

**Clamouring to be heard:
a critique of the *forgotten voices* genre of social history of the
early twenty-first century**

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Critical essay

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ABSTRACT

Forgotten Voices of the Great War by Max Arthur (in association with the Imperial War Museum), (London: Ebury Press, 2002) sold over 250,000 copies and was the first of a series of fourteen *forgotten voices* books that used first-hand accounts from the Imperial War Museum's Sound Archive. Their commercial success spawned a raft of publications that promised to introduce readers to the authentic experiences of men and women who had survived major conflicts in the twentieth century. This thesis will argue that, while the books expose individual lives that might otherwise be overlooked, the narrative structure serves to flatten out, rather than amplify, personal testimony. The books largely fail to explore how an interviewee's experience was shaped by wider geo-political pressures or considerations of gender, rank, geography and age and how events influenced the narrator's subsequent life.

This thesis argues that, while my work has been subject to the same commercial considerations as the *forgotten voices* books, I have, nevertheless, developed a form of oral history that can be 'popular' but mindful of the complex intellectual demands, conundrums and opportunities of oral history. Further, I maintain that my books have made a unique contribution to the genre that has become known as 'creative non-fiction'. Analysis of my three books: *Waiting for Hitler*, *Voices from Britain on the Brink of Invasion* (London: Hodder, 2006); *The Barbed-Wire University: The Real Lives of Allied Prisoners of War* (London: Aurum, 2011) and *Army Wives: The Women Behind the Men who Went to War* (London: Aurum, 2016) shows how I achieved this in a way that honours the traditions of oral history and the individuals who take part in it.

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1. Introduction

The Spring 2018 issue of the British publication *Oral History*, the official journal of the Oral History Society, bears witness to the range of human experience that has been recorded by oral historians in recent years.¹ Articles explore ‘families after the Holocaust’, ‘oral history and composure in the electricity supply industry’, ‘post-conflict identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina’, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) community in Alabama, oral histories of bridge construction in the San Francisco Bay area, First Nation women’s voices in Canada, what oral historians can learn from psychotherapists, and finding poetry in sound archives in a public history context. The range of topics reflects the extent to which both the practice and theory of oral history have expanded and deepened over the past thirty years and the extent to which it has established its place within academic history around the world. The journal articles also offer a reminder of oral history’s driving impetus, albeit invariably modified and developed in actual practice: a desire to recover the voices of those whose lives have previously been overlooked by established historical methodologies and practices. These lives, which until the 1960s were largely ignored by historians, now include women, people of colour, and from ethnic minorities, members of the LGBTQ community, and those from ordinary backgrounds.

At first glance, the fourteen *Forgotten Voices* books that emerged at the start of the twenty-first century, and were aimed at a commercial rather than academic or scholarly readership, appeared to be following the same objectives and protocols of oral history as it was simultaneously being practised within the academy and in other specialised professional contexts. Drawing on first-hand accounts from the Sound

¹ *Oral History*, 46.1 (2018).

Archives of the Imperial War Museum (IWM), the *Forgotten Voices* books sought to marshal first-person accounts of those involved in the major conflicts of the twentieth century.² The first of these, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* by Max Arthur (Ebury, 2002), examined the lives of rank-and-file British soldiers, as well as witness statements from American, French, and even German combatants. The book also incorporated first-hand accounts from women on the Home Front, including nurses, and those who had experienced the war as children. Its publisher made much of its efforts in promotional material to present the ‘authentic’ voice of the past. By the time Ebury published the sequel, *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War*, in October 2004, the first book had sold 300,000 copies and would eventually sell nearly half a million.³ In time there would be twelve further titles. All these books found a ready audience in ‘heritage sites’ such as the IWM’s own shop, as well as non-specialist retailers and were included in pre-Christmas round-ups of books about twentieth-century conflict.⁴

However, while the first two *Forgotten Voices* books climbed up the history and non-fiction bestseller lists, a close reading of the texts reveals that both of them neglect, or are wilfully ignorant of, the key principles of oral history as practised in a

² Max Arthur (in association with the Imperial War Museum), *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* (London: Ebury, 2002), *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War* (London: Ebury, 2004), *Forgotten Voices of the Great War (Illustrated)* (London: Ebury, 2007), and *Lest We Forget: Forgotten Voices 1914–1945* (London: Ebury, 2007); Roderick Bailey (in association with the Imperial War Museum), *Forgotten Voices of the Secret War* (London: Ebury, 2008), *Forgotten Voices of D-Day* (London: Ebury, 2009), and *Forgotten Voices of the Victoria Cross* (London: Ebury, 2010); Joshua Levine (in association with the Imperial War Museum), *Forgotten Voices of the Blitz and the Battle for Britain* (London: Ebury, 2006), *Forgotten Voices of the Somme* (London: Ebury, 2008), and *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk* (London: Ebury, 2010); Hugh McManners (in association with the Imperial War Museum), *Forgotten Voices of the Falklands War* (London: Ebury, 2007); Lyn Smith (in association with the Imperial War Museum), *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust* (London: Ebury, 2005); Julian Thompson (in association with the Imperial War Museum), *Forgotten Voices of Burma* (London: Ebury, 2009) and *Forgotten Voices: Desert Victory* (London: Ebury, 2011).

³ 300,000 copies: *Wells Journal*, 8 October 2004; nearly half a million: back cover of *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* (2014).

⁴ See, for example, Deborah Moggach, ‘An A-list Guide to Holiday Reading’, *Mail on Sunday*, 8 December 2002, p. 66. The twelve-CD set of *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*, narrated by the distinguished classical actor Richard Bebb, won the 2004 Spoken Word Awards.

scholarly context. Their narrative structure, which relies on extracts from – typically – over a hundred interviewees, serves to flatten out rather than amplify individual testimony. People often appear more than once in a book or in different books, which makes their story feel fragmented; we never have a sense of an individual’s background or personality, unless they make a point of telling us as part of the interview. The extracts appear without any sense of the context in which the interview took place or of the dynamic between interviewer and narrator; there is no room for the author to elaborate on silences or the way in which the speaker told their story. The manner in which interviews in the earlier books were gathered, often with a focus on a campaign, likewise flouts the practice encouraged by members of oral history communities, such as the British Oral History Society, to consider a subject’s entire life, rather than simply focussing on one comparatively short period or episode. With testimony divided into bite-sized chunks, it can be difficult to see how a subject’s experience is shaped by wider geopolitical pressures or considerations of gender, rank, geography, and age. What is presented as the *Forgotten Voices* books’ biggest advantage – that they appear to offer readers an insight into what it was really like to experience war *in the moment* – is also their biggest disadvantage: few of the books offer any reflection on the impact of this experience on the later life of the interviewee. The books violate individual experience, while claiming to honour, even fetishise it.

At the time that the *Forgotten Voices* books were reaching their most commercially successful point, I began work on the sequence of three books that forms the focus of this critical commentary: *Waiting for Hitler*, a study of the Home Front; *The Barbed-Wire University*, an exploration of prisoner-of-war creative

culture, and the self-explanatory *Army Wives*.⁵ My aim in writing them was to develop a form of commercially viable, ‘popular’ oral history that was, nevertheless, mindful of the complex intellectual demands of oral history in a way that the *Forgotten Voices* books so flagrantly were not. It was immediately apparent, however, that I would encounter challenges. The realities of trade publishing, such as publishers’ reluctance to include off-putting and expensive footnotes and a resistance to the inclusion of too much contextualising material, made it unworkable to be explicit about my attempts to respect the conventions and codes of oral history. Nevertheless, I have developed my practice in a way that allows me to honour the complexity of oral history – and the opportunities and dilemmas it offers – while avoiding the worst traps of the *Forgotten Voices* books, which leave one with the uneasy feeling that individuals’ life stories have become fragmented and, despite the claims of the publisher, devalued.

⁵ Midge Gillies, *Waiting for Hitler: Voices from Britain on the Brink of Invasion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006); *The Barbed-Wire University: The Real Lives of Allied Prisoners of War in the Second World War* (London: Aurum, 2011); *Army Wives: From Crimea to Afghanistan: The Real Lives of the Women Behind the Men in Uniform* (London: Aurum, 2016).

2. The development of the theory and practice of oral history and its place within the academy

According to Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, editors of the third edition of *The Oral History Reader*, the development of oral history as a distinct practical and theoretical exercise has been ‘complex and messy’.⁶ This complexity and ‘messiness’ surrounding oral history has meant that one simple fact about its development and its relationship to other kinds of history is often overlooked. Put simply, oral history is as old as history itself and was, in fact, the first kind of history.⁷ Indeed, it is only recently that an ability to assess oral evidence ceased to be one of the tools of a good historian.

The use of oral sources by writers who consider themselves ‘historians’ rather than ‘oral historians’ can be easily traced from classical times to the nineteenth century. Herodotus (c. 484–425 BCE), the first Greek historian, used oral accounts when describing the wars between the Greeks and Persians, and his successor, Thucydides (c. 460–400 BCE), relied on eyewitness testimony and his own memory when writing *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Writing under the Romans, Plutarch (c. 46–120) made use of family stories in his *Parallel Lives*. In the early eighth century, ecclesiastical historian Bede employed oral sources, among others, when writing his *History of the English Church and People*. In sixteenth-century Italy, Francesco Guicciardini eschewed direct quotations from documents and relied on his own involvement in events as proof of their accuracy when writing his *History of Italy*. Bishop Burnet’s *History of His Own Time* (1724) valued oral history, and Voltaire, while stressing the importance of verifying facts, also used eyewitness

⁶ *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

⁷ Paul Thompson with Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 23.

accounts, as in his *History of Charles XII* (1731).⁸ In the nineteenth century, French historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874), professor of the École Normale, the Sorbonne, and the Collège de France and chief historical curator of the National Archives, employed his memory and collection of oral evidence in his *History of the French Revolution* (1847–53).⁹ Macaulay's *History of England* (1848–55), probably the bestselling nineteenth-century history book in the English language, drew on a range of sources, including surveys, poetry and novels, diaries, published reminiscences, and ballads.¹⁰

It was not until the nineteenth century that historians began to turn away from oral sources. Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), who was appointed professor at the University of Berlin in 1825, questioned the use of eyewitness accounts and emphasised the importance instead of ascertaining facts through detailed and thorough examination of official archives and written records. He believed it was possible to harness the objectivity of the emerging scientific disciplines to create an absolute and authentic version of the past, 'how it really was', in a way that ran directly contrary to oral history's reliance on the individual and the partial.¹¹ Ranke imbued history with a sense of professionalism, teaching his students that the past could only be properly reconstructed by relying on archival sources. Most of these sources were paper documents, such as treatises, and had already been pored over by previous historians. What was different in Ranke's methodology was the absolute avoidance of imagination when interpreting these sources. This clarion call to seek out documentary evidence coincided with a trend that saw national governments

⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

¹¹ Roey Sweet, 'Antiquarianism and History'. In *Making History, The Changing Face of the Profession in Britain*. Institute of Historical Research (2008) <<https://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/antiquarianism.html>> [accessed 25 May 2018].

across Europe establishing and opening up archives to professional historians as a way of telling and cementing new national stories concerning great men, politics, religion, and war.

Paul Thompson, who was one of a group of historians who emerged from the 1960s with the conviction that oral history could be a way of investigating the lives of ordinary people, asserted that von Ranke's emphasis on the documentary method helped to transform history into an 'expert specialism, not shared by others' and that by shutting themselves away in studies and archives historians were offered 'invaluable social protection' from both the elite and ordinary people.¹² Thompson studied history at the University of Oxford before moving to the newly established University of Essex, where he was appointed lecturer in sociology.

Oral testimony's estrangement from history as practised in the academy was cemented by the establishment of undergraduate programmes of teaching and graduate research. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson pointed out the importance of the first chairs devoted solely to history rather than history's inclusion within another subject – in 1810 at the University of Berlin and 1812 at Napoleon's Sorbonne – and the emergence by the second quarter of the nineteenth century of history's 'own elaborate array of professional journals'.¹³ When William Stubbs became Regius Professor at Oxford (1866–84), he brought with him a reputation for scholarly rigour and insisted that historians should observe political neutrality in their research. At Cambridge, Lord Acton, a follower of von Ranke and advocate of scientific methods of inquiry, was appointed Regius Professor of History in 1895. Further affirmation of history's acceptance within the academy came with its

¹² Thompson with Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 49.

¹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 194.

establishment as an independent honours degree subject at Oxford and Cambridge in 1872 and 1873, respectively.

