

THE CANADIAN ORAL HISTORY READER

Christina Landman

Research Institute for Theology and Religion
University of South Africa
landmc@unisa.ac.za

Llewellyn, Kristina R., Freund, Alexander and Reilly, Nolan (eds.). 2015. *The Canadian oral history reader*. Carleton Library Series 231. Montreal, Kingston, London and Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press. ISBN 978-0-7735-4495-6. pp. 408. This is an achieving book in oral history, which gives an overview of Canadian insights into oral history thinking and practice that are relevant to the international discussion. This is done in four sections: Methodology, Interpretation, Preservation and Presentation, and Advocacy.

The section on methodology deals with issues such as the credibility and legality of oral histories, which are, to a great extent, dependent on the methodology used (Brian Calliou). It furthermore addresses the methodological challenges of 'sharing authority', which includes interviewers dissociating themselves from their ethnic roots (Stacey Zembrzycki). An important chapter is that by Nancy Janovicek on oral history and ethical practice, and the need to move away from a medical model of ethical clearance. An important methodological statement made in this chapter is that traditionally, history has to be substantiated by written sources of which the authors must be made known; why then must the authors of oral sources be kept anonymous? Jill Jarvis-Tonus wrote the chapter on legal issues regarding oral histories, dealing specifically with copyright. According to Canadian law, the author of the work (that is, the oral historian) owns the copyright. There are of course nuances to this, and oral historians need to inform themselves of the law in their own countries as a matter of professional urgency.

Section 2, on interpretation, deals with a variety of case studies that illustrate how people construct themselves, and that the interpretation of the oral historian is subject to the self-expression of the interviewees. Kristina Llewellyn (p. 153) illustrates that women as a gendered group 'do not have a coherent self that moves through history with a single identity' and points to the interpretative dichotomy that women's narratives are socially constructed, yet are to be respected as their own stories even if some of them express comfort in submissiveness. Alexander Freund presents an excellent and useful chapter on interpreting a family 'making memories' of their difficult past. Family memory loses details and remembers only a few foundational stories, usually the funniest, to pass on. Artificial family harmony is created through this and 'empty speaking' to create a mythology of remembrance. Julie Cruikshank undermines the idea that oral traditions are natural products and that stories speak for themselves – stories become facts and find voice only through theoretical assistance.

The third section deals with the preservation and presentation of oral history material, and offers invaluable information in this regard. Of note is the hint by Elise Chenier that oral history researchers must, when applying for grants, request funds to archive the material. And Alexander Freund reminds us that the recording of an interview is a more accurate document than the transcript. Stacey Zembrzycki and Steven High describe a process in which survivors of horror could remember but not be re-traumatised by journeying back into their pasts. Bronwen Low and Emmanuelle Sonntag warn us not to lose our listening, but through oral history interviews to create 'occasions for exploring individual and collective meaning-making and identities' (p. 279).

The fourth and last part, which deals with advocacy, is not the most exciting part of the book. However, it reminds us that the oral historian has an obligation towards advocacy as part of his/her role in 'shared authority' with the interviewee(s).

Although the book is focused on Canada – where, it is claimed, more fieldwork has been done than in any other part of the world – it is a foundational work in oral history that needs to be on the shelves of all oral historians. Under the teaching eye of an oral history lecturer who can interpret the contents for local contexts, it can even be a prescribed work to students in the light of the huge vacuum that exists in this regard.

Other countries should be encouraged to engage in publishing such foundational works that can be used as teaching material. South Africa, especially, with its unwritten, half-written and one-sided histories, should produce a book like this lest history be lost for future generations.