Book Reviews:


Armed with a list of questions and enough knowledge to operate a tape recorder, anyone can be an oral historian, or so my students in a recent social history class naively hoped. After reading selections from these volumes, they began to realize that both doing and using oral histories demand a sophisticated understanding of not only content but also process. They learned that oral history provides us with an avenue to seek meaning beyond traditional sources, but that the road is often twisted and full of potholes. Not limited to the role of custodian, the oral historian influences the selection of memories, determines the significance of personal histories and how they will be interpreted, and decides how oral history will be presented to an audience. These responsibilities for public memory must not be taken lightly and require constant examination by oral history practitioners.

Ronald Grele and Michael Frisch address the oral historian's responsibilities in a number of useful ways in these fine volumes. Grele is the director of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University and has served as the editor of the *International Journal of Oral History* and the *International Annual of Oral History*. Frisch holds a joint appointment in the departments of American Studies and history at the State University of New York—Buffalo, and is the editor of *The Oral History Review*. Both authors are recognized authorities in the field, and their expertise is evident in their choice of subjects as well as the questions they raise.

Both books are compilations of essays. Grele’s book, first published in 1975, grew out of a session at the 1973 annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians and includes essays and interviews of others working in the field including Studs Terkel, Jan Vansina, and Alice Kessler Harris. Frisch’s volume brings together essays published elsewhere over a fifteen year period, as well as some new, previously unpublished material. The author has organized the essays into three coherent sections and through his introduction provided a framework for considering oral and public history. The two volumes complement each other beautifully. Whereas Grele is most concerned with the creation of oral history, Frisch is most interested in its application. Although strongly theoretical, both authors have used case studies to highlight such problems and issues as collective memory, the relationship between the historian and the source, and oral history as a means to bring the historical participant into the process of interpreting the past.
In the 1973 OAH panel discussion, which involved five scholars and Studs Terkel as interviewer and was recorded at radio station WFMT in Chicago, Grele said that "oral history is a tool to democratize the study of history" (87). Because history does not require a special language, anyone who has a sense of the past can "do" history. However, who decides what becomes part of the history that will be recorded and passed on to succeeding generations? Can the participant determine what place his/her memories and feelings have within history, or is that the role of the historian? If the historian is to make sense of the data, in this case recorded memory, what factors contribute to decisions concerning its significance? These are the types of issues the oral historian must wrestle with to understand fully what he/she does.

In an essay entitled "Can Anyone Over Thirty Be Trusted: A Friendly Critique of Oral History," Grele continues to examine the usefulness of oral history to the profession in general. He concedes that oral history has opened up new areas of American history to examination and has helped to recreate the lives of those who had been ignored in the past. Through the use of personal narratives, we can begin to see what the common person remembers about the past and can theorize about such things as the formation of class ideology. But Grele also points out that there is a danger in assuming that because "someone says something it automatically contains a truth beyond those of established historians who have written in the past." (201) Nor is it true that oral histories of those traditionally hidden from history are automatically free from the cultural biases of the larger society. However, we must remember, as Grele so perceptively puts it: "History without biases and passions is probably impossible and if attainable would be as dull as dishwater" (203). Keeping in mind that the personal narrative as well as the written record are flawed, the historian must somehow make sense of words and meanings. As Grele points out, this often raises more questions than answers.

Michael Frisch also questions the role of the professional historian in the collection, interpretation, and presentation of oral history. Frisch is a populist who believes that the professional historian must not be given sole responsibility to determine what is historically significant and that the public be empowered to engage in dialogue about the past; hence the title of the book. He believes that professional historians can aid the public in the empowerment process, but that biases and condescension often obscure common ground. For instance, in the essay "The Memory of History," Frisch explores the relationship of the past to the present and America's selective memory about its history. He states: "Memory has always proven difficult for historians to confront, committed as they are to notions of objectivity beyond the definitive subjectivity of individual and collective recall" (21). Historians typically use oral history as a way to personalize and complement "objective" source material. Frisch points out that historians often allow the obscure participant only to relay personal experience, while encouraging the famous and the expert to pass judgment on historical events. Using the PBS series Vietnam: A Television History as an example, he shows how interviews of politicians and military brass take on much more significance than those with ordinary foot soldiers and antiwar protesters. Frisch also uses Vietnam to warn against the tendency to let oral history stand by itself because its emotional urgency
seems to defy interpretation. As Frisch observes, "To confer unquestioned authority on direct experience is usually to mystify, rather than bypass, the process of drawing meaning from the stream of history" (160).