However, while universities in Britain were placing greater stress on what was seen as the precision offered by documents, other researchers, outside the academy, continued to value oral testimony as a way of accessing experiences from different parts of society. Journalist Henry Mayhew, author of *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), and social reformers such as Charles Booth in *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1889–1903) and Seebohm Rowntree (1871–1954) in his study of life in York, relied on interview material. Booth's cousin, Beatrice Webb, turned to oral history alongside documentary evidence while writing *The Co-operative Movement in Britain* (1891) and in the book she produced with her husband, Sidney, *History of Trade Unionism* (1894). They also passed on their methodology to the fledgling school of British labour history. Indeed, the rise of the trade union and labour movements, as well as increased activism among suffragettes, suffragists, and those engaged in the international peace and socialist movements, led to a re-evaluation of which subjects were worthy of study by historians. These many changes contributed to a reassessment of the areas of history in which there were few, or no, documents to guide historians. Oral sources gradually began to regain their standing, leading in the last 50 years to an explosion of their use within history, especially social history.

i. The rise of 'history from below'

The idea of 'history from below', which aimed to record the experiences of working-class people, had its origins in the French historical *Annales* school. The movement, which was developed by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in the late 1920s,

endeavoured to shift history away from being concerned entirely with such ‘public’ matters as the rise and fall of nations, regime change, and war. By borrowing some of the methodologies and interests of adjacent disciplines, including literature and psychology, the aim was to explore the *mentalité* of past times. By *mentalité*, followers of the Annaliste approach meant a focus on the wider mindsets of past cultural or social groups. The idea of *mentalité*, with its emphasis on gradual development rather than short-term events, was part of the Annalists’ concentration on the *longue durée* (the long term). Meanwhile, in the United States, the New Deal Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) provided a forum for many groups who had been overlooked by American historians. As part of the scheme, over 6,000 out-of-work artists and writers interviewed more than 10,000 American men and women from a range of backgrounds about their lives.¹⁴ As Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli pointed out, the interviews with former slaves that were part of the FWP meant that ‘oral history has been about the fact that there’s more to history than presidents and generals’.¹⁵

Marxism provided another important impetus to make working-class history a valid area of research. In particular, key members of the British Communist Party History Group encouraged historians in the 1950s and 1960s to write about ordinary people although this was achieved with scant reference to women’s experience. Its members included E. P. Thompson, who wrote the pivotal *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), Christopher Hill, who applied Marxist theories of change to seventeenth-century England, Eric Hobsbawm, who in the 1950s and 1960s explored the ‘standard of living debate’ of the Industrial Revolution through the prism of working-class experiences, and Raphael Samuel, a social historian who set up the

¹⁴ Lyn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 4.

¹⁵ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. viii.

History Workshop movement in an attempt to move the study of the past from the academy to public gatherings or ‘workshops’.¹⁶ At the same time, historians of the newly emerging sub-discipline of labour history were dismayed at the paucity of sources relating to the lives of working people. The deficit spurred on historians such as Asa Briggs and John Saville to champion the creation of oral history archives and their use, both within the academy and beyond. Saville, meanwhile, combined his role at the University of Hull with becoming the first chair of the Oral History Society (set up in 1970). The society’s membership was made up of social scientists, broadcasters, and museum and library staff.

The Women’s Liberation Movement, or ‘second-wave feminism’ from the late 1960s, highlighted the fact that Marxist approaches in particular sometimes failed to acknowledge the experiences and viewpoints of women. Although Sheila Rowbotham did not use oral history herself, her pioneering study *Hidden from History* (1973) encouraged historians to study aspects of women’s lives that had often been overlooked. Her work, and developments such as the History Workshop movement that promoted feminist and labour history, were part of a realignment that led practitioners of social history and social sciences to re-evaluate what was historically significant.

Oral testimony provided a useful way to approach new areas that historians were beginning to focus on in the second half of the twentieth century. These areas included studying people of all races and, as Edward Said demonstrated in *Orientalism*, how the West’s treatment of other, ‘subaltern’ cultures offered a greater

¹⁶ Thompson with Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 63. Samuel wanted to make historical writing and research a ‘collaborative enterprise’ to support social justice and to inform politics. See ‘About HWO’, *History Workshop* [website] 2018 <<http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/about-us/>> [accessed 23 March 2018].

insight into that society than it did into the groups under its control.¹⁷ Oral history provided tools with which to examine oppressed groups, but also those who offered resistance or acquiescence.¹⁸ By the end of the twentieth century, oral historians were starting to gather life histories from lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and journals such as *Oral History* were beginning to include more articles about LGBTQ groups from around the world.

For many oral historians, the search to record forgotten lives and to help people to explore and make their own histories ‘continue to be primary justifications for the use of oral history’.¹⁹ This motivation also goes some way to explaining the growth of oral history outside the academy (and the rise of oral history societies and networks from a range of different cultural backgrounds): in schools, community projects, and reminiscence therapy (in which discussion of the past, often using prompts such as photographs or music, helps to validate memories in a therapeutic setting such as a care home) for example.²⁰ As Paul Thompson said:

Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow-workers. It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact – then understanding – between social classes, between ethnic groups and between generations.²¹

ii. The ‘ebbing of documentary credibility’²²

Thompson is widely regarded as a pioneer of the use of oral history as a research

¹⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1991).

¹⁸ See for example, Anna Laura Stoler with Karen Strassler, ‘Memory Work in Java: A Cautionary Tale’ in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, pp. 370–96, and Kathleen Blee, ‘Evidence, Empathy and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan’ in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, pp. 424–34.

¹⁹ *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, p. 3.

²⁰ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p.159. *The Oral History Reader* lists networks and societies around the world, pp.697-703.

²¹ Thompson with Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 22.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

methodology for social history, and has also shown that it is possible to find an audience outside the academy for an accessible yet scholarly history of working-class lives using oral history. *The Edwardians* (1975), for example, which was based on a national survey of 450 people from different backgrounds born before 1918, secured a trade publisher (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) and was reviewed in a range of non-academic publications such as the *Sunday Telegraph* and the *Observer*. The success of this, and of other books by Thompson, proved that the general reader was interested in whole-life histories, rather than the truncated versions that would be offered two decades later in the *Forgotten Voices* series.

In *The Edwardians*, he argued that oral testimony had a pedigree that is often overlooked and that, while the tape or digital recorder has now superseded the researcher's notebook, oral sources have always been part of the historian's toolkit: 'The intrusion of machinery into the historian's craft, and the new title "oral history", have perhaps made the use of tape-recorded interviews as evidence seem more novel than it is'.²³

By the time he wrote *The Voice of the Past*, first published in 1978 and now in its fourth edition, Thompson was convinced of the limitations of the documentary tradition based on paper sources and pointed out that the document had changed its social function in three ways. First, important communication is no longer made through long-lasting documents; instead people meet, text (as a more recent edition pointed out), or phone. Second, letters, 'probably the most important documentary source since the eighteenth century', have been replaced by emails (and, in the twenty-first century, we might add social messaging services). Lastly, the documentary record has lost its innocence; we recognise that diplomats write with

²³ Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 16.

future readers in mind, that minutes of important meetings are often deliberately inaccurate, and that official documents are only as accurate or as honest as the person creating the record.²⁴ Although there have always been cases of officials writing with an eye to a later readership, Thompson believed that this approach became commonplace after several European governments released more archival material in the early twentieth century: ‘From the 1920s, therefore, no diplomat could possibly forget that any document which he eventually retained might later be used against him’.²⁵

Although oral history is not the only way we can reach different perspectives, it does allow for multiple viewpoints: we hear not just from the general, but also from the ordinary soldier; the pupil, as well as the teacher; we know what the husband *and* the wife felt.²⁶ The invention and extensive use of the portable cassette recorder in the 1960s – followed by the introduction of the digital recorder in the late 1990s – confirmed oral history’s validity by allowing interviews to be preserved (both in the form of an original recording and a transcript) in an archive.²⁷ As Thompson noted, the recording of the interview can now be used by ‘lone scholars in libraries just like any other type of documentary source’.²⁸

Paul Thompson and other scholars working in the humanities and social sciences were also influenced by the ‘cultural turn’ of the 1970s. Naively unproblematic and ‘straightforward’ readings of documents and economic data no longer held sway, and historians felt liberated to read the same sources ‘against the

²⁴ Thompson with Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 50.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁶ Erika Rappaport, “‘The Bombay Debt’: Letter Writing, Domestic Economies and Family Conflict in Colonial India”, *Gender & History* 16.2 (2004), 233–60 shows how domestic correspondence can be read as ‘narrative and object’.

²⁷ Thompson with Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 52. Perks and Thomson describe this as a fourth ‘paradigm shift’. See *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, p. 38.

²⁸ *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, p. 38.

grain' and to look for meaning in the interstices of a culture's language. This new way of viewing the past was influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud, who, at the start of the twentieth century, had developed a different approach to language and hidden meaning. Elite Britons, particularly members of the Bloomsbury Group of intellectuals, became interested in Freud's theories and in psychoanalysis, and invested in the idea that retelling or reshaping a life story could lead to a rearranged and more congruent sense of self. This alerted oral historians to the importance of the not-said in life narratives; the omissions, as well as the over-emphatic denials, jokes, and slips of the tongue of a self-narrative became as important as the overt message.

In his introduction to *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Eric Hobsbawm argued that historians could benefit from looking for insights in unusual corners of a nation's culture. These fresh ways of viewing history in the 1980s allowed oral testimony to regain some of its pre-von Ranke legitimacy as a source in the new appreciation of contested meaning and omissions. In the postmodern world, the impossibility of producing 'objective' history was acknowledged. Thanks to theoretical borrowings from adjacent disciplines, in particular literary studies, it now appeared there was room for rhetorical flourishes in the way historians wrote history and the manner in which narrators told their own life history. Since every source is filtered through at least one human experience, each document or account picks up a dusting of bias or omission. Documents such as the census and birth and death certificates are now understood as a representation of what was *told* to an official and what the official *thought* they had been told.²⁹ The memoir written several years after

²⁹ I experienced the limitations of official sources when writing about the music hall performer Marie Lloyd, who was pregnant when she married for the first time in 1887 and lied about her age, saying she was a year older than she really was. See Midge Gillies, *Marie Lloyd: The One and Only* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1999), p. 36. Charles Bean, Australia's official war correspondent of the First World War and an early advocate of oral history, found that, since soldiers were trained to make accurate observations on which their lives depended, they were often more reliable than official dispatches. See

the event, like the interview, is composed in the knowledge of how the experience unfolded and ended.³⁰ It may be influenced by multiple edits (by the memoirist, or their typist and editor – if they have one) and is often infused with a nostalgic belief that life was better in the past or that human nature was kinder, even within harrowing situations.³¹ However, most people write only one memoir, whereas a subject may be interviewed multiple times. Orlando Figes commented that, in the Soviet context, oral history was more reliable because it could be ‘cross-examined and tested against other evidence’, whereas writers censored their own letters and diaries to protect themselves against official retribution.³²

iii. Post-positivist approaches to memory

While Paul Thompson and others have made a convincing case for the legitimacy of oral testimony about the past, its reliance on an individual’s memory still causes unease among some historians who view it as intrinsically unreliable. As a Cambridge-trained historian, I felt anxious – and a little excited – about the prospect of using what was (to me) a new type of material in my earlier books, biographies of Marie Lloyd and Amy Johnson and *Waiting for Hitler*. I recognise now that my concern missed the point of the practice and its uses. As so many other sources, such as newspaper and court reports rely, ultimately, on verbal accounts, in a sense I had been using oral history for years – I just didn’t realise it. In addition, memory, though no doubt complex and contested, still has much to offer.³³

Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2013), pp. 164–65.

³⁰ Clare Makepeace, *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 23.

³¹ Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 151.

³² Orlando Figes, ‘Private Life in Stalin’s Russia: Narratives, Memory and Oral History’ in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, pp. 363–69.

³³ Fred Allison, ‘Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight: Changing Perspectives over Time’, *Oral History Review*, 31.2 (2004), 69–83 shows how accounts told at different times to different audiences

Jay Winter, Charles J. Stille Professor of History Emeritus at Yale University, writing in 2001, suggested that towards the end of the twentieth century the subject of memory had for many historians become ‘*the* central organising concept of historical study’, overshadowing themes of gender, class, and race.³⁴ The ‘memory boom’, he maintained, was partly driven by the success of French social scientist, Pierre Nora’s *Les lieux de mémoire* (Sites of Memory), a collection of essays by leading French intellectuals that examined ideas of memory situated in sites ranging from statues and place names to flags and ceremonies and published between 1984 and 1992. While Winter agreed with Nora that the Holocaust had inspired a range of memories, he argued that the contemporary ‘obsession’ with memory had arisen out of a ‘multiplicity of social, cultural, medical and economic trends and developments of an eclectic but intersecting kind’.³⁵

Winter argued that advances in information technology, such as digital and audiovisual recordings, since the 1960s and 1970s allowed us to hear distinct voices and see moving images of the witnesses – particularly the victims. For Nora, this meant that we are now overwhelmed by data and that the proliferation of oral histories has become ‘a function of its own recording – a secondary memory, a prosthesis-memory’.³⁶ For Winter, the ‘baby boom’ of the 1960s, growth in tertiary education in Europe and the US, and spreading affluence in the late twentieth century produced a ready demand for the by-products of the ‘memory boom’. The public in the West had the leisure time, education, and disposable income to spend on ‘cultural

can add a variety of detail. John Arnold, in *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 110–19, discusses how the ‘Ar’n’t I a woman’ speech by a former slave, Sojourner Truth, was interpreted in different ways.

