable for her enjoyment of working as a curator on Norfolk Island and its distinctive pidgin, a mixture of historical influences on the island since the nineteenth century. There are additional complexities in the processes of interviewing in and translating from other languages but oral history recordings can be replayed repeatedly until the transcription is accurate and translations can also be independently confirmed by others.

Geraldine Fela's *Memory, Place and Australia's HIV/AIDS Crisis* [audio segment 23.30–25.05], examined the different experiences and care of people with HIV and AIDS, which varied by location and over time. Homosexual men and indeed anyone with HIV and AIDS were highly stigmatised in regional towns compared to those in capital cities, especially Sydney and Melbourne which had been at the centre of gay liberation in the 1970s. Gay men living in these cities with better facilities were

strong advocates who were predominantly affected by the epidemic in Australia. Until the mid-1990s, nearly every patient with HIV/AIDS died, but multi drug therapy has since transformed survival and reduced stigma surrounding people with HIV and AIDS in Australia.

Cate Pattinson, *Local Maternity Hospital Care in Perth's Western Suburbs* [audio segment 25.10–26.05], demonstrated how effectively local history can be preserved through oral history, accompanied by documents, newspaper articles, photographs, and artefacts. 'Laying-in Hospitals' were pre-war and post-war private maternity hospitals and her study recovers not only local history but also many institutional and systemic changes in medical care in the post-war era.

In *The Oral History of Test-tube Testimonies* [audio segment 26.00–27.50], Fiona Littlejohn and Susan Bewley challenged the triumphant narrative of In-Vitro Fertilisation from the 1960s using oral testimonies from successfully born 'test-tube' children and the many parents who were not successful and whose voices were not included in official histories. This pre-recorded presentation worked smoothly without the technical glitches and nervousness that can hinder live presentations. More use of pre-recordings would reduce the conference's environmental footprint, an important consideration for the 2021 OHA conference to be held in Tasmania.

Alistair Thomson selected oral histories from the Australian Generations Oral History Project to examine changing patterns of fatherhood in *New Wave Dads and Fatherhood in the 1970s to 1990s* [audio segment 27.55–31.00]. He made use of oral history quotes to add voice, text, and context to social history. He demonstrated how to weave together collective and individual oral history which was useful for anyone grappling with the challenge of representing and summarising a collection of oral histories.

Two presentations in the same session namely Skye Krichauff, *Analysing Settler Descendants' Historical Consciousness* and Cameo Dalley, Ashley Barnwell and Sana Nakata's *Frontier Violence and Memorialisation* [audio segment 31.20–35.15] dealt with settler and First Nation histories. Indigenous oral history is often silent and silenced in local history, memorials and museums. Skye looked at the selective remembering and forgetting of invasion history by settler families and their descendants. The



Alistair Thomson leads a workshop at the 2019 OHA Biennial Conference. Photographed by Judy Hughes.

Frontier Violence presentation combined the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and political science to compare Aboriginal and settler oral histories and how the accounts, artefacts, and memorabilia of white settlers are privileged at Wyndham local museum in the Northern Territory.

Oral history in Australia has a vital role in recording and recovering the history of colonial and settler interactions, violence, and dispossession. New technologies now allow these histories to be produced and accessed in creative ways, not just through museums and archives. Digital technologies create exciting new versions of oral history, such as walkabout tours and soundscapes; some examples were showcased in other presentations and the pre-conference workshop *Digital Futures in Oral History*.

CONCLUSIONS

This selection of highlights represents a small slice of the total conference sessions [audio segment 35.20–44.10]. For both of us, the *Interpreting Memories* workshop helped us better understand interpretation, how best to provide relevant history, and how people interact with events in different historical periods. The conference also confirmed the value of working closely with community and our privileged position as oral historians. The opening and closing sessions reinforced the importance of listening with love, of putting aside our own views and listening deeply to interviewees' viewpoints. It is important to know who we are as insiders and outsiders,



Closing conference plenary at the 2019 OHA Biennial Conference. Photographed by Judy Hughes.

and how this role can change in the process of recording and analysing oral histories. Academic theorising risks moving too far away from interviewees' perspectives and we need to be cautious about over analysing recordings and texts.

