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Week 2 & 5 Reading

APA referencing

Curthoys, A., & McGrath, A. (2009). *How to write history that people want to read* (pp. 91–96). University of New South Wales Press.

Referencing for family history

Ann Curthoys & Ann McGrath, *How to write history that people want to read*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2009, pp. 93–96.

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Ann Curthoys

I visited the NSW township of Young, near the site of the Lambing Flat anti-Chinese riots of 1861, for my doctoral research on responses to Chinese immigration. There I saw not only the mullocky terrain of the goldfields but also the local historical museum, which displayed the flag of the anti-Chinese European miners: Roll Up, Roll Up, No Chinese. I had read of the flag in the colonial newspapers, but to actually see it helped me gain a real sense of these men – often from politically restive backgrounds in Britain – using their political protest skills against the Chinese miners in their midst. That it was still in a country museum also told me something about how the riots were remembered.

Yet we need to be careful when using present sites to understand the past. They may have changed in important ways – the course of a river has been altered, a beach may be huncreds of metres from its 1820s location, a swamp may have been reclaimed, a hillside levelled, a bridge collapsed, and so on. What looks creed and beautiful now may have been dusty and ugly then, and vice versa.

Oral histories

Recorded oral histories are a major resource for the historian of more recent times. As most of us realise, however, you need to use oral history with understanding and care. Particularly since the 1970s, those of us working in oral history have been preoccupied with the problem of the nature and reliability of memory. Luisa Passerini argued in the late 1970s that the silences, discrepancies and inconsistencies that she encountered in her interviews with Italian workers about the Fascist period from 1922 to 1943 were themselves forms of culture that historians needed to understand. The oral sources were indications of subjectivity, of feelings and ideas about the past seen through the lens of the present.¹³ In the 1990s Italian historian Alessandro Portelli also suggested that factual errors were worthy of serious consideration. He found that the people he interviewed in a small working-class Italian city about events that occurred twenty years or so earlier misremembered events in systematic and revealing ways.¹⁴

With these ideas in mind, historians came to study oral history mainly as a form of memory – more important for revealing ways people narrate the past and make meaning than as a set of clues about the past. To understand the meaning of the stories people tell them, historians have had to investigate not only questions of subjectivity, the self and identity, but also the building blocks of storytelling – rhetoric, metaphor and narration. While Portelli himself suggests oral history should serve as both a source of information about the past and a site of cultural study in itself, many in the field have ceased to see oral history as evidence about the past at all, but only as evidence about the present. That is, they interpret oral history interviews anthropologically, but not historically.

- Avoid disturbing or upsetting those you interview. Talking about the past stirs up both welcome and unwelcome memories, and the experience may be distressing. Sometimes, though, it is highly therapeutic. You should be prepared for these varying responses, and act always with consideration towards your interviewees.

Choose your technology carefully; digital recorders and voice recognition software may be worth using. You have to be practical and check that your equipment is all working well, and ensure that you are confident about using it. Nervousness on your part will only make your interviewee uncomfortable. The saddest research tales are about wonderful interviews that ended up being blank tapes because the historian pressed the wrong button.

Contact your potential interviewee by mail or by phone. Many people are nervous about the idea of being recorded by someone they don't know; although you will find that older people are often keen to share their histories and thoroughly enjoy the experience of their story being valued by someone else. Be very clear about the general topic you wish to cover. Tell them about your project and why you wish to speak with them in particular. You may need to reassure them that they have something valuable to add. Some people may like to have a family member or a friend present, and you should go along with such a request. Depending on the conversational etiquette and expectations of the people concerned, two interviewees, talking together with occasional prodding from the investigator, can produce wonderful material. An interview with a single individual can also create a strong dynamic and lead to rich material being recorded.

You should be very courteous to any potential interviewee, aware that they are doing you a generous favour. Take with you a small

offering such as a cake, a packer of biscuits – or a document from your research that they might find of interest. Choose a place to meet where they feel comfortable. An interview conducted in their home can be very worthwhile because there will often be memory triggers nearby, things like photographs, letters, maybe a painting. Ask whether such things are available. Prompts like these can be a great way of starting an interview in a more relaxed way.

Take a consent form with you. Its content may be dictated by your institution, but it should have a section explaining the nature of the project terms, and then a series of statements setting out the conditions under which you may make use of the material in the interview. You should show the interviewee the consent form either beforehand or right at the beginning of the interview, and ask them to sign it then or straight after the interview is over.

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Indigenous oral history is a particularly special kind of oral history, as are the histories of all those peoples who have no long tradition of literacy. Histories of this kind may be conveying encultured ‘ancestral memories’ going back multiple generations. You will be dealing with ‘stories’ that may seem mythologised, that are being told in a way unfamiliar to many westerners. It may not be first-hand history, but it will often contain a great deal of information plus conceptualisations and interpretations that can valuably inform your project. Indigenous history may also be analysed as a form of history-telling that can be critiqued and discussed. History-telling may be through song, dance, storytelling traditions, art, and many forms of popular culture transmitted between generations. Historians are only beginning to learn about and analyse these significant historiographical traditions.

If you are working with people who have suffered long histories of oppression, you as historian will need to take this into account because their initial response to you may be a test of your attitudes and character. If you are an ‘insider’ in such a group you may be more readily accepted, but there will still be issues and limitations.¹⁶

Building research relationships with other people can be time consuming, but it is well worth it. A good historian must obtain insider perspectives to truly understand the past. Most oral history deals with living memory and people’s experiences during their

lifetimes. Sometimes, however, you will be dealing with deeper stories – of landscape and human creation, perhaps of slave journeys, passed down the generations.

Once your project is complete, you should deposit your interview transcripts and tapes in a library or other collecting institution. You will have created a valuable piece of historical data which future researchers will have the benefit of using if it is stored safely.¹⁷

Ann Curthoys

I was living in Canberra at the time of the 2003 bushfires, when over 500 suburban homes were burnt down. In the end, my home turned out to be safe, but over several days the repeated warnings that the fires could change direction and return made me realise that the valuable materials in my study – including oral history tapes, as well as photographs, pamphlets, minutes of meetings, and other records from the Freedom Ride of 1965 that I’d written about in a book which appeared in 2002 – could well be destroyed. I asked the specialist library of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies whether I could donate my material. They agreed, and so they are now available for anyone to use, and they are much safer than they could ever be with me.

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Week 3 Reading

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