³⁴ Jay Winter, ‘The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the “Memory Boom” in Contemporary Historical Studies’, *Canadian Military History*, 10.3 (Summer 2001), 55–66, p. 57.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁶ Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les lieux de mémoire’, *Representations*, 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring, 1989), 7–24, p. 14.

products' that emerged from the common identity of sharing narratives about the past through, for example, a trip to a National Trust stately home in Britain or by reading a history book or biography. Another vector has been the 'exteriorization, or expression in public space, of the interior discourse of psychoanalysis'; the spread of therapy cultures has helped to make memory a 'light consumable durable' for those who can afford it.³⁷

As well as political and economic reasons for the 'memory boom', Winter identified a demographic factor that was more about families than politics and that helped history to 'sell'. History is at its most lucrative when it positions family stories within much bigger narratives, when grandparents who lived through Second World War bombing can take their grandchildren to the Blitz Experience at the IWM or can view TV or film versions of a previous generation's life (in my own family's case, when my daughter watched *The Great Escape* with her ex-POW grandfather).³⁸

Eric Hobsbawm maintained that one of the reasons historians should study the invention of tradition was the light it sheds on the human relation to the past and, therefore, to the historian's own practice.³⁹ All invented traditions, he argued, use history as a 'legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion'.⁴⁰ He continued:

The element of invention is particularly clear here, since the history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so. Oral historians have frequently observed how in the actual memories of the old the General Strike of 1926 plays a more modest and less dramatic part than interviewers anticipated.

³⁷ Jay Winter, 'The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the "Memory Boom"', p. 62.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³⁹ *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

For Hobsbawm, the study of the invention of tradition was interdisciplinary and could not be adequately pursued without collaboration with academics in adjacent disciplines, such as social anthropologists and social scientists.

Memory has been transformed from one of the key obstacles to oral history's entry into the academy to one of the most hotly debated interpretive tools. As well as the different perspectives discussed above, the work of two Italian oral historians has shown that the perceived unreliability of memory can offer valuable insights into how we – as individuals and communities – view the past and how that dynamic can change over time. Although Luisa Passerini's work on Italian memories of interwar fascism offers invaluable insights into subjectivity in history, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to assess these in depth.⁴¹ Instead, I will address the work of her compatriot, Alessandro Portelli, who, like Passerini, has explored the always-shifting relationship between the present moment and the excavated past, the difference between individual and collective memory, and the shaping agency on personal testimony. As Portelli said, 'Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did'.⁴² His collection of essays, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, written between 1979 to 1989 and published in 1991, aimed to describe 'the fascination and frustration of oral history – floating as it does in time between the present and an ever-changing past, oscillating in the dialogue between the narrator and the interviewer, and melting and coalescing in the no-man's land from orality to writing and back'.⁴³

⁴¹ See Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and 'Work ideology and consensus under Italian Fascism', *History Workshop*, 8 (1979), 82–108.

⁴² Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 50.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

Portelli trained as a criminal lawyer before an interest in folksong led him to explore oral history and to stumble across the case of Luigi Trastulli, a twenty-one-year-old steel worker from a town in central Italy. Trastulli was killed by police on 17 March 1949 during a demonstration against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), although as Portelli started to investigate the event, he found many discrepancies in the ‘facts’ and the way the incident was remembered by local people. Both pro-government newspapers suggested that Trastulli may have been killed by shots from behind the workers’ lines and gave his first name as ‘Alvaro’. In the interviews Portelli carried out in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he found significant changes in the way inhabitants remembered the incident. Some recalled the death as having taken place in 1952 and that it happened just before 2,000 workers were laid off – and not as a demonstration against Italy joining NATO. Thus, Trastulli became a martyr for jobs, not peace. Portelli also found inconsistencies over the location of the killing: instead of being shot in the middle of a road, he was said to have been killed against a wall, in a detail reminiscent of the way Resistance fighters had been executed by Nazis in the Second World War.

Portelli concluded that the discrepancies arose because Trastulli’s death was so shocking that a measure of confabulation was needed in order to construct a persuasive account of how such a momentous event came about. An accident during a minor scuffle over a political protest was insufficient, whereas the sacking of some two thousand workers in 1952–53 was one of the most dramatic events in the town’s history, and it made sense that the most tragic episode should be reassigned to this context. As Portelli commented:

The discrepancy between fact and memory ultimately enhances the value of the oral sources as historical documents. It is not caused by faulty recollections (some of the motifs and symbols found in oral narratives were

already present in embryo in coeval written sources), but actively and creatively generated by memory and imagination in an effort to make sense of crucial events and of history in general. Indeed, if oral sources had given us ‘accurate’, ‘reliable’, factual reconstructions of the death of Luigi Trastulli, we would know much less about it. Beyond the event as such, the real significant historical fact which these narratives highlight is the memory itself.⁴⁴

Portelli’s approach to oral testimony seems to me to be an imaginative and realistic way to make the most of sources that, on an initial encounter, seem to be confusingly contradictory. In my own research, I have learnt not automatically to dismiss one account because it does not entirely tally with an official version. My father, for example, told me that when he was flown home from mainland Europe in the dying days of the Second World War, the pilot had dropped low over the fighting because he thought my father would enjoy the spectacle and a closer look at the foreign landscape. It was an episode that my father repeated several times in his life and which obviously carried a profound significance for him. I described this experience in the ‘Homecoming’ chapter of *The Barbed-Wire University*. When Roderick Suddaby, then Keeper of Documents at the IWM, read the manuscript, he pointed out that there would not have been fighting in that part of Europe at that point in the war. Anxious to observe historical accuracy, I decided not to use the reference to fighting, but retained the rest of my father’s recollection of the flight home.⁴⁵ Having studied Portelli and other oral historians, this apparent error in my father’s account of the flight now appears to be one of the most significant details of the story. Perhaps my father conflated a memory of battle – from the period when he was fighting in North Africa and Italy in 1943/44 and which led to his capture – with this moment when he was on his way home after over a year in captivity. It may be that the pilot’s attempt to delay (however briefly) their return to England was a highly

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

⁴⁵ Gillies, *The Barbed-Wire University*, p. 403.

significant experience for my father and one that he could only fully understand by conjoining it with another powerful memory – of battle. Adding the memory of fighting may have allowed him to make sense of the impatience and anxiety he felt at the pilot’s suggestion that he might delay the long-awaited journey home. As Portelli has pointed out, the very error itself may carry significance beyond ‘the truth’.

Joshua Levine, who worked as a researcher for *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* and *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War* before writing *Forgotten Voices of the Blitz*, *Forgotten Voices of the Somme*, and *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk*, acknowledged the importance of ‘facts’ that are misremembered or misinterpreted:

There’s a stigma among certain people that oral history isn’t real history because of problems with memory and truthfulness. There can be a sense that sources such as court reports are preferable because they’re official. This argument works on the basis that there is a shining diamond of ‘truth’. There isn’t. It’s all about perceptions. Life isn’t black and white, life is nuanced and this should be the case in good oral history. Oral history is messy and life is messy.⁴⁶

Levine, who like Portelli trained as a lawyer, pointed to his own experience in court when he heard witnesses produce very different accounts of the same incident. He agreed that a memory that turns out to be not entirely accurate could be as insightful as one that is factually correct.⁴⁷

iv. The transformation of the role of ‘interviewer’ and the move towards the era of the witness

The role of the ‘interviewer’, and an acknowledgement of their relationship with the person being interviewed, has changed dramatically over the last few decades and marks a pivotal moment in the theory and practice of oral history. Even the lexicon

⁴⁶ Telephone interview, 28 March 2018.

⁴⁷ Testimony by Flight George Lerwill in Levine, *Forgotten Voices of the Blitz*, p. 53, is a good example of this.

used by the oral history community carries a new resonance: the word ‘subject’ is rarely used but, rather, the person being interviewed might be described as an ‘interviewee’, ‘participant’, or ‘narrator’ – terms that (particularly in the last two instances) grants them a more active agency. The *Forgotten Voices* books refer to ‘contributors’, although this seems to be overstating the influence of the interviewee which, in reality, was limited to agreeing access conditions and, usually, signing over copyright. In many instances, the contributor had died several years before the book was published, and the ‘relationship’, as far as it went, was tenuous indeed.

While the boundaries of this thesis prohibit a comprehensive history of the concept of ‘self’, nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge its significance within oral history, its connection to memory and how awareness of ‘self’ has changed in recent years.⁴⁸ As Paul Thompson has said, ‘Yet whatever the intended focus, an oral history interview will always imply engaging with the self of another person, with who they think they are’.⁴⁹ According to Lyn Abrams in *Oral History Theory*, ‘The revelation of the self, understood as the autonomous and self-contained individual who possesses a rich and complex inner life or consciousness, has become one of the key aims of oral historians’.⁵⁰ The story that emerged from the conversation between ‘researcher’ and ‘narrator’, to use her terms, is a product of communication between two individuals, ‘both of whom bring something of themselves to the process’.⁵¹

⁴⁸ The literature on ‘self’ is extensive; the following have been helpful in my background reading: Lyn Abrams, ‘Self’ in *Oral History Theory*, pp. 33–53; chapter 8, Thompson with Bornat, ‘Memory and the Self’ in *The Voice of the Past*, pp. 238–65; *Autobiography: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by T. L. Broughton, 4 vols (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); Jenny Harding, ‘Looking for Trouble: Exploring Emotion, Memory and Public Sociology’ in *Oral History* 42.2 (2014), 94–104; Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford: OUP, 1993); Roy Porter, ‘Introduction’ in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1–14; Michael Roper, ‘Slipping Out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History’, *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), 57–72.

⁴⁹ Thompson with Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 238.

⁵⁰ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 33.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Oral history theory is now founded on this idea of there being two subjectivities at an interview, interacting to produce an effect called intersubjectivity which is apparent in the narrator's words [...] Subjectivity refers to the constituents of an individual's sense of self, his or her identity informed and shaped by experience, perception, language and culture – in other words an individual's emotional baggage (as opposed to objectivity which implies a neutral or disinterested standpoint).⁵²

The complexity of this relationship is one with which I have actively grappled in my own practice. My parents lived through the Second World War; my father was a POW and my mother, briefly, an army wife. Each 'label' contributed to the relationship I had with my interviewees.⁵³

This dialogue between interviewer and narrator and the effect of wider cultural influences means that the interviewee is constantly taking stock and reshaping their life story for different audiences – in much the same way that a biographer might shape a life story so that it speaks to a current generation and its preoccupations. Oral historians have used the word 'composure' to describe the process by which an individual moulds a memory story at a particular point in time so that they feel comfortable with the product and in a way that responds to present cultural understandings. Historian Graham Dawson is usually credited with coining the term.⁵⁴ The expression reflects the twin meanings of a memory story: that it is 'composed' (constructed) and brings 'composure' (equanimity). Theories of composure are often deployed by historians working in war and gender studies – as in Dawson's *Soldier Heroes*, Penny Summerfield's, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, and Alistair

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The links between the idea of intersubjectivity and the recent interest in the idea of 'intersectionality' offer possible areas of investigation. See Eleanor Robertson, 'Intersectional – what?', *Guardian*, 30 September 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/30/intersectional-feminism-jargon>> [accessed 6 April 2018].

⁵⁴ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 66.

Thomson's study of Australian soldiers who served in the Great War, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (originally published in 1994).⁵⁵

Thomson has shown how changes in cultural memories of the Great War and the life experiences of the veterans he interviewed influenced the way they remembered the 1914–18 conflict. In particular, he explored how memories became entangled with the changing view of the Great War and the soldier's role. These perceptions travelled through many stages. One of the earliest was the Anzac legend of the patriotic 'Digger' who fought bravely at Gallipoli and on the Western Front.⁵⁶ This perception transformed into the less positive image of the soldier after Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and the peace movement's opposition to nuclear weapons, before changing again into a more sympathetic remembering following the success of the film *Gallipoli* (1981) and key anniversaries of the Great War. Thomson, influenced by Portelli, Passerini, and members of the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, used the theory of composure to examine how veterans made sense of their war experiences at different stages in their life and against different cultural backgrounds. In the 2013 edition of *Anzac Memories*, he revisited the subject after a gap of nearly twenty years. The interval allowed him to secure his father's permission to discuss the author's grandfather's mental illness and, as well as tackling a previously forbidden subject, he made use of new primary sources: the Repatriation medical files, now legally available after 30 years had passed, shed light on the mental health of his grandfather and other ex-soldiers. In the case of one veteran, Fred Farrall, Thomson discussed how in late life he was finally able to tell the story of his nervous

⁵⁵ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994); Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Thomson, *Anzac Memories*.