For public history to fulfill its purpose, we must understand why our public culture is so disengaged from its past. Above all, professional historians must involve the public in the exploration of the past, to make their memories active in the present, not just collect them as bits of data to be used in the footnotes of "objective" history. Many of the essays in A Shared Authority implore the professional historian not to dismiss the contributions of the obscure as marginally significant and to understand that history and the process of history belong to all of us.

Both of these books will be considered the standards by which other examinations of oral history will be judged. Both books are powerful tools to be used in the exploration of what historians do and how memory and history can be used to connect the past to the present. I expect that the pages of my volumes will become dog-eared from frequent reference, for no matter how often I refer to an essay, I come away with a renewed sense of intellectual stimulation. I would like to think that my students have a similar experience.

Margaret A. Spratt, California University of Pennsylvania

By Alice M. and Howard S. Hoffman. Archives of Memory: A Soldier Recalls World War II


This book is both an oral history narrative of war and a systematic exercise in the process of memory retrieval. Alice M. Hoffman, a past president of the Oral History Association, worked with her husband, Howard S. Hoffman, an experimental psychologist and World War II veteran, to answer three principal questions important to the field of oral history: Does the human mind reproduce its memories in very similar ways over a period of years; in short, is memory reliable? Is memory factually accurate and verifiable when compared to written materials from the period? Can one's memory of a historical event be improved by contextual cues?

To address these questions, the Hoffmans review classic psychological investigations concerning memory and find that the behaviorist school's experiments with rats shed little light on longterm human memory. To remedy this shortcoming in the literature, the Hoffmans devised their own case study with Howard as the subject. His assignment was to retrieve his wartime experiences between enlistment in 1943 and mustering out in 1945 in four sets of free recall interviews separated by ten years. The time differential would test the stability of Howard's memory. After the second set of interviews was completed in 1982, nearly forty years after the war, the Hoffmans tried jointly to jog Howard's memory for more information by revisiting army posts, examining wartime photographs and maps, and talking to old comrades at veteran reunions. They also checked his account against the daily company log and other records.

Howard made a desirable subject because of his complete cooperation with his wife and
his willingness not to review outside material such as war films during the study. His detailed recollections are remarkable for their graphic and technical detail and accuracy when compared to written documents. There were few lapses, mistakes, or instances of repression. His memory failed him in only two ways—when asked about war experiences out of chronological sequence and when shown battlefield photographs intended to elicit new memories.

Although sometimes controversial among oral historians, the Hoffmans’ conclusions seem eminently reasonable and accord with my own experiences in interviewing historical subjects. The crux of their insights is that there is a separate category of memory that can be called “archival” because it operates under its own rules and because “it is unaffected by disuse and is susceptible to little or no decay over time” (150). This memory survives for an individual’s lifetime because the recorded events are unique to him or her, well rehearsed mentally, and readily retrieved in a variety of ways, much like a library card catalog. The implication of this discovery is that historians ought to attach greater weight to interview evidence. The Hoffmans also learn that archival memory is little improved by additional external cues. They suggest that oral historians need not over-prepare for interviews, since their subjects have largely fixed memories of dramatic episodes that are best tapped by the kind of “simple and straightforward” question Alice Hoffman asked her husband at the start of their work: “Tell me about the war. And begin at the beginning” (154).

The question that goes unanswered in this book is whether Howard Hoffman’s phenomenal recall is simply an exceptional case study. The Hoffmans’ exploration points the way to at least two additional studies of human memory. First, other persons, say even from Howard’s own battalion, should be interviewed for their recollections of epic events. Second, memories of epic events should be compared to memories of mundane occurrences.

Aside from the methodological focus on oral history, Archives of Memory is a fascinating excursion into the gritty life of an American combat soldier in the European theater. Howard Hoffman was attached to the Third Chemical Battalion that fought its way past Cassino and Rome in Italy, invaded southern France, and joined General George S. Patton’s final push to crush Hitler’s Third Reich from the Battle of the Bulge to the Elbe River. Along the way, he tells about being part of mustard gas experiments at Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland and fending off fierce German counterattacks for 154 consecutive days. He vividly recounts his revulsion at seeing dogs and pigs eating deceased French civilians lying in city streets. He also reports seeing evidence of such German atrocities as crushing the skulls of young babies and burning one thousand political prisoners alive in a barn in Gardelegen to prevent their liberation by the approaching Allied army.

In sum, Archives of Memory is a book that can be read profitably by psychologists, oral historians, and military enthusiasts.

