



THE HOUSES OF HISTORY

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Oral history

Oral history is usually referred to as a methodology, not a theory. But during the past decade oral historians have developed a number of interpretive theories about memory and subjectivity, and the narrative structures which provide the framework for oral stories about the past. While these have not yet coalesced into a single body of theoretical concepts, the directions are clear, and our understanding of both individual and collective memory has been greatly enhanced. Despite this, oral history is still regarded by the majority of historians as primarily a methodology. From this perspective, oral history often appears to be a more or less technical process in which the memories of the elderly are elicited through questions, recorded on tape machines and transcribed. The revival of interest in oral history from the 1960s onwards was not well received by conventional historians, who regarded oral testimonies as unreliable and tainted by personal subjectivity. Such sentiments were expressed by Eric Hobsbawm in an essay originally written in 1985. Describing oral history as 'a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts', Hobsbawm called upon oral historians to work with psychologists to establish the parameters of memory.¹

There are probably limits to the value of such an encounter between psychology and history. Daniel Schacter, Professor of Psychology at Harvard, argues that those events which we experience with the most intensity will be more elaborately encoded by a system of memory which ensures that we recall what is most important to us.² This is, therefore, unlikely to be the experiments carried out by psychologists in controlled tests! What is important will vary from individual to individual, and the British oral historian Paul Thompson cited an interesting instance in which an elderly Welshman was asked to recount the names of the occupiers of 108 farms in his district in 1900. When checked against the parish electoral list, he was found to

be correct in 106 cases. Thompson concludes that the reliability of memory must rest partly on whether the question being asked interests the informant.³ The memories of crucial experiences may be re-evaluated and re-contextualized throughout life, but they remain the basis upon which individual memory, and our sense of self-identity, is constructed.

The revival of oral history derived from a new generation of historians steeped in the politics of the New Left, civil rights and feminism. These university researchers, drawn from a much broader segment of the population than had been the case previously, wanted to include the experiences of marginalized or neglected social groups. Oral history was perceived as a means to empower women, the working class and ethnic minorities, allowing them to speak for themselves. We will return to this difficult question later. But there is no doubt that oral history has played a significant role in ensuring that many of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century against mankind are not forgotten, and that in some cases the perpetrators are brought to justice.⁴ This aspect of oral history is celebrated in the new international award, Le Prix de la Mémoire, established in 1989 by the France-Libertés Foundation, to honour those who work to preserve collective memory. The prize grew out of the belief that 'the expression, transmission, and preservation of Human Memory is the most effective means of struggling against the recurrence of barbarism'.⁵

Until the 1970s oral testimonies were approached by historians in very much the same way as documentary sources, as a source of factual evidence. Michael Roper describes this period as 'oral history in the reconstructive mode'.⁶ A great deal of valuable historical information was recorded and preserved, particularly in the areas of working lives. One of the largest oral history projects during this time was Paul Thompson's study of Edwardian Britain which sought to satisfy the traditional empirical requirements of a balanced sample producing representative results. Five hundred interviews were recorded with a cross-section of British society, exploring the dimensions of inequality and social structure. The interviews were structured around an interview schedule of some twenty pages, with the intention of generating comparable material. Thompson explicitly pointed out that the major strength of oral history lay in the 'particular facts and detailed accounts of everyday events'.⁷

But despite Thompson's efforts, establishing the empirical legitimacy of the source among professional historians remained elusive. Towards

the end of the 1970s some historians sought to take oral history in a new direction, turning its perceived weakness, the subjectivity of individual memory, into a strength. Roper describes this turning point as 'oral history in the interpretive mode'.⁸ In 1979 Italian historian Luisa Passerini published one of the most influential articles in the theory of oral history. Exploring the effects of Fascism upon the Italian working class in Turin, Passerini concluded that oral testimonies needed a far more sophisticated conceptual approach with which to understand the ways in which culture and psychology influenced memory. She argued that oral historians 'should not ignore that the raw material of oral history consists not just in factual statements, but is pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and therefore includes not only literal narrations but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires'.⁹

The role of female cultural norms, and subconscious resistance, have been central to Passerini's analysis of women's self-representation in oral testimonies. The following example illustrates the way in which Passerini locates individual stories within the matrix of cultural norms. Maddalena Bertagna gives an account of an occasion when she was part of a demonstration, and the soldiers opened fire (the actual event was in 1920). Maddalena attended the demonstration with a number of women and her young daughter. As the soldiers began to shoot, Maddalena ran away, holding the child by the hand. The following account includes both some of Maddalena's words (in italics) and Passerini's subsequent analysis:

I had her by the hand while running. She held onto Giambone's sister, the Giambone who they then killed at Martinetto. Well, his sister had her by the hand on one side and I had her on the other, and we were running to get away.

When we stopped running, across that thing there was just by the arcades, just there her hat flew off her head, and to fetch the hat I let go of her [the daughter], she fell. I fell too, and the next moment we're heaped on top of one another.