⁵⁶ ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps); Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 11.

breakdown because recent histories of the Great War had shown how common such behaviour was; additionally, and importantly, by the late twentieth century, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was better understood and viewed sympathetically.⁵⁷

Changing attitudes to subjects such as PTSD, alcohol abuse, and sexuality have frequently provided a release for memories that interviewees were previously not prepared to share. I found this to be the case in many of the interviews in the three books analysed in this commentary. One POW I interviewed in *The Barbed-Wire University* said he felt able to talk for the first time about homosexuality within camps in the Far East while, conversely, the daughter of a man held in Europe still refused to acknowledge the allusion to homosexuality I found in her father's notes. Women I spoke to in *Army Wives* said that contemporary acknowledgement of the dangers of alcohol abuse had prompted them, for the first time, to speak about a 'drinking culture' in some parts of the armed services. I wonder, too, whether current attitudes to immigration would produce a different response if I were able to reinterview Renée Anzani, the daughter of an Italian tailor who was interned in Britain in 1940.

The way in which the silence and, indeed, the interview and transcript are interpreted has much to do with the interviewer and what has been described as their 'cultural habitus'.⁵⁸ Philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's seminal term, 'habitus', which he used to argue that the individual internalises the structure of the external world to include influences such as class or family to produce a way of thinking, has been expanded to absorb what sociologists such as Martin Hammersley have called

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

⁵⁸ Hammersley quoted in Joanna Bornat, 'Remembering and Reworking Emotions: The Reanalysis of Emotion in an Interview' in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, p. 437.

‘cultural habitus’.⁵⁹ As Joanna Bornat has pointed out, it can be valuable for the interviewer to return to an earlier interview armed with new theoretical approaches, as she did when, thirty-six years later, she reassessed an interview of a seventy-seven-year-old female ex-mill worker she conducted in 1974.⁶⁰ In this instance she, the interviewer, was a young university researcher, who created the silence by moving the conversation away from the subject of the interviewee’s parents’ separation, which was causing her interviewee obvious emotional discomfort. Bornat later admitted she was unprepared for, and felt uncomfortable with, this show of emotion – partly because of the age difference and the dissonance in their ‘cultural habitus’.

The structure of the *Forgotten Voices* books, in which extracts appear without any sense of the context in which the interview took place or of the dynamic between interviewer and narrator, means there is no room for the author to elaborate on silences or the way in which the speaker told his or her story. For the reader, it is impossible to know whether they said something in a joking way or while pausing to fight back tears. The nearest the compilers of the *Forgotten Voices* came to revealing the emotions of the moment was by using italics to denote that a particular word was stressed.⁶¹ This constraint means that they are limited in the way they can describe memories such as moments of public humiliation, which, Douwe Draaisma argues, can feature in the memory more vividly than other events.⁶² He recalled seeing someone flush from an insult delivered 70 years before, and many of my interviews with POWs included instances of these sorts of ‘affronts’.⁶³ One man, for example,

⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁵⁹ *Oral History Theory*, p. 56. Martin Hammersley, ‘Qualitative Data Archiving: Some Reflections on Its Prospects and Problems’, *Sociology*, 31.1 (1997), 131–42.

⁶⁰ *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, pp. 434–42.

⁶¹ Smith, *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust* makes particularly effective use of italics.

⁶² Douwe Draaisma, *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older: How Memory Shapes Our Past*, trans. by A. Pomerans and E. Pomerans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 47.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

broke down in tears when remembering how he was unable to protect a Chinese woman who was beaten by a Japanese guard.⁶⁴ Such moments of heightened emotion highlight the fact that an interview is a dialogue between an interviewer and a narrator. According to Abrams, ‘Memory stories are not repositories of an objective truth about the past; they are creative narratives shaped in part by the personal relationship that facilitates the telling’.⁶⁵

Alistair Thomson summed up this new emphasis in a postscript to the 2013 edition of *Anzac Memories*: ‘We are living in the “era of the witness”, in which our society valorises first person testimony – the soldier’s story, the survivor’s evidence – as the most direct and authoritative account of past events’.⁶⁶ That valorisation has been most significant to historians writing about areas such as race and gender. However, valorisation throws up distinct dilemmas when the ‘witness’ has survived particularly terrible experiences – most obviously in the case of the Holocaust.

Assessing the reliability of witnesses of the Nazi Holocaust has proved more troublesome, as scholars have naturally been reluctant to intrude into the trauma of horrific memories and worried about offering even a crumb of support to Holocaust deniers. While it is seen as natural for historians of other periods to question eyewitness testimony, such scrutiny is, as Christopher Browning wrote, ‘emotionally freighted in the study of the Holocaust’.⁶⁷ Browning has stated that it is important for the integrity of Holocaust scholarship that eyewitness accounts should be treated with the same critical analysis as other accounts, especially given the rare, but damaging, accounts by imposters. This is not to diminish the importance of eyewitness accounts; as Mark Roseman has pointed out, oral history may be the only record left of a

⁶⁴ Gillies, *The Barbed-Wire University*, p. 116.

⁶⁵ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 58.

⁶⁶ Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, p. 323.

⁶⁷ Christopher Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: WW Norton, 2011), p. 8.

survivor's experience if their friends and relatives were murdered and property such as letters taken from them.⁶⁸ Those contemporary written records that remain may be inaccurate, such as the deliberately misleading Gestapo files in which, for example, officials lied about events to cover up their own dereliction of duty: that they were in a different part of a building when a prisoner escaped.⁶⁹

Roseman, like Portelli, discovered that discrepancies may offer further clues as to the significance of a detail. When, for example, he was researching the biography of a Holocaust survivor, Marianne Ellenbogen, whose life was unusually well documented via official sources, he found that her memories tended to introduce 'small exaggerations or magnifications of experience' in periods that were particularly traumatic, for example, the guilt of leaving her family.⁷⁰ This is something I have encountered in interviews with Far East POWs. While I made use of official sources to corroborate facts where they were available, such as the location and date of captivity, interviews did occasionally produce exaggerations that I believe indicated the importance of an incident or subject.⁷¹ One interviewee, for example, mentioned being given a certain number of duck eggs, while the figure changed in his written account of the incident. Since food was vital to starving Far East POWs, the exaggeration of the number of protein-rich eggs may have indicated the importance of the topic. At least three of the men I interviewed were in civilian life professional

⁶⁸ Mark Roseman, 'Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Testimony' in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, pp. 320–33.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 321. Luisa Passerini notes how other sources such as police records, statistics, and the press are also unreliable in an authoritarian regime – for example, Fascist Italy.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁷¹ Official sources include those held at International Committee of the Red Cross, British Army Records, and the National Archives. Ordinary Ranks do not appear as frequently in War Diaries as officers.

entertainers who performed for their fellow inmates; this may also have played a part in their method of narration.⁷²

v. Conclusion

In this section, I have traced the development of oral testimony from its position as a mainstay of early histories to its ostracism in the nineteenth century in the face of the growing professionalism of history. I have described its re-emergence in the second half of the twentieth century, when postmodernism and Marxism allowed a re-evaluation of oral testimony's worth to historians and other scholars. Buoyed up by a new interest in 'history from below' and the 'cultural turn' of the 1970s, oral history gained a new following. I have explored some of the major themes in the development of oral history: the decline of reliance on documentary evidence and how this has influenced the use of oral testimony, particularly in light of new theories concerning memory. I have examined how these developments have influenced the changing role of the interviewer and their relationship to their 'subject' amid a move towards the era of the 'witness' and the theory of 'composure'. I have also looked at how these changes have broadened the scope of the life histories recorded by oral historians.

In the following section, I will offer a critique of the *Forgotten Voices* books. I will describe the origins of the series and suggest reasons for the books' popularity and what I see as their limitations.

⁷² The narrative style of entertainers in oral history would be a worthwhile subject for further research. Abrams devotes a chapter to 'performance' in *Oral History Theory*, and song played a part in many of the interviews conducted for Thomson, *Anzac Memories*. See also Katherine Borland, "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretative Conflict in Oral Narrative Research' in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, pp. 412–22.

3. Analysis of the *Forgotten Voices* series

While the last twenty years have seen a growing sophistication in the theory and practice of oral history, the same period has also witnessed the development of what might be called ‘oral history lite’. This highly commercialised form takes oral history’s ‘unique selling point’ – the ‘authenticity’ of the individual voice – and prises it away from the individual’s life story and the historical and social context in which the person lived. Although books such as the *Forgotten Voices* series, and exhibitions at heritage sites that allow the visitor to listen through a handset to a ‘real person’ from the past, maintain that they are emulating the practice of established oral history in reclaiming the lives of lost people, in reality they hollow out individual stories. They edit and arrange testimonies in a way that contributes to Nora’s ‘prosthesis-memory’.⁷³

The *Forgotten Voices* series would not have been possible without IWM’s Sound Archive, which was set up in 1972 and which included former soldiers then in their seventies and eighties among the first interviewees. The archive emerged during a period of increased public interest in the First World War and in the role of ordinary men and women within it. The interest was partly generated by the fiftieth anniversary of the conflict in the 1960s and by the highly popular BBC documentary series, *The Great War* (1964), produced in association with the IWM, which garnered an average audience of eight million viewers (a seventeen per cent share of the viewing population) for each of its twenty-six episodes.⁷⁴ The 1970s saw the publication of collected works by war poets including Ivor Gurney and Edward

⁷³ The series appeared at the same time as books, also published by Ebury, mined the Mass Observation archive, e.g., Simon Garfield, *Our Hidden Lives: The Everyday Diaries of a Forgotten Britain* (London: Ebury, 2004).

⁷⁴ Dan Todman, ‘The Reception of The Great War in the 1960s’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 22.1 (2002), 29–36 <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01439680220120264>> [accessed 28 December 2017].

Thomas, as well as biographies of other poets such as Isaac Rosenberg, whose work was shaped by the conflict.⁷⁵ Commentators such as Paul Fussell, whose *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) won both the National Book and National Book Critics Circle Awards and managed to attract readers beyond academia, highlighted the lasting cultural influence of the conflict, at a time when oral history was gaining credibility among professional historians.

This growing interest was fuelled by a number of books by popular historians not attached to universities, who started to use oral testimony as a means of telling the story of the ordinary ‘Tommy’. In *Death’s Men* (1978), schoolteacher Denis Winter used memoirs, published and unpublished, from the IWM and interviews he conducted himself. The introduction highlighted what Winter saw as the gap in most histories of the Great War:

But, both during and after the war, the individual voices of the soldiers were lost in the collective picture. Men drew arrows on maps and talked of battles and campaigns, but what it felt like to be in the front line or in a base hospital they did not know. Civilians did not ask and soldiers did not write. Just as in the Napoleonic wars or in our own time, Vietnam or Northern Ireland, the experiences of the inner lives of the ‘other ranks’ were as private and unknown as those of Kalahari bushmen.⁷⁶

However, it was Lyn Macdonald’s books that were to have the greatest influence on the emergence of the *Forgotten Voices* series. Significantly, Macdonald, for many years a radio producer with the BBC, came from a medium that relied on voice. She had written four books about the First World War before Penguin published *1914–1918: Voices and Images of the Great War* in 1988.⁷⁷ The book used a compelling

⁷⁵ Peter Parker, *The Last Veteran* (London: Fourth Estate), p. 203.

⁷⁶ Introduction to Denis Winter’s *Death’s Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 15.

⁷⁷ Lyn Macdonald, *They Called It Passchendaele: The Story of the Third Battle of Ypres and of the Men who Fought in It* (London: Joseph, 1978); *The Roses of No Man’s Land* (London: Joseph, 1980); *Somme* (London: Papermac, 1983); *1914: The Days of Hope* (London: Penguin, 1989). These were

mixture of extracts from interviews, letters, diaries, national and regional newspapers, cartoons, adverts, poems and songs, and images. It was one of the first times – if not *the* first time – that the word ‘voices’ had been used in the title of a book that lent heavily on oral testimony, and Max Arthur, author of the first and still most successful *Forgotten Voices* books, gave Macdonald’s influence due credit.⁷⁸

There are other, structural ways in which *1914–1918* paved the way for the *Forgotten Voices* books. Although Macdonald included an author’s introduction and short passages in italics to add some historical context, the extracts do most of the narrative work. Page headings such as ‘Mobilisation’ help to guide the reader and, as with the *Forgotten Voices* books, chapters are divided by years (e.g., ‘1914’). As with the *Forgotten Voices* books, there is an emphasis on the ordinary soldier. The book’s introduction stated:

There are few literary gems, not much ‘fine’ poetry and not many of the ‘great’ names culled from the considerable literary heritage of the Great War. They have had their say. This is the turn of Tommy Atkins, Heinz Schmidt and Digger Smith, Bill Brown from Calgary, Jack Robinson from Christchurch, Joe Soap from Kansas. And this was their war.⁷⁹

Macdonald’s publisher’s website includes a quote from her saying that her intention had been ‘to tune in to the heartbeat of the experience of the people who lived through it [the First World War]’, a corporeal reference that echoes the intent of the *Forgotten Voices* books to reanimate the human voice.⁸⁰

Forgotten Voices of the Great War, and subsequent books in the series, is divided into chapter years. Each chapter begins with a factually dense assessment of

followed by *1915: The Death of Innocence* (London: Headline, 1993) and *To the Last Man: Spring 1918* (London: Viking, 1998).

⁷⁸ Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*, p. ix.

⁷⁹ Lyn Macdonald with research by Shirley Seaton, *1914–1918: Voices and Images of the Great War* (London: Joseph, 1988), p. 3.

