

# Oral History

Annotated Bibliography for 2016 NEH Summer Institute on Veterans in Society

Andrew J. Boysen  
Saint Louis University

Coffman, Edward M. "Talking about War: Reflections on Doing Oral History and Military History." *The Journal of American History* 87:2 (2000): 582-92.

While oral histories are useful in researching a number of historical subjects, oral history is becoming indispensable to military history. Coffman traces military oral history to the Athenian general Thucydides and his Peloponnesian War history. He also, however, believes scholars only first truly accepted oral histories after World War II.

Frisch, Michael. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990.

History belongs to everyone, and oral history helps history be accessible to everyone. Thus, all historians can remain objective and overcome their personal biases or prejudices when interpreting history through increased collaboration with those who lived history. Oral history facilitates this collaboration, and is reshaping the historical profession by offering a compelling alternative to the traditional practice of history.

Kirby, R. Kenneth. "Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History." *The Oral History Review* 35:1 (2008): 22-38.

Kirby details oral history's alleged problems, including the reliability of oral history interviews. This unreliability arises from the interviewer asking questions in a manner that improperly influences the interviewee's responses, the interviewer's inherent biases, selecting the proper interviewees and memory reliability. Kirby believes oral history suffers from a problem inherent in all historical research: ensuring information produced is based on an objective rather than a subjective telling of history.

For Kirby, however, phenomenology provides a successful response to oral history's critics. Admitting it lacks a simple definition; Kirby still attempts one by stating that phenomenology "advocates a bracketing or suspension of taken-for-granted attitudes about reality in order to reconstruct a more accurate view of self and world." (23) Most importantly, phenomenology can help ensure objectivity by identifying subjectivity in the interviewer and interviewee. It also addresses memory gaps by seeking "truths of understanding, of spirit, of cultural values, that tell the real story of the historical event or era." (33)

Lofgren, Stephen J. "The Status of Oral History in the Army: Expanding a Tradition." *The Oral History Review* 30:2 (2003): 81-97.

The U.S. Army codified its oral history practice in 1993 with Army Regulation 870-5, which governs the Army's military history program and includes an oral history chapter.<sup>1</sup> This coincided with the Army's Center for Military History publishing an oral history guide, and the practice only increased after September 11, 2001. This increase demonstrates oral history's benefits, reinforcing the therapeutic nature of interviewees' sharing experiences and strengthening the historical record with a number of personal accounts. These benefits help assuage Lofgren's "concerns about the value of oral history as perceived by others." (96)

Neuenschwander, John N. *A Guide to Oral History and the Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Army Regulation 870-5, *Military History: Responsibilities, Policies and Procedures* (Washington, DC: HQDA, 12 July 1993).

Neuenschwander regularly releases his legal guide, which seeks to help oral historians “stay out of trouble.” (xvi) Defamation, invasion of privacy, Freedom of Information Act requests and copyrights are a few of the topics explored.

Parr, Alison. “Breaking the Silence: Traumatized War Veterans and Oral History.” *Oral History* 35:1, War and Masculinities (2007): 61-70.

Parr conducted interviews with nine New Zealand World War II veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and conducted follow-up interviews with the only three surviving veterans thirteen years later. Noting the veterans believed it was therapeutically beneficial for them to share their stories, Parr advocates more work with veterans’ oral histories. As such, and echoing Lofgren, Parr believes oral historians can help veterans tell their stories to cope with traumatic experiences. She cautions, however, that “we oral historians are researchers, not therapists.” (69) Still, Parr recognizes that “those of us who work with veterans of war have a particular responsibility. . . . We can do no better than follow Alistair Thomson’s cardinal rule – and remember always to put the well-being of our interviewee before the interests of our research.” (*Ibid.*) Through disciplinary collaboration and helping veterans share their stories for therapeutic purposes, oral historians can both ensure their interviewees’ well-being and advance their own research.

Thomson, Alistair. *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Using 21 veteran interviews, *Thomson* explores the “Anzac legend” of Australian soldiers’ World War I service and how it established an Australian national identity. Acknowledging the veterans suppressed memories of unpleasant experiences, Thomson believes memory “‘distortions’ . . . could be a resource as much as a problem.” (228) Thus, Thomson promotes additional study of changing memories based on fluctuations in circumstances or public perceptions.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History.” *The Oral History Review* 34:1 (2007): 49-70.

Here, Thomson discusses four major changes in oral history since World War II. Among these changes are “the postwar renaissance of memory as a source for people’s history; the development . . . of post-positivist approaches to memory and subjectivity; a transformation in perceptions about the role of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst” and, most recently, “the digital revolution.” (50)

Thomson also addresses oral history’s interdisciplinary possibilities, and the fact a large number of veterans’ oral histories come from those without traditional historical and/or academic training. As such, one concern for historians is “that the increasing theoretical sophistication of academic oral history is incomprehensible to, or ignored by, oral historians outside the academy, for example those working in schools, community projects and the media.” (56-57)

Yow, Valerie R. “Ethics and Interpersonal Relationships in Oral History Research.” *The Oral History Review* 22:1 (1995): 51-66.

Yow uses different hypothetical situations to help oral historians traverse potentially problematic areas. These involve the presentation of the narrator in published writing; the oral historian’s unconscious advocacy of historical matter; maintaining a professional relationship versus developing a personal friendship; establishing trust between the interviewer and narrator, and being particularly aware of this trust encouraging the interviewee to reveal information that might be harmful to his or her own interest; how to ask potentially painful questions; maintaining objectivity when using oral history to reinforce the narrator’s purpose, principally when the interviewer does not agree with the interviewee or objects to the interviewee’s participation in historical events; and avoiding misrepresenting the interviewer’s purpose.

\_\_\_\_\_. “‘Do I Like Them Too Much?’ Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa.” *The Oral History Review* 24:1 (1997): 55-79.

In this article, Yow advances the theme of preserving objectivity in oral history practice by offering a series of questions the oral historian can ask him- or herself, particularly when conducting interviews. “1. What am I feeling about this narrator? 2. What similarities and what differences impinge on this interpersonal situation? 3. How does my own ideology affect this process? What group outside of the process am I identifying with? 4. Why am I doing this project in the first place? 5. In selecting topics and questions, what alternatives might I have taken? Why didn’t I choose these? 6. What other possible interpretations are there? Why did I reject them? 7. What are the effects on me as I go about this research? How are my reactions impinging on the research?” (79)