This is the beginning of a sequence in which events are jumbled up together, recalled with accelerating pace in a loud, high-pitched voice, punctuated with laughter. Maddalena gets up, her hair loose and face dirty, her child with an injured arm. They pick up the hair-pins and take refuge in a janitor's lodge which is already full of people. The story emphasizes the things which transgress everyday norms – the women drink the water keeping the radishes cool and find it refreshing, they return home late, to find – in a reversal of roles – Maddalena's husband, who has been waiting

for some time, struggling with the soup she had put on the stove before leaving.¹⁰

Passerini draws our attention to the 'strong sexual connotations of the hair undone' and suggests that Maddalena's self-representation may best be understood as an unconscious manifestation of the older cultural figure of the disorderly woman, transgressing gender boundaries. This interpretation may have been fundamentally influenced by Passerini's own experience of psychoanalysis during this period.¹¹ An alternative reading of this narrative might have focused upon the rhetorical and performance aspects of story-telling, in which humour plays a central role. Indeed, Elizabeth Tonkin identifies the context in which the story is told as particularly important, for 'good storytellers are admired, and their genre gets critical and informed support. . . . But little academic attention is paid to the rhetorical skills of ordinary speakers'.¹²

Passerini's work also emphasizes other psychological dimensions of memory, 'including the un-said, the implicit, the imaginary, that . . . does not coincide with consciousness'.¹³ She is probably best known for drawing our attention to the significance of silences in oral testimonies. One of the most striking features of her Turin study was the apparent excision of fascism from the memories of working-class men and women. Whole life histories were recounted without any mention of the years between 1925 and the outbreak of the Second World War. Passerini regards such silence as evidence of 'a scar, a violent annihilation of many years in human lives, a profound wound in daily experience'.¹⁴ Many oral historians have been reluctant to actively employ the tools of psychology and psychoanalysis, and Jacqueline Rose has pointed out the risks of confusing an historical interview with a therapeutic psychoanalytic one, asking 'what are its objectives . . . what are the limits being placed on what can and cannot emerge?'¹⁵

Despite this concern, oral historians have increasingly followed Passerini's direction in seeking to understand the hidden, and often unconscious, structures which inform narratives about the past. In the United States Ron Grele, for example, drew attention in 1975 to the need for oral historians to grasp the 'underlying structure of consciousness which both governs and informs oral history interviews'.¹⁶ Grele's initial contribution to this process was an in-depth analysis of two oral history interviews conducted as part of a larger project in New York. The two accounts, he argued, employed two

different structural frameworks: the first a cyclical story of progress and decline, and the second, the binary opposition of two eternally opposing forces.¹⁷ Historians, Grele suggested, needed to understand the way individuals constructed their life histories to create a 'usable past'.¹⁸ This understanding of the need for individuals to construct a coherent account of their life history, with which they feel comfortable, is closely related to the concept of 'composure' developed in the reading by Alistair Thomson which follows this introduction.

Another way in which a 'usable past' is created is through adjusting the sequence of events to fit an overall narrative. In these cases, conflict between the oral and documentary record is a feature of oral history research, as Alessandro Portelli and John Bodnar discovered. Portelli recorded stories about the death of Luigi Trastulli in Terni, Italy when participating in a protest against the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949. However, in popular memory, the date of his death had shifted to 1953, in the context of conflict over the layoffs from the local steel factory.¹⁹ Portelli sees this factually incorrect account not as the product of faulty memory, but as an active creation which gives us insight into the way in which experience is symbolically and psychologically incorporated into memory. In addition, Bodnar points to the importance of recognizing that oral accounts of the past are constructed in the present. Individual memories of working lives at the Studebaker automobile plant in Indiana were collectively constructed into a three-part narrative that did not always accord with the documentary evidence.²⁰ However, Bodnar argues that the perspective on each stage was inevitably informed by the final outcome, the closure of the plant, and 'that only from the perspective of the end do the beginnings and the middle of a narrative make sense'.²¹ In both these cases the altered chronology entered collective memory, and became the dominant narrative for that group.

Increasingly oral historians have focused upon the role of imagination in story-telling. In 1987 a conference on 'myth and history' explored the importance of imaginative paradigms for the process of remembering. In this context myth was defined as:

a metaphor for the symbolic order, or for the relationship between the imaginary and the real. We wanted to break down the opposition between the imaginary and the real, and to show for personal life narratives as anywhere else, that no statement that is made about one's past individually, is in any way innocent of ideology or of imaginative complexes.²²

Two papers given at the conference, which were subsequently published, illustrate two different aspects of myth in oral history. Canadian anthropologist Julie Cruikshank showed how myth continued to play a critical role in oral tradition, the transmission of stories from generation to generation. She interviewed eight Athapaskan women who were born during or after the Klondike gold-rush of 1896-98.²³ Cruikshank's initial expectations of the content of the interviews, based around her knowledge of the disruptive effect of contact with prospectors, missionaries, traders and miners, was deflected by the women's determination to tell traditional stories. In the end Cruikshank recorded more than one hundred stories, many of which were almost identical to those described by early ethnographers in the late nineteenth century. Why did these stories persist as a way of explaining life experience? While Cruikshank acknowledges the implicit problems entailed by cross-cultural interpretation of oral traditions, she argues that the narratives were employed to convey ideas about social change to the next generation of young women. Myth was utilized as a bridge between past and present, and to explore the role of women within a culture suffering from painful dislocation. In this instance Cruikshank is deeply sensitive to Tonkin's point about the importance of the context in which stories are told.

However, myths are not confined to cultures in which the transmission of history remains primarily oral. Jean Peneff also drew attention to the pervasive elements of myth in the culture of capitalism.²⁴ In a study of Algerian entrepreneurs he explores the strength of the 'myth of the self-made man' for men who came from families of 'substantial privilege in colonial Algeria'. Peneff identified three elements to the story: the contrast of before and after in each individual story; a tendency to conceal