Bruce J. Dierenfield, Canisius College


This anthology, consisting of thirteen diverse articles, marks the transition of the *International Journal of Oral History* from a triennial journal to an annual review. The editor, Ronald J. Grele of the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, notes in his introduction that for the past ten years the journal has "published articles which are of more than local interest, which are comparative in approach, which make use of cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches, and which concentrate upon methodological or theoretical discussions, which for one reason or another cannot find a local audience" (1). The new format is designed to allow for longer, more finely textured, speculative essays.

This volume opens with an article by Tamara Hareven that carefully explores the process of work and family interaction among Japanese silk weavers. Part of a larger project on the traditional silk weaving industry in Kyoto, this fascinating article is interdisciplinary in the truest sense in that the author successfully utilizes the disciplines of history, sociology, and linguistics. Professor Hareven is well known as the coauthor of *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory City* (1978), which details the social history of the textile city of Manchester, New Hampshire, through extensive oral history interviews. Transporting her interviewing skills across the Pacific, Hareven is attempting to compare the now defunct New England textile industry with that of the Nishijin weaving district. She concludes that the sense of betrayal felt by the Nishijin weavers during the dramatic decline of their industry matched that experienced among the New England workers. Interviews indicated that the stronger the sense of identification with an industry, the stronger the feeling of betrayal by the employees during its failure. Her most valuable message, however, is that the researcher must be carefully attuned to the cultural nuances of the community being studied. For example, in both Japan and the United States she learned that "textile language" became a powerful means of communication.

Articles by Selma Leydesdorff and John Bodnar focus on the relationship between oral history and social history. Leyesdorff, of the University of Amsterdam, argues that "the life story approach in oral history can be raised to a science that investigates individual ideologies and memories" (54). By examining the location and type of housing as well as the mobility of the Amsterdam working class, she was able to show that what seemed to be a middle-class population was, in fact, deeply working class and that their conceptions of themselves were fraught with contradictions. For his article Bodnar studied randomly selected transcripts from a collection of 140 interviews with Polish Americans recorded in 1976-1977 at the Oral History Archives of Chicago Polonia. He takes the reader inside the Chicago Polish community to view the complexity and many contradictions inherent in its conception of the family. Bodnar moves from mere descriptions of social and economic relations to interpretations of those relations based upon the visions of the people themselves. This is an area that we are just beginning to understand. Unfortunately, the article is only nine pages long, and one feels that the author has just
begun when he breaks off.

From South Africa come articles by Isabel Hofmeyer of the University of Witwatersrand and Ari Sitans of the University of Natal, both prepared for the third Triennial History Workshop at the University of Witwatersrand in 1990. Both articles deal with the close affinity between social and political struggle and the world of orality. Both move us from the world of writing and literacy to the world of voice and sound. Hofmeyer’s article focuses on the mundane act of fence-making and the establishment of borders in rural South Africa. She is able to show just how much these encounters depend on oral communications and how their consequences have meaning within the local struggle against domination. Sitans’s interest is in the patterning of public performance. He says he wants to show the reader the public voice of South African revolution as that voice is heard in rituals of participation. The key to this exercise is the relationship between oral performance and the audience, which the author says “will continue as long as the South African revolution propels people to gather or to gather in different ways” (103).

Both Florence Charpigny of the University of Provence in France and Jenny Gregory of the University of Western Australia raise serious questions about methodology and interdisciplinary work. Charpigny argues that the interview text—not its content—is the appropriate object of study. She urges a more scientific approach to oral history, which she calls the ethnotext. Gregory writes that “oral historians worry about memory” (107) and then proceeds to discuss the applicability of various memory theories to oral history data. Her conclusion is that memory is a complex and multifaceted process that is continually being reconstructed.

Three separate articles by LuAnn Jones of the Smithsonian Institution, Allesandro Portelli of the University of Rome, and Michelle Palmer, Marianne Esolen, Susan Rose, Andrea Fishman, and Jill Bertoli, all participants in the Smalltown Community Project, move the reader to consider oral history as a way of raising political consciousness and urging political involvement. The article by Palmer et al. is guaranteed to open many readers’ eyes when they learn that the project took place in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. It is about helping a community to discover and document its own stories. Jones documented changes in farming life among older farmers in the American South. Both the small town group and Jones focus on the process of interviewing, the relationships that emerge within that process, and the consequences that follow those relationships. Portelli’s article, which deals with interviews conducted by his students during a wave of political demonstrations at the University of Rome, is a complex, highly complicated interweaving of history, politics, and personality.

The closing articles by Pamela Grundy of the University of North Carolina, Sherna Berger Gluck at California State University, Long Beach, and Glen Adler of Columbia and Witwatersrand universities focus upon ways that oral history can be used to document political struggles. Grundy studied water rights in Cave Creek, North Carolina, and her interviews reveal the complex emotional issues that arise in political struggles. Gluck’s study of Palestinian women shows how feminism is changing the Palestinian struggle. This is more than a study of the women of the Intifada, for it raises the issue of research and writing for political independence. Adler’s arti-
545

cle, which deals with South African union activists in various automobile factories, is a most appropriate conclusion because it forces the reader to think about the value of freedom and political participation.

The editor promises in the introduction that the work presented will be "at the forefront of the intersection between theory and practice and incorporate a new accent on multiculturalism" (1). This valuable book has certainly succeeded in these terms. All in all, this book is highly recommended not just for oral historians but for scholars in general. As the editor rhetorically asks, if knowledge is power, then to what ends will scholars use their knowledge? Robert H. Terry, York College

Edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History

This collection of thirteen essays, addressing a variety of questions, approaches, and analyses, should appeal to anyone interested in the theory or the practice of history in general and oral history in particular. Nevertheless, the editors of this volume have solicited contributions from scholars representing a number of fields other than history, including women's studies, speech communication, cultural studies, folklore, linguistics, anthropology, social work, and sociology. The interviewees are equally diverse, ranging from older female African-American professionals, to the leaders of four Palestinian women's committees, to steelworking families (both men and women) in Maryland. What ties these essays together is that all of the contributors are women who are attempting to bring a feminist sensibility to the practice of oral history, even as they struggle to define what that might consist of and to put that definition into practice. These essays thus reveal sixteen years of evolution and continuing debates within the field.

The editors have divided the collection into four parts, each with its own separate introduction, which captures the diversity of the contributions. "Language and Communication" analyzes the psychological and social, as well as linguistic, components of the interview, considering how the interviewer must put these components into cultural and historical context. "Authority and Interpretation" tackles the thorny ethical and power dimensions of the interview and its analysis, suggesting ways to empower the interviewee while allowing the interviewer to interpret and contextualize (no mean feat). "Dilemmas and Contradictions" carries the ethical considerations even further, using the unique conditions of fieldwork to illustrate the often inherent conflicts between intent and practice. Finally, "Community and Advocacy" presents a variety of models for bridging the gap between the academy and the community, as the essayists question whether it is possible to be both an advocate and an unbiased interpreter and, if so, how this is to be accomplished. All four of these sections, however, raise important questions about the role of the interviewer, and suggest that there are no easy solutions to the problems
embedded in the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Moreover, common
gender does not mitigate these power differentials, just as it does not necessarily provide either
easy entree into or complete understanding of the world of the interviewee.

While there are stronger and weaker selections within this anthology, the most valuable
contributions are those that demand a multivariate approach to the analysis of women's lives,
giving class, race, ethnicity, and culture a place equal to gender. It is these essays (mostly to be
found in part three) that put this collection on the cutting edge of history. As early as 1975 (two
years before the first group of women gathered at a conference of the National Women's Studies
Association to discuss oral narratives), Herbert Gutman inveighed against the "balkanizing
thrust" of history as it was being studied by scholars fashioning themselves as labor historians,
African-American and ethnic historians, women's historians, and so on. He suggested that
research focusing on a single issue "often substitute[s] classification for meaning and wash[es]
out the wholeness that is essential to understanding human behavior." The more sophisticated
of the essays in this collection address Gutman's warning and provide ample evidence of how
recent contributions to women's history have attempted to understand the many components of
individual identity (gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, community), the possibility for net-
working provided by such components, and the intersections between these networks, as well
as give a historical context to this understanding. Thus, discussing her research on Brazilian
women in her essay "Is Ethical Research Possible," coeditor Daphne Patai warns that
in a world divided by race, ethnicity, and class, the purported solidarity of female identity is in
many ways a fraud—in this case perhaps a fraud perpetrated by feminists with good inten-
tions. Having rejected the objectification of research subjects construed as "Others," the new,
ostensibly feminist scenario substitutes the claim of identity, our identity as women, while
often straining to disregard ethnic, racial, class, and other distinctions that, in societies built on
inequality, unavoidably divide people from one another (144).

And, of course, the difficulty is compounded by the difference between past behavior and pres-
ent understanding as articulated in an interview and the relationship between interviewer and
interviewee. Thus the claim of some of the contributors to this volume of an immediate under-
standing arising out of the commonality of gender is too easy. But the best of these essays recog-
nize that there are no easy answers; rather that we who do history (women and men alike) must
recognize the problems and find the solutions best suited to our topics, no matter the gender of
our subjects. Thanks go to the editors for assembling this stimulating anthology.

Lori E. Cole, Carnegie Mellon University

Notes

1. Herbert G. Gutman, Work, Culture & Society in
Industrializing America (New York: Vintage
By Robert H. Terry. *Neighborhood Center: An Urban Love Story*

(Harrisburg, Penn.: Neighborhood Center of the United Methodist Church, 1992. Pp. 250. $14.95, Paper.)

The role of the academic in community history is far more complex than that of the ubiquitous consultant. Despite caricatures of professors content in ivory towers, those of us who teach in colleges and universities are members of the community and participate in it, albeit to varying extents. For example, Robert H. Terry of York College of Pennsylvania has combined his professional skills as a historian with his religious faith and his work in the community to write *Neighborhood Center.* Inside the back cover of the book, the reader is informed that he belongs to the United Methodist Church and is a member of the board of directors of the Neighborhood Center, a Methodist affiliated social service organization in Harrisburg that has served that city's migrants and lower classes for more than eighty years. Terry's account shows us that the intense involvement that embodies so much of the promise of community history can indeed be conveyed by an academically trained scholar. But it also shows that a scholar must take care to avoid the common pitfalls of community history—insufficient analysis, a lack of appropriate context, and an uncertain grasp of audience.

Terry has organized his work chronologically, dividing each chapter into a narrative section and a set of excerpts from oral history interviews, which comprise approximately one-third of the book. He deals with many aspects of the center's day-to-day operations through a careful examination of its minute books. Still, most readers might prefer more analysis and a less detailed recitation of such matters as receipts and disbursements for various months (53, 69, 91, 101) or attendance figures for the center's programs (21, 54, 145, 163). Similarly, changes in staff are chronicled perhaps too exhaustively.

Known for most of its history as the Methodist Mission, the center was established to assist in the assimilation of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, but by the 1930s and 1940s it was serving African Americans almost exclusively. While Terry mentions that separate kindergarten classes were held in the 1910s for white and blacks, he does not clarify when that policy was abandoned. He deals too narrowly with Harrisburg urban renewal program that accommodated the expansion of the Capital Complex in the late 1950s and early 1960s and so forced the center to relocate. Unfortunately, Terry's understandable focus on the center's day-to-day operations prevents him from effectively addressing any audience beyond those already familiar with the institution. But those readers too might appreciate an effort to place the center's history more broadly within the all-important context of Harrisburg's history. That would have fit better with the local nature of his work than beginning each chapter as Terry does, with a paragraph or two listing contemporaneous national and international events (31-32, 46-47, 68, 88, 131-32, 161, 189).

Through his extensive use of oral history, Terry provides a great deal of interesting material on the role of the center in the community. For example, an interviewee born in 1901 to a family of Slavic immigrants mentions how, in one of the center's programs, she was taught a particular
way to set the table. One evening, she told her mother: "'No, mother, you don't do it that way.' . . . She [mother] said, 'Where did you learn that? Who taught you that?'" This episode and the interviewee's reflection, "My mother never forgot that I wanted to share my knowledge with her. She accepted it very well," (43-44) are indeed thought-provoking but, like other oral history excerpts in the book, could benefit from further analysis.

The interviews shed the most light on race relations. Of special interest are those with African Americans who visited the center regularly during their youth and later served as staff member. Excerpts give a striking portrayal of the white deaconesses who led the staff until the 1970s. Conspicuous in their religious garb, "little black hats and . . . long dresses," (38) they apparently were not only accepted by the community but beloved by many. In the book's final excerpt, a young woman tells how the center's program for unwed mothers has enabled her to finish college and launch a career (238-40).

In the final third of the book, Terry provides a useful account of the stresses and successes the center has experienced since 1970, from recurring budget crises to the construction of a new building in 1984. While more attention to context and analysis would also have been helpful here, these chapters confirm the essential role of institutions like the center in grappling with the rapidly multiplying hardships of contemporary urban life. Professor Terry deserves our thanks for chronicling the center's inspiring story and thus stimulating our interest in learning more about the changing community it continues to serve.

Perry Blatz, Duquesne University