⁸⁰ ‘Lyn Macdonald’, Macmillan Publishers [website] 2018 <<https://us.macmillan.com/author/lynmacdonald>> [accessed 28 December 2017].

the political and military background, including dates and figures (for example, the fighting strengths of Britain, France, and Germany). Each chapter is divided by headings such as ‘First Battle of Ypres, October–November’ in the 1914 section.⁸¹ Entries vary from a few lines to one of the longest, at ninety-four lines, which tells the story of Captain Tom Adlam winning the Victoria Cross.⁸²

i. Reception of the *Forgotten Voices* books

Timing was all-important for the success of *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*. The book appeared in hardback in autumn 2002 and made the most of November’s Remembrance Sunday. The IWM commemorated the anniversary through an exhibition called ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, which featured the life and work of twelve soldier poets from the First World War and which ran from October 2002 to April 2003, accompanied by a book edited by Wilfred Owen’s biographer, Jon Stallworthy.⁸³ However, some commentators felt that the prism of poetry was too traditional and inaccessible for a modern audience. Mark Bostridge, joint editor of *Letters from a Lost Generation*, who reviewed the exhibition for the *Independent on Sunday*, suggested that *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* offered an alternative for those who prefer ‘their war testimony more rough and raw’.⁸⁴ Poet Laureate Andrew Motion praised the exhibition but said it left him eager to know more about the less well-known, or totally *unknown* ‘voices’ and urged visitors to buy *Forgotten Voices*

⁸¹ Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the First World War*, p. 42.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 180–84.

⁸³ Isobel Fox, ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, *Daily Mail* <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-130730/Anthem-For-Doomed-Youth.html>>; Anthony Thwaite, ‘The Pit of War Poetry’, *Daily Telegraph*, 6 October 2002 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4728938/The-pity-of-war-poetry.html>> [both accessed 31 December 2017]; Jon Stallworthy, *Anthem for Doomed Youth: Twelve Soldier Poets of the First World War* (London: Constable, 2002).

⁸⁴ *Letters from a Lost Generation: First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends*, ed. by Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge (London, Virago, 2008). Mark Bostridge, ‘Books – Psalmists and Prophets’, *Independent on Sunday*, 27 October 2002, p. 15.

of the Great War from the IWM bookshop.⁸⁵ Author and journalist Ben Macintyre, writing in 2008, said it was the ‘matter-of-fact tone’ of the *Forgotten Voices* books that gave them ‘their particular emotive power’.⁸⁶

As well as the anniversaries, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* also benefitted from several advantages that aided its promotion. The geographical sweep of the voices allowed regional media to pick out stories with a local ‘angle’, and reviews were syndicated as widely as Belfast and Birmingham. The sequel attracted similar interest and again found its place among a raft of history books that concentrated on the ‘authentic’ voice of the ordinary person.⁸⁷ Historian and Second World War veteran M. R. D. Foot reviewed it alongside *Witness to War*, which relied mainly on diaries, and *The Voice of War*, which used mainly letters. Foot concluded, ‘All three books breathe a sense of immediacy, of being there on the spot; and the spot is, only too often, a place of horror’.⁸⁸ Only the Oral History Society struck a note of criticism.⁸⁹ Although Megan Hutching, who reviewed *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War*, said that Max Arthur used the interviews skilfully, she did not approve of several extracts from one person appearing in different parts of a chapter. She also felt that short extracts – almost ‘sound bites’ – failed to allow the interviewee to make sense of what had happened to them:

One of the joys of oral history is that it is able to restore the individual to history. This book achieves this in some ways but, curiously, does not in others. While the danger, chaos, death and injury of being in action are conveyed well, the sheer number of extracts, and brevity of some, mean that

⁸⁵ Andrew Motion, ‘Well Versed in the Legacy of Conflict’, *The Times*, 30 October 2002, p. 18.

⁸⁶ Ben Macintyre, ‘Given Voice at Last’, *The Times*, S1, 11 November, 2008, p. 8.

⁸⁷ *Forgotten Voices of the Somme* was also reviewed together with similar books when it was published in 2008. See, for example, Damian Whitworth, ‘Wartime Voices Tell of Pain and Small Pleasures’, *The Times*, 8 November 2008, p. 9.

⁸⁸ M. R. D. Foot, ‘What It Was Really Like’, *Spectator*, 16 October 2004, p. 63.

⁸⁹ Megan Hutching, ‘Review of *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War* by Max Arthur’, *Oral History*, 33.2 (Autumn, 2005), 110–11.

the voices of each interviewee blur one into another so that they become strangely anonymous.⁹⁰

The book, she concluded, was the '*hors d'oeuvres* to the banquet that is the oral history collection of the Imperial War Museum'.

In the following section, I will explore my own attempts to use oral testimony in a way that gives individuals a depth of character while also preserving the historical context in which their lives were played out.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

4. Clamouring to be heard: the use of oral history in *Waiting for Hitler, The Barbed-Wire University, and Army Wives*

I grew up in a tradition of oral storytelling; my families' life stories – on both sides – are obvious examples of 'history from below'. My parents left school in their early teens and came from families that made a living by manual labour; my relatives had neither the time nor the belief in the value of their own life experiences to commit their thoughts to paper. Their lives were recorded on birth, death, and marriage certificates, army records, and the census, but these official documents offered few clues about how their everyday existence was shaped by international events such as world wars, economic downturns, agricultural mechanisation, or changing attitudes to religion, urbanisation, and social status. Oral storytelling preserved our family history.

One of the first adult non-fiction books I read growing up was *Akenfield*, and I remember hearing its author, Ronald Blythe, lecture on the subject in the 1970s.⁹¹ *Akenfield* was one of the reasons I chose to study history. However, at the University of Cambridge in the 1980s, oral testimony was never mentioned as a source that was valued in the same way as letters, diaries, newspapers, or other documents. While oral history was not evident on the history syllabus, I was spending my spare time interviewing subjects such as Dame Mary Warnock, the new mistress of Girton College, and people who ran homeless shelters for the student magazine, *Cantab*.⁹² Their testimony offered an intimacy and immediacy that I found as powerful as the sources I was studying in Cambridge University Library.

After graduation, I worked as a journalist. Nearly every piece I wrote included an interview, and I came to see it as an essential part of my toolkit. When I decided to

⁹¹ Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (London: Lane, 1969); see Lyn Abrams *Oral History Theory*, p. 13 on his 'tidied-up yet elegant prose'.

⁹² In *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), Alexander Masters gave a Cambridge homeless person a voice in a skillful work of collaborative life writing.

research a book-length biography of the Edwardian music hall star Marie Lloyd, it seemed natural to seek out descendants and other commentators to interview as part of my research.⁹³ In my biography of Amy Johnson, who in 1930 became the first woman to fly solo from England to Australia, I interviewed her nieces, other pilots who had known her, and descendants of key people in her life.⁹⁴

Amy Johnson led directly to *Waiting for Hitler*. During my research for the biography, I came across a letter from Amy to her mother in which she expressed her shock at the fall of France in 1940 and the feelings of vulnerability this produced in Britain now that the Nazis were positioned just across the Channel. Immediately before *Amy Johnson* was published in the spring of 2003, the TV news showed scenes of Iraqi people fleeing their homes in anticipation of the invasion by (mainly) British and American troops.⁹⁵ The final impetus to explore the psychological terrain of 1940 emerged when speaking to a friend's mother, who said that her mother had been so terrified at the prospect of a Nazi invasion (since they lived near the South coast) that she had bought enough poison to kill herself, her husband (who was in the Home Guard), and their four children.⁹⁶

Although the Acknowledgements to *Waiting for Hitler* begin, 'This book is about voices from the past', the book uses many different kinds of materials, not just oral testimony, to evoke the peculiar atmosphere of 1940.⁹⁷ I devoted a whole chapter to Charlie Mason, a resistance fighter I interviewed in November 2004, and in another chapter, I told the story of Decio Anzani, an Italian tailor who was interned in 1940 and whose daughter Renée Chambers I interviewed.

⁹³ Gillies, *Marie Lloyd: The One and Only*.

⁹⁴ Gillies, *Amy Johnson: Queen of the Air* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003).

⁹⁵ London, RAF Museum, Amy Johnson Archive, undated, quoted in *Waiting for Hitler*, p. 118.

⁹⁶ Gillies, *Waiting for Hitler*, p. 255.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

I was approached by a different publisher, Aurum Press, to write my next book, *The Barbed-Wire University*. My editor, Graham Coster, suggested that there was a gap in the market for a book that told a different story about POWs, rather than the familiar account of escapes that, in reality, did not represent most men's experience of captivity. Coster proposed a focus on creativity and the day-to-day life of captivity. The idea appealed to me, because I had always wanted to tell my father's story but was realistic enough to appreciate that there was no room for yet another POW memoir. I was still keen to explore how the experience may have shaped his character and influenced his later life. While he was held prisoner, for example, he received a Dear John letter in which his fiancée told him she wanted to break off their engagement. As was the custom in such cases, he was made by his fellow POWs to write a reply in which he wished her well. On his return to England, he married another woman: my mother.

I spoke to about thirty POWs when researching the book but also made use of transcripts from different sound archives from around the world. One interview in particular made me acutely aware of the pitfalls of the *Forgotten Voices* strand of books, in which an individual's voice is homogenised simply because, by an unfortunate fluke of history, they happen to share a common label – for example, 'POW'. By the time I interviewed John Lowe, who had been held in Formosa (modern-day Taiwan) and Japan, I had carried out several interviews, and read many accounts, in which POWs had mentioned the importance of Red Cross parcels. When I asked Lowe about this, he told me that he had never seen a single Red Cross parcel in almost four years of captivity. This experience alerted me to the complexity of oral history and the integrity of individual stories.

Unusually for a book about POWs, I included testimony from POWs in both Europe and the Far East. Assessing the experience of men from two very different theatres of war made me realise how important it is not to aggregate an experience by a catch-all term – in this case, ‘POW’. In Europe, the POW experience differed widely depending on whether someone was an officer (who, under the Geneva Convention, was not obliged to work) and even on the type of camp where the POW was held, from the high-security castle of Colditz for persistent escapers and high-profile POWs to the more barrack-like camp of Stalag IV-B (where my father was one of several thousand Other Ranks). In the Far East, the contrast was even sharper, because Japan did not recognise the Geneva Convention and viewed being captured as a humiliating experience. Many POWs were forced to endure hard physical labour and were kept on starvation diets – one of the most extreme cases being the men forced to build the Thailand–Burma railway. Nevertheless, within these sharply different contexts, it was still instructive to compare continuities in attitudes and responses to creativity.

The subtitle to *The Barbed-Wire University*, ‘The Real Lives of Allied Prisoners of War in the Second World War’, was chosen partly to help potential readers find the book using internet search engines that would highlight areas of interest via the keywords ‘Allied’, ‘Prisoners of War’, and ‘Second World War’. However, the word ‘real’ may be seen as an alternative to ‘forgotten voices’, as the adjective is often used in publishing to imply the same unmediated ‘authenticity’ that the ‘voices’ epithet promises. The success of Ebury’s *Forgotten Voices* books also contributed to the way in which ‘*forgotten voices*’ became a sort of ‘brand’, although, of course, Ebury had no control over its use, and many other publishers incorporated it in book titles.

The idea for *Army Wives* emerged from the highly popular BBC documentary presented by Gareth Malone, *Military Wives* (2011). I was struck by the age-old themes captured in the programme: loss, fear of injury, family cohesion, communication, and status. *Army Wives* gave me the chance to pick up threads touched on in *The Barbed-Wire University* and even to reinterview Tom Boardman, a FEPOW I had spoken to in the earlier book; it also allowed me to explore more recent history and to talk to wives and girlfriends of serving soldiers. While continuing my commitment to historical context, in *Army Wives* I also used group interviews with one or more women as a way of expanding individual stories. The historical sweep of the book, from the Crimea War to the present day, allowed me to challenge the reader to take a longer view of the role of women in wartime, rather than concentrating on silos of history that allow little space for context and narrative drive.

In the following section, I will explain my contribution to creative non-fiction and how I have silently negotiated the complexities of oral history within it. I will examine how my own practice has evolved to take into account challenges such as intersubjectivity, multiple interviewing, use of different sources, anonymity, and memory to create a narrative that is far removed from the *Forgotten Voices* books, which, at best, gloss over these important tensions.

5. My contribution to creative non-fiction

The three books under discussion demonstrate my unique contribution to the style of writing that has become known as creative, or literary, non-fiction. My technique has emerged from my earlier books, particularly my biographies of Amy Johnson and Marie Lloyd. I described my approach to this style of writing in *Literary Non-Fiction: A Writers & Artists' Companion* (2016):

Writing about the past, whether in the form of biography or narrative history, requires mastery of the facts – but also the confidence not to swamp the reader with each and every one of those hard-won facts. Literary non-fiction should have all the elements of good fiction: intriguing characters, variety of pace and vivid descriptions. It should make you think about the human condition, about the motives behind what people did, and whether they were driven by emotions or by outside influences such as national events or the mores of their day.⁹⁸

I have relished what some novelists see as the constraints of truth - the restrictions of a life span or a historical period - to make the most of dramatic moments in life writing. In both *Amy Johnson* and *Marie Lloyd* I began at the conclusion of the subjects' lives in a deliberate bid to upend the traditional 'cradle-to-grave' approach of most biographers. In Amy's case this highlighted the mystery of her final hours, when her plane disappeared over the Thames Estuary, and in Marie's my description of her lavish funeral demonstrated just how popular she had been.

This approach encouraged me to make the most of dramatic peaks in the three books under consideration and to vary the pace through the use of humour and more reflective final chapters. In *Waiting for Hitler* I harnessed the historical ebbs and

⁹⁸ Sally Cline and Midge Gillies, *Literary Non-Fiction, A Writers' & Artists' Companion* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 77.

flows of 1940 from the inertia of the Phoney War at the start of the year through the extreme tension of the summer to the first weekend in September when the invasion threat was at its most acute and the Nazi aerial bombardment signalled what became known as the Blitz. *The Barbed-Wire University* also made use of the Second World War's chronology whilst picking out particular dramas such as the fall of Singapore in February 1942 and the struggles of individual men such as John Lowe who was transported to Japan as a Far East POW and forced to work in a coalmine. Although *Army Wives* covered a much wider historical sweep, from Crimea to the present day, I, nevertheless, found scope for individual drama, for example, in the tension I described in chapter six, 'The "Great Sepoy Mutiny": Harriet Tytler, Fanny Wells and Lady Julia Inglis'.

These moments of heightened tension were interspersed throughout the three books with humour – a technique I learnt to value in my previous biographies. Comedy was important in *Marie Lloyd* because the subject was a comic performer and also as a way of providing a counterpoint to her tragic life story. In *Amy Johnson* humour, mainly through descriptions of her eccentric fellow pilots, offered a contrast to her serious personality and allowed a release from the tension of her flights. I made the most of humour in the three books that form the focus of this thesis: in *The Barbed-Wire University*, for example, the description of an incident in which POWs carried their elderly guard's rifle so that they would not need to miss their swimming outing; the rumours surrounding parachutists disguised as nuns in *Waiting for Hitler* and in *Army Wives* the case of the batman who was forced to pick fleas out of an officer's wife's drawers in Crimea.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ *The Barbed-Wire University*, p.66; *Waiting for Hitler*, pp.156-7 and *Army Wives*, p.47.

Writing *Amy Johnson* gave me experience of structuring non-fiction in a uniquely creative way. I used each of her record-breaking flights to make the most of the inbuilt drama; this proved especially effective when comparing her progress against the pilot whose record she was trying to beat. In *The Barbed-Wire University* I introduced three short sections called ‘Uses for a Red Cross Parcel . . .’, for example, ‘Uses for a Red Cross Parcel Number 1 – String’, to give the reader a break from the main narrative and to introduce material that it might have been hard to place elsewhere. In *Waiting for Hitler* I used contemporary extracts from the BBC Monitoring Service to heighten the tension. I was inspired to look for these variations in tone by the biographer, Kathryn Hughes’s suggestion to, ‘Draw up a list of “landing places”, points in your narrative where your reader can have a bit of a sit down and admire the view so far’.¹⁰⁰

Finally, I have used description to create characters and places that are both convincing and historically accurate. As inspiration I have turned to travel writers such as Eric Newby, who was himself a POW and who wrote *Love and War in the Apennines* (1971), and to Truman Capote, whose *In Cold Blood* (1966) was one of the first books to demonstrate that a piece of non-fiction could be novelistic. I have described settings as diverse as the Burma-Thailand Railway, an officer’s wife’s hut in the Crimean War and the changing landscape of the south coast of England during the invasion scare. I have also drawn on a range of sources to re-create characters.

¹⁰⁰ Various, ‘So you want to be a writer’, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/14/creative-writing-courses-advice-students>> [accessed 23 February 2019].

Perhaps one of the most successful examples was my description of my father at the start of *The Barbed-Wire University*.¹⁰¹

The following case studies demonstrate my use of oral history:

i. Charlie Mason: historical contextualisation

Although I had gathered personal testimony for my two biographies, my encounter with Charlie Mason in *Waiting for Hitler* marked the first time I had interviewed someone about their own life story rather than about a second biographical subject. I made contact with Charlie, who in 1940 had been recruited to serve as a member of the British Resistance in the event of a Nazi invasion, when the Head of Local History Studies at Hull Library, whom I knew well through my research for my biography of Amy Johnson, heard about my new book project and put me in touch with Charlie's daughter, a library colleague. The initial introduction established my credentials with Charlie and his daughter as a bona fide researcher and, perhaps more importantly for Charlie, linked me to Amy Johnson, a local hero who was widely revered – particularly by Charlie's generation. I interviewed Charlie in his flat in Hull and, although his daughter welcomed me at the door, she was not present during the interview.

Charlie is exactly the sort of ordinary person the *Forgotten Voices* series claims to celebrate. He was one of ten children and, like his siblings, learnt from an early age to poach game from the countryside west of Hull, where his father was an assistant station-master. *Forgotten Voices of the Blitz* features a chapter on 'the British Resistance', which includes comments from four members of 'auxiliary units',

¹⁰¹ *The Barbed-Wire University*, p.xiii.

as the ‘stay-behind’ groups were called, based in Kent and Lincolnshire, but these entries are brief – the longest is twelve lines. There is no sense of the tension of the time or of the individual lives behind the establishment of a British Resistance. In devoting a whole chapter to Charlie, and by including some of his after-story in the Epilogue, I gave him his own voice in a way that the *Forgotten Voices* books make impossible.

Establishing Charlie’s physical presence was vital, and I began the chapter with this sentence: ‘Now in his nineties, he is still wiry and has the gaunt features of someone who has spent most of his life outdoors’.¹⁰² It was important, too, to give his experience historical context. I had already explained in the previous chapter why the auxiliary units were set up, and more generally, the narrative arc of the whole book helped to elaborate the background of rumour and suspicion that Charlie talked about. I also wanted to do justice to his individual story by showing his conviction that his role in the Resistance could lead to death. This was particularly important, because the collective memory of that year has since been muddied by the highly popular sitcom, *Dad’s Army*, which paints the ‘Home Guard’ in a comic light. By explaining Charlie’s background and the fact that his wife knew that when the Germans arrived she would not see her husband again and should cycle to her parents’ house for refuge, I hoped to bring home the seriousness of the situation for people who experienced it at first hand. Charlie’s own words expressed this fear:

Unless you actually lived through that time you can’t understand. I would rather have been up in the air but I couldn’t [because as an engineer he was in a ‘reserved’ occupation]. There was a feeling that you wanted to do something. You didn’t think about life, because life didn’t matter. People were being killed in towns and what you wanted to do was to kill some Germans.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Gillies, *Waiting for Hitler*, p. 232.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

Including within this chapter two full-page images of auxiliary unit documents (one describing the job of the resistance fighter and the other showing a plan of a design of a hideout and both headed ‘Secret’) helped to contextualise what Charlie was saying. The documents from the National Archives also offered an element of intertextuality that varied the narrative pace of the chapter.

Although *Waiting for Hitler* exists within a discrete timeframe starting in the spring of 1940 and ending on ‘Invasion Weekend’ of 7/8 September, when it was widely believed that the Germans would attempt to invade Britain, I still managed to incorporate a sense of Charlie’s whole life story. In explaining his motives for joining the Resistance, he told how he longed to be a pilot like his close friend, Stanley Andrew, and in the Epilogue he spoke movingly of hearing that Stanley had been killed and of collecting his belongings from an airfield in Essex:

I looked at the Hurricanes all ready for take-off. They had patching on their sides and wings, red daubs that made them look like they were bleeding. They looked as though they had been bandaged up ready to go, as though they were looking, watching. I felt these Hurricanes are going to take off if they get the alarm.¹⁰⁴

This episode ties up one thread of Charlie’s life story – what happened to his close friend – and we know that Charlie was never called on to be a Resistance fighter and that he lived on into his nineties. Indeed, the Epilogue concluded the life stories of most of the key players in *Waiting for Hitler*. However, if I were to revise the book, I would include more of Charlie’s after-story and more of his corporeality, particularly the way in which he related his story. I still remember, for example, him rising slowly from his chair to demonstrate how he had been trained to fire a gun from the hip and to strangle a German invader with cheese wire.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 304.

ii. Fergus Anckorn: composure and corporeality

By the time I wrote my next book, *The Barbed-Wire University*, I was more confident about including a physical sense of the narrator, where I had such information, and convinced of the importance of ‘composure’ in the telling of a life story. The contribution of Fergus Anckorn demonstrates both.

Gunner Fergus Anckorn, 188 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, is one of around 130 soldiers to appear in *Forgotten Voices: Victoria Cross* (2011). Fergus, who did not win a VC himself, is quoted in the final ‘Reflections’ section, in which combatants consider the personal qualities required to secure the honour. Author Roderick Bailey said he included the thirty-one-line extract to show that soldiers are ordinary people in extraordinary situations.¹⁰⁵

Although the decision to include a ‘Reflections’ chapter shows a sophistication that is absent from many of the *Forgotten Voices* books, this fragment of Fergus’s life story also highlights the limitations of the genre. The brevity of the entry leaves no room for historical context and nuance, such as the background to Singapore’s fall and the reaction of troops who had arrived from Europe and elsewhere. There is no scope to explore, or even acknowledge, the disputed nature of the Alexander Hospital ‘massacre’ (as it is still sometimes referred to). The biggest omission is Fergus’s back- and after-story. We are not told, for example, that he had been the youngest member of the Magic Circle or that he performed for troops under the stage name of ‘Wizardus’. We are also ignorant about his upbringing and the fact that his fiancée, a nurse called Lucille, was waiting at home for him. We are unaware that his ability as a magician was to help him to survive as one of the slave labourers forced by the Japanese to build the Thailand–Burma Railway. We do not know how

¹⁰⁵ MG telephone interview, 27 June 2018.

this experience was to shape the rest of his life and the effect it was to have on his mental and physical well-being. In short, the format of the *Forgotten Voices* books has reduced Fergus to a shadow of himself.

I first met Fergus in 2008 at the second international Researching Far East POWs conference, when he made my business card disappear. When I interviewed him formally at his home, he magicked my digital recorder into thin air – a detail I used in my conclusion to *The Barbed-Wire University*. Fergus obviously had an interesting story to tell; my main challenge was how to weave his story into my narrative without losing a sense of him as a particularly charismatic individual.

He first appeared on page 106, when he commented on how unexpectedly noisy battle can be. His remarks were part of Chapter Ten, in which I explained the historical and military background to the fall of Singapore. He appeared again in Chapter Twelve, when he commented on how a soldier's attitude to food changes, before he was fully introduced in Chapter Fourteen, 'Entertainment'. In this chapter, I took several pages to explain his background and his injury during the battle for Singapore. Since the book follows a broadly chronological arc, with thematic interludes, it felt natural to allow him to 'comment' on topics as they occurred in the narrative. In Chapter 31, about the Thailand–Burma Railway, for example, I wanted to explore the collective memory of the POW experience and included his comments on the accuracy of David Lean's film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). Although the film was based on a novel by Pierre Boulle, the depiction rankled with many former POWs. Fergus commented, 'Alec Guinness saying to the Japs, "Let's discuss this over a cup of tea." Some chance. They didn't speak English, we didn't speak Japanese'.¹⁰⁶ It seemed important to air what was a controversial issue among

¹⁰⁶ Gillies, *The Barbed-Wire University*, p. 308.

some POWs and which had contributed to their belief that they were a ‘forgotten army’. Just as Alistair Thomson recognised a changing perception of the life of the Anzac soldier, so Far East POWs, who were in their nineties when I interviewed them, were also beginning to be aware of a sea change in how their experience of the Second World War was remembered. It felt significant that the first time I met Fergus was at the National Memorial Arboretum, a memorial site that was opened as recently as 2001.

Likewise, it was vital to include the POWs’ after-story: how they had dealt with the depravations of captivity, both physically and mentally, and how their experience had shaped their later lives. I covered this in the final four chapters of the book. In Fergus’s case, this allowed me to return to his capture on Singapore and to show how his post-war visits to the island – with his son in 2005 and then to Alexandra Hospital with his daughter in 2007 – had helped him to come to terms with the mental anguish he still suffered. We discussed the effect of captivity on his marriage and nagging worries that remained, particularly his fear, due to several years of hard labour in the jungle, that he might not be able to find his way home once he was free:

I learnt to use a compass and I’ve got a fetish about it. I never go anywhere without a compass. I must have ten compasses in this house and I also brought one in the car – I’m not talking about the Sat Nav. I’ve always got one because it could have saved my life. I thought how important it is to know where you are.¹⁰⁷

The flipside to Fergus’s eloquence as a storyteller was the challenge of working with a professional, and habitual, performer, who was also, to use Lyn Abrams’ expression, a ‘repeat-respondent’, although she added that performance is ‘implicit’ in

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 424.

every oral history interview.¹⁰⁸ By the time I met Fergus, he had been telling a version of his life story for years. He had appeared on the BBC children's programme, *Blue Peter*, and was quoted in Julie Summers's *The Colonel of Tamarkan* (2005), but had yet to reach the levels of exposure that followed the surge in interest in the experience of Far East POWs at the start of the early twenty-first century – of which my book was a part. Although my interviews with Fergus produced some stories that he had obviously told before, I believe that in pursuing a slightly different tack (I focussed on the experience of creativity within POW camps) and by asking him to reflect on how captivity had shaped his life, I managed to 'find a chink in the armour' that allowed him to reflect differently on the past.¹⁰⁹

The other challenge when interviewing a performer is the extent to which they may exaggerate a story for comic or dramatic effect.¹¹⁰ I guarded against this by gathering as many other sources as possible. Several of these, such as correspondence between Fergus and his fiancée and mother are held in IWM; the National Archives at Kew include records of dates and camps where British POWs were detained. These other sources helped to verify the basic framework of Fergus's account, while he, in turn, was able to add detail and context to documents. He told me, for example, that in the photo of Lucille as a nurse she was holding her spectacles behind her back because she felt self-conscious about wearing glasses. He was also able to interpret code used in letters written by his mother and, most remarkably, to explain how he incorporated Pitman shorthand in preprinted official postcards sent home by POWs.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 126 and p. 51.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹¹⁰ John Lowe, whom I met during my daughter's ballet class when he was in his late eighties, would break off during our interviews to sing songs from the camps. I was certain at the time this was a way of allowing himself respite from the trauma of reliving painful memories.

¹¹¹ Gillies, *The Barbed-Wired University*, p. 237.

I left my description of Fergus as an old man until the very end of the book, because I felt the photo of him as a soldier, taken shortly after his release, and the description of the deprivations suffered by Far East POWs helped the reader to create an image of what Fergus *had* looked like during the Second World War:

Fergus, now in his nineties, is tall, white-haired avuncular [...] He thinks nothing of driving the 160 miles from his home in Kent to a conference about the history of Far Eastern POWs, and, after apologising about his lack of mobility, bounds up the stairs so that I struggle to keep up with him.¹¹²

Perhaps I should have tried harder to capture the sound of his voice. To my ear, he had no discernible accent; the cadence and speed of his speech were unremarkable. However, when he and another POW performer, John Lowe, both appeared with me on *BBC Breakfast*, BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, and other radio shows, my written version of their voices led to an additional 'live' record. This represented part of the 'afterlife' of an interview, when, as Abrams has said in reference to the film and written appreciations of *Akenfield*, the interview remains 'fluid and negotiated rather than fixed on a page in a transcript or in an academic text'.¹¹³

The appearances boosted sales of my books – probably because of the 'authenticity' that the two men brought to my project – but these publicity interviews also led to other appearances in which the POWs composed other tellings of their life stories, often without me. One of the last versions of this was when Fergus appeared in the final of *Britain's Got Talent* in 2016, after Richard Jones, a soldier himself, told Fergus's story as part of his own, winning magic act. The appearance marked for me a final shift in our relationship and the intersubjectivity of the interviewer/narrator dynamic: I had moved from daughter of a POW, to researcher, to author, to TV viewer.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 427.

¹¹³ Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 114.

iii. Terry Frost: the value of intersubjectivities and multiple sources

Sergeant Terence Frost made an even briefer appearance than Fergus, when he was given twenty-two lines in *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War*.¹¹⁴ The extract presented a vivid picture of capture, and some of Frost's humour came through in the language, but, again, the lack of context failed to do justice to the individual.

By making more extensive use of the same IWM interview, together with extracts from a longer and much more recent interview that was part of the National Life Stories (NLS) project, and which was conducted by an interviewer who had specialist knowledge of twentieth-century art, I was able to present Terry Frost as a three-dimensional character with a back- and after-story.¹¹⁵ My additional research and use of multiple sources allowed me to provide more of his early life story and his personality and to offer a later-life perspective on his experience as a POW. I was able to devote most of Chapter Nine, 'POW Artists', to his story, and also to include his experience at other salient points in the book, such as when I described sport and gambling. The sharply different intersubjectivities within the two main interviews (from the IWM and the NLS) enabled me to describe Frost not only as a POW but as the artist he became; the breadth of my research gave me freedom to quote Frost on many different topics related to captivity, confident that I could do his own life story justice.

The Terry Frost interview was part of the NLS's *Artists' Lives* initiative started in 1990 in partnership with the Tate Archive. Tamsyn Woolcombe, who has conducted many interviews of artists, interviewed Frost at his home in Newlyn,

¹¹⁴ Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Second World War*, pp. 150–51.

¹¹⁵ The NLS, originally known as the National Life Stories Collection, was founded in 1987 by Paul Thompson and is based at the oral history section of the British Library. It aims to record as wide a cross-section of society as possible; each individual life story interview includes family background, childhood, education, work, leisure, and later life.

Cornwall over five days.¹¹⁶ The transcript runs to 256 pages and starts with his birth; it includes additional information about the relationship between interviewer and narrator, such as ‘(laughs)’, and ‘mm’. Frost was seventy-nine at the time of the interview in 1994 – forty-nine years after the end of the Second World War. He had been elected a member of the Royal Academy two years previously.

RP Tilson conducted the IWM interview in 1977, thirty-two years after the end of the Second World War, when Frost was sixty-two. The conversation lasted ninety minutes and began with Frost’s school days. Although the interviewer asked about his development as an artist and his friendship with the more established painter, and fellow POW, Adrian Heath, most of the interview was concerned with military campaigns and his life as a soldier and POW. Unusually for the IWM, a transcript of the interview exists; it runs to thirty-five pages but gives no indication of the relationship between the (male) interviewer and Frost.

The NLS interviewer was much less knowledgeable about what it meant to be a soldier and about the Second World War. At one point, Woolcombe asked, ‘So you had machine-gun things?[[?]]’. However, when it came to Frost’s development as an artist while he was a POW, she posed much more searching questions than the IWM interviewer. She quizzed Frost about the type of painting he was trying in the camps (‘oh, interiors?’), about how he discovered perspective, his use of oils, and the role of Adrian Heath as mentor. As the transcript was not available when I was writing *The Barbed-Wire University*, I did not read the ‘laughter’ note, but I heard this in the recording and felt confident enough to state in my book that ‘Frost’s ribald humour and Heath’s playful understatement and rebelliousness, together with their shared sense of social justice, made a neat fit’, followed by a line from the NLS interview:

¹¹⁶ BL Sound Archive C466/22.

‘And that was the start of our friendship, and [he] also encouraged me to carry on painting for ever’.¹¹⁷

The differences between the IWM and NLS interviews were not confined to a greater emphasis on military history in the former and on art in the later. In the NLS, Frost talked at some length about ‘Stalag happiness’, a state of mind when POWs invented imaginary worlds and pets as a way of ‘escaping’ momentarily from captivity. At one of the camps where Frost was held, Stalag 383, this form of behaviour lasted for several days in an episode that later became known as ‘Crazy Week’. Frost described to the NLS interviewer how he polished his cap badge and put on his best clothes to order an imaginary taxi, adding, ‘It was wonderful to go to Blighty’.¹¹⁸ There was no mention of ‘Crazy Week’ in the IWM interview, and I now wonder if the changed cultural habitus made it possible for Frost to discuss this aspect of his captivity. Given her limited knowledge of captivity, it is highly unlikely that the interviewer knew about this mental phenomenon and, indeed, it was Frost who introduced the subject after he was asked about ‘real’ escape attempts. Perhaps as an established artist, who had just become a member of the Royal Academy, he felt less concerned about raising the notion of mental instability, which in the 1970s would have carried a degree of stigma. The interviewer’s gender and knowledge of art may also have prompted this different response.

My use of both interviews, which reflect different intersubjectivities, together with other sources, allowed me to establish Frost as a multi-layered personality and to explore his background and after-story. Another NLS *Artists’ Lives* interview, with Adrian Heath, offered further insight into the friendship between the two men, while David Lewis’s short biography, *Terry Frost: A Personal Narrative* (1994), which

¹¹⁷ Gillies, *The Barbed-Wire University*, p. 89.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

quoted from an interview in the Tate Archive, contributed additional details, as did newspaper obituaries, the *Dictionary of National Biography*, *Grove Art Online*, Heath's liberation questionnaire in the National Archives, and images of Frost and his work.¹¹⁹

Using a variety of different sources allowed me to establish the historical and social context to the events Frost lived through. In Chapter Seven, “‘Stalag Happy’ – Imaginary Worlds and Other Ways of Escape’, I incorporated material from MN McKibbin's memoir of Stalag 383, *Behind Barbed Wire* (1947) and the Archives of Hamilton Heath Sciences and the Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University in Canada to explore a wider discussion of mental health among POWs. Both Frost and Heath appeared in the book's final chapter, ‘Aftermath’, in which I offered a perspective on their careers and lives. This epilogue provided a useful way of comparing their experience as POW artists in Europe with the life story of Jack Chalker. I interviewed Jack several times to record his experience as both a medical orderly on the ‘Death Railway’ and as a clandestine artist, and in this final chapter I described how his POW experience shaped his later life and led to a civilian career as a surgical illustrator. These sorts of comparisons and reflections are impossible within the straitjacket of the *Forgotten Voices* narrative style.

iv. Barbara Wilton and Sue Middleton: joint and multiple interviews

When I started my research for *Army Wives*, I expected the interviews I carried out would be on a one-to-one basis. However, the nature of the army network meant that many of my interviews involved more than one interviewee. This was not an arrangement I chose, although I usually found it helpful, but something the narrators

¹¹⁹ Interview by Norbert Lynton, *Artists' Lives*, BL Sound Archive reference C466/11.

had organised themselves. I was conscious that this left me outnumbered and that it represented a shift in ‘power’ – although one that I was happy to agree to. I always made it clear before the interview that I had written a book about POWs and that my mother had, briefly, been an army wife; the fact of my gender also contributed to my ‘membership’ of the group of women I was interviewing. While this did not allow me full membership of the army wives ‘club’, I felt it meant that I was not the outsider I might otherwise have been.

Graham Smith, Chair of the UK Oral History Society, has pointed out that there are very few studies of group work by oral historians. Those that exist often describe this approach as ‘high risk’, because it can lead to confusion.¹²⁰ Smith observed that, while interviews in kin and neighbourhood groups are much more common outside white, Western European, and North American contexts, it is important not to ‘overstress such differences’; ‘group remembering’ is still an important part of everyday life in developed parts of the world. Memory, Smith argued, is ‘the result of social processes that are experiential’.¹²¹

The main risks in multiple interviews – narrators talking simultaneously and rapid topic-switching – were not evident in my interviews with army wives. My experience supports research that suggests that this disruption is less prevalent in groups or pairs (particularly elderly married couples) who know one another well. Instead, narrators are more likely to ‘cue’ one another’s memories, leading to a greater font of ‘pooled’ information.¹²² It should also be noted that army wives – particularly officers’ wives – are well practised in observing unspoken rules in formal situations about who should speak when. The women I interviewed were acutely

¹²⁰ Graham Smith, ‘Remembering in Groups: Negotiating between “Individual” and “Collective” Memory’, *Oral History*, 35.2 (2007), 77–90, reprinted in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, pp. 193–211.

¹²¹ *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Perks and Thomson, p. 194.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 195.

aware of their husbands' rank and how that standing is often transferred to them. This factor may also have contributed to the way in which wives 'cued' other wives in joint interviews. In two cases, an officer's wife arranged for me to speak to the wife of an Ordinary Rank soldier and to the wife of a member of a Gurkha regiment. In both cases, I felt that the interview had only been possible because of the entrée provided by the officer's wife.

I was introduced to Barbara Wilton by a mutual friend and interviewed her in her house in Suffolk. She invited Sue Middleton, also a former army wife, to join us. Although the two women were close friends and their husbands are both retired officers, they came from different backgrounds: Sue grew up near the officers' training school at Sandhurst, and Barbara was from Northern Ireland. Sue and her husband were posted to Germany at the height of the Cold War in 1967, while Barbara and her spouse arrived ten years later, when memories of the Second World War were starting to fade.

Looking back at the interview transcript, there is no sign of rapid changes of topic or of the women talking at once. Rather, one woman would pick up and amplify something the other had said, for example:

Barbara: Things became more blurred in my day because you were always 'Mrs So-and-So' and I felt I was 'Barbara'.

Sue: Weren't you lucky! I was 'wife of'. When I had James over my bed was written 'Wife of Lieutenant Middleton'.

Barbara: So was I. You were known by your husband's last three numbers.

Although I had prepared questions in advance, the two women quickly took control of the conversation as they started to talk about their shared experience, albeit at different times, of living in Germany. They went on to discuss how some things had

changed over the years: childcare, careers for wives, life after retirement, being part of the army 'family'. At the end of the interview, both women spontaneously provided introductions to the wives of serving soldiers (who are quoted in Chapter Seventeen), and these, in turn, led to further interviews.

I started the chapter in which Sue and Barbara feature, 'The Cold War Wife', by providing historical context for their lives as army wives in Germany. I used pamphlets and other sources from the IWM to describe what Germany was like immediately after the end of the Second World War, before introducing Sue and describing her early life. Barbara's story, plus testimony from another interviewee, Carol Armstrong, and material from a memoir by novelist Elizabeth Speller, helped to provide a sense of the continuities and differences of experiences in Germany, before returning to Sue and Barbara and Barbara's experience of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

There are risks in group and dual interviews, but in my experience the dangers never materialised, and this format proved ideal for a group of women that has been under-represented in oral history. As Graham Smith has said, 'Moving power away from the researcher/interviewer, even if it is only once in a while, can open up new topics and yet further improve understandings of remembering and memories'.¹²³

v. The anonymous interviewee

Since women have so often remained invisible in historical narratives, it was disappointing, although in my opinion justifiable, to have to anonymise the modern army wives I interviewed in the final chapter of my book. The expediency proved the extent to which an interview is shaped by the time in which it is conducted. I carried

¹²³ Ibid., p. 207. See also Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 136.

out most of my interviews for this part of the book in 2013. One in particular, with a woman I have called 'Louise', took place a few days before Fusilier Lee Rigby was killed near the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich, southeast London and after terrorists had killed three soldiers in France the previous year. When I showed Louise, who was already nervous about speaking to me, the quotes I wished to use from the interview, she insisted that I should not use her real name. Like most of the narrators, she had agreed to the interview against the wishes of her husband. Her insistence, and the insistence of other interviewees, meant that I had to give every person quoted in this chapter a pseudonym and change other details that might have identified the soldiers' wives. In the opening scene, I described how 'Annabel' (not her real name) opened the door one Sunday morning to find her husband's commanding officer standing in full uniform. She wrongly assumed he had come to tell her that her husband had been killed; he had, in fact, popped round to ask her to Sunday lunch. On Annabel's insistence, I removed the name of the county where she lived and details about the view from her cottage.

Being clear from the start of the interview that I would allow them to veto material in the chapter before publication made it possible to discuss sensitive but important themes, such as how rank affects female friendships, the poor quality of army accommodation, the difficulties in communicating when loved ones are absent, and the challenges of building a career when your partner moves base frequently. Building trust led naturally to an exploration of even more sensitive subjects, such as a 'drinking culture' within the army and how media coverage of the army and world affairs affects army children. Without the anonymity, it would have been impossible, owing to child protection laws as well as ethical considerations, to describe how one family coped when the father was posted to Afghanistan (or 'the desert', as the

parents explained to their five-year-old son). The boy suffered nightmares because of the way the conflict in Afghanistan was discussed at school but, on advice from the army welfare officer, the family responded by simplifying the reasons for the mission (Daddy was telling the ‘Baddies’ to ‘Go home, stop fighting’) and by making his job sound mundane through the use of play acting meetings and PowerPoint presentations.¹²⁴

Although the women I interviewed became anonymous, I still managed to retain a sense of them as individuals by describing how they met their future husbands and what they did as jobs. Their rituals and superstitions, such as Kitty’s habit of saying ‘goodnight’ out loud to her husband before climbing into an empty bed when he was away on manoeuvres, also helped to make their experiences individual. There is more humour in this chapter than elsewhere in the book, and this, too, helped to create a sense of individual personalities, as when Kitty described favourite treats to send to her absent husband: ‘There’s probably more Haribo in Afghanistan than there is in the whole of the UK’.¹²⁵

Although this chapter dealt with the modern army wife, context was just as important. I explained how media coverage of the Falklands War in 1982 helped to shape the current way in which the British Army keeps families informed of their loved one’s safety. I also analysed how today’s faster communication has led to unexpected difficulties: the speed with which soldiers can now return from areas of conflict offers less time to readjust to civilian life, and the instant connection of social media can lead to conversations that are damaging because they are less considered than a letter written at leisure from the Home Front.

¹²⁴ Gillies, *Army Wives*, p. 314.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

Giving narrators pseudonyms will always be a compromise, but if it allows the interviewee to discuss challenging subjects, the compromise becomes worthwhile.

6. Conclusion

After a period of marginalisation in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, oral testimony has regained its place in the academy as a legitimate historical source. More than that, it has found champions in other disciplines, not just history, and the practice has won followers in areas of conflict resolution, community projects, and among healthcare practitioners. Visitors to heritage sites expect to *hear* the past as well as see it. We have all become eyewitnesses and recorders: anyone who has a smartphone now has the technology to create an oral history source, either as interviewer or narrator. Memory, once a key obstacle to the acceptance of oral history, has become a major interpretative tool. From eyewitness accounts of ancient wars to the modern census, the spoken word has formed the basis for historical research. The commercial success of the *Forgotten Voices* series of the early twenty-first century uncovered a craving for the ‘authentic’ but at the same time revealed how impossible it is to reproduce so many different stories without destroying the individual life stories within each artificially created time period. The books left little room for historical and social context and paid scant attention to back- and after-story. Although the publishers promised to resurrect the voices of soldiers and civilians from the past, instead they banished them to an eternal purgatory of sameness. My three books under discussion have shown that, by allowing individuals room to speak and by placing them in a historical context, it is possible to illuminate the past by tuning in to distinct voices within it, while still aiming for a compelling narrative structure. In a world of multiplying sources, it is increasingly important to assume a more reflective stance on a person’s life. Oral history is, indeed, ‘complex and messy’, but this is exactly why it deserves to be treated with a greater sophistication than the constraints of a *Forgotten Voices* approach can offer.

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8. Appendix: Critical responses to *Waiting for Hitler, The Barbed-Wire University, and Army Wives*

The contribution of my three books to social history, and in particular their inclusion of oral testimony, has been recognised by historical institutions, academics, and reviewers from a wide range of publications.

Dr Clare Makepeace, Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London, cited *The Barbed-Wire University* in *Captives of War* (CUP, 2017) and as a ‘key source’ in her article, ‘A Mystery and a Massacre’ in *Who Do You Think You Are?* (June 2018). The book was also included in the bibliographies of *Captive Memories, Starvation, Disease, Survival* (Palatine Books, 2015) by Geoff Gill, Emeritus Professor of International Medicine at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), and Meg Parkes, Honorary Research Fellow LSTM, and in *My Ancestor Was a Woman at War: A Guide to Sources for Family Historians* by Emma Jolly (Society of Genealogists, 2013). The Researching Far East POW History Group’s newsletter (No. 7, August 2011) described it as ‘a fascinating, substantial book and an important contribution to POW history’ and praised the book for treating captives as individuals and avoiding the stereotypes of POW escapees in Europe and of suffering in the Far East. The book is on the reading list for ‘Studying Prisoners of War: A Beginner’s Guide’ run by the University of Cambridge Institute of Continuing Education and led by Doctor Gilly Carr of St Catherine’s College, Cambridge University.

Many newspaper reviews highlighted the scope of the book and the way in which it avoided representing a clichéd view of POWs. The *Guardian* gave *The Barbed-Wire University* extensive coverage. Ian Jack selected the book for the ‘What’s Ian Reading’ section of his regular Saturday opinion piece and commented

on the ‘many eye-opening facts in a bright new history of POWs [...] I’m finding it enthralling’ (24 June 2011). Sports writer Frank Keating devoted his entire column to the book (4 January 2012) and described it as ‘a breezy, edifying history which knits together compelling tragi-comic tales’. Nicholas Lezard made it his paperback choice on 12 June 2012, admitting that he had originally dismissed the book when it came out in hardback, as ‘a bit *niche*’. In his paperback review, he conceded, ‘Which will teach me not to be so quick to dismiss a book in future. For this is a valuable, fascinating and moving book’. He praised the book for not concentrating on those who had escaped from POW camps and pointed out the careful use of documentary sources to verify eyewitness accounts. He also noted that my father’s recollections had been key to the book’s inception: ‘In the end this is a riveting collection of stories about incredible resourcefulness’. Lezard included *The Barbed-Wire University* in his ‘Best of 2012’ paperback choice (1 November 2012), commenting:

One of the best war books I have ever read was Midge Gillies’s *The Barbed-Wire University* (Aurum), the story of allied PoWs during the second world war; the tales of courage, resilience and bloody-minded mischief in the face of intolerable oppression had this stony-hearted reviewer in tears.

The attention I paid to honouring the individual lives I portrayed using oral testimony was acknowledged by many newspapers. The *Daily Telegraph*’s obituary of Dr Nowell Peach, a Far East POW I interviewed about his medical studies and practice within camps, included the comment, ‘He was also proud to be included in a recent book about POW ingenuity, *The Barbed-Wire University* by Midge Gillies’ (13 March 2012). The *TLS* (25 November 2011) described the book as ‘an engrossing survey of prisoners’ experience’, and the *Sunday Times* (17 July 2011) also stressed my efforts to differentiate the men featured in the book and to offer proper historical context:

The problem with Gillies's approach to her subject is that with its emphasis on the achievements of POWs, it might appear to belittle their suffering, particularly in the Far East. She is aware of the danger and makes every effort to place all the creativity within its proper context of boredom, homesickness, cruelty and often potential fatal illness. However, what the reader is most likely to take away from this rich and well-researched book is a sense of the extraordinary ingenuity and resourcefulness so many POWs displayed.

Jane Rye's review in *The Spectator* (23 July 2011) pointed out how individual stories had been treated with integrity:

Every facet of this epic story is covered with sensitivity, restraint, notable fairness (in dealing with such delicate matters as the disparity of conditions between officers and men, for example), and a leavening of humour.

Julie Summers, author of books including *The Colonel of Tamarkan*, wrote in *BBC History Magazine* (August 2011):

The historical detail is woven brilliantly into the narrative so that facts are conveyed rather than stamped upon the reader. This is an outstanding piece of scholarship which is as readable as it is informative. It is a valuable addition to the literature of the history of the Second World War.

The book was also praised by tabloid newspapers. The *Daily Express* (1 July 2011) described it as 'a rich and insightful panorama of POW life' and highlighted the interviews as particularly worthy of praise:

Gillies, whose father was a POW, has produced a magnificent tribute to the men. She has evidently taken delight in interviewing ex-POWS and listening to their often heartening, sometimes amusing, sometimes hair-raising stories. Every one of her 247 pages hums with human interest and the whole enterprise is conducted with the highest standards of scholarship.

The *Mail on Sunday* (19 June 2011) ran a two-page feature on John Lowe, one of the Far East POWs I interviewed, and the *Daily Mail* (16 June 2011) included a two-page feature on the book. The book received a five-star review in the *Mail on Sunday* (3 July 2011) and was described as 'brilliantly researched and moving'. Again, the reviewer highlighted the oral history aspect of the book:

Those [POWs] who survive, such as Clive Dunn and Ronald Searle, are now in their 90s. It was vital, therefore, that someone harvested these precious memories before it was too late. Gillies has not only undertaken this important job, interviewing scores of former POWs, but has weaved her findings into a fascinating and deeply moving piece of social history.

The *Mail on Sunday* (30 July 2006) also praised *Waiting for Hitler* for its use of oral history:

Gillies has written a wonderful book, packed with the authentic voices of the past. What might in other hands have been a rather depressing read becomes, thanks to her careful touch, a witty yet moving exploration into Britain and Britishness at its blundering, heroic best.

Tony Benn, who had served in the Home Guard during the Second World War, described *Waiting for Hitler* as ‘a brilliant book and will be enjoyed by people from every generation’, and Margaret Forster said it was ‘the best kind of social history’ (both cover quotes).

Reviews of *Army Wives* concentrated on the depth of my research and the care I took to offer an accurate historical perspective that honoured individual experiences. The University of Cambridge’s website featured an article on the diversity of sources used; the *Daily Express* ran a full-page feature on the book (13 August 2016) and Dan Snow featured it in his *History Hit* podcast (22 July 2016).¹²⁶

History Revealed (November 2016) described *Army Wives* as ‘a compelling history which ranges across centuries, conflicts and continents’, and *Family Tree* (December 2016) said it was ‘a gem of a read that packs an emotional punch, revealing lives that have often been hidden from view’.

Caroline Moorehead, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, writing in the *Sunday Times* (14 August 2016) described *Army Wives* as ‘entertaining’ and

¹²⁶ ‘Stolen World War Two letters help author uncover the hidden lives of army wives’, 9 September 2016, <<https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/stolen-world-war-two-letters-help-author-uncover-the-hidden-lives-of-army-wives>> [accessed 3 July 2018].

‘invaluable for social historians’. The *Mail on Sunday*’s review (4 September 2016) gave the book five stars and added, ‘Gillies is one of our most acute historians of behind-the-scenes military life’. Joanna Bourke, Professor of History, University of London, commented in her review in *BBC History Magazine* (October 2016), ‘she [Gillies] is exquisitely sensitive to the emotional lives of soldiers’ wives’, and the *Telegraph* (7 September 2016) ran a feature on the book.