The conference confirmed for us how nuanced and complex oral history is. The theme, *Intimate Stories – Challenging Histories*, was very appropriate. The intimacy of recording interviews and personal stories are special qualities of oral history that both inform and challenge other versions of histories. Overall, the conference was a welcome opportunity to put academic writing aside and enjoy so many different types of oral histories and oral historians – not just academics but also family, local and community, institutional and social historians. Oral history is indeed a diverse discipline.

The authors would like to thank Oral History Queensland, Oral History Australia and the State Library of Queensland for organising and hosting the 2019 Conference. Madeleine also thanks Oral History Australia SA/NT for the student bursary that assisted her to attend the conference.

Tribute to Karen George

ALISON MCDOUGALL

Until retirement in 2019, Alison McDougall worked as a freelance researcher and oral historian with private and public institutions. She was a committee member of OHA SA/NT from 2001 to 2019, edited their newsletter for 17 years and was made a Life Member in 2019.

Dr Karen George became a Member of the Order of Australia in the Queen's Birthday Honours on 7 June 2020 for significant service to history preservation and research, and to professional associations. This well-deserved and prestigious recognition builds on her other recent awards: Oral History Australia's Hazel de Berg Award for Excellence (2017) and OHA Life Membership (2018).

Karen is a consultant historian based in South Australia who has spent much of her working life bringing the lives, issues and concerns of the disadvantaged, the forgotten and the overlooked to public attention. Karen indeed describes herself as an historian of social justice. There are over 200 oral history entries in the State Library of South Australia's catalogue, in addition to those within the National Library of Australia, which document her extensive and varied work.

After receiving her PhD in History from the University of Adelaide in 1994, Karen worked as the Oral Historian for the Corporation of the City of Adelaide from 1993 to 2001, making extensive use of their archives, interviewing an ever-widening range of people connected to the City and producing a guide and index to the collection, *City Memory* (1999). Concurrently, she undertook the Loxton War Service Land Settlement Project (1995–1999) which resulted in her acclaimed book published by Wakefield Press, *A Place of Their Own: The Men and Women of War Service Land Settlement at Loxton after World War II* (1999), and contributed to the *Wakefield Companion to South Australian History* (2001).



Karen George. Image courtesy of Karen George.

Through working in a culturally sensitive manner, Karen has established strong links with Indigenous Australians. She has undertaken archival research and oral history for native title claims and worked with the National Library of Australia on the 'Bringing Them Home' Oral History Project (1999–2002), which focused on the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. This forcefully brought to her attention the disconnection between these people and their extant government records. A joint project with the

State Records of South Australia and Link-up SA (Nunkuwarrin Yunti of SA Inc) led to Karen's development and writing of *Finding Your Own Way: A Guide to Records of Children's Homes in South Australia* (2005), which in turn became the basis for the South Australian section of the Find & Connect web resource. Since then she has undertaken 30 oral history interviews with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff of Nunkuwarrin Yunti of SA with a view to writing the history of this Aboriginal Community Centre.

In 2005, Karen was appointed as Research Historian and writer for the Government of South Australia's Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry. For three years she worked in this sensitive area providing archival research, writing and advice. She gained deep insights into working with vulnerable people and was a much-valued interviewer and contributor to the National Library of Australia's 'Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants' Oral History Project (2009–2012). Karen has continued as a researcher and historian in this field, exploring the role of genealogical research and family tracing in the process of healing for Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants (University of Melbourne: Routes to the Past – ARC

Seeding Grant) and working with clients and staff of Relationships Australia South Australia's Elm Place and as Historian Researcher at Link-Up SA.

In addition to being a member of the Professional Historians Association (SA), Karen was a long-term committee member of Oral History Australia SA/NT (1999-2017), undertaking the role of president and editor of *Word of Mouth* from 2000 to 2002. For many years she taught oral history and research practice and ethics for OHA SA/NT through the Association's workshops. Her contribution has ensured a high standard of oral history practice throughout communities and organisations in South Australia.

We congratulate Karen on this significant recognition of her passion and commitment to giving voice to those who are otherwise silent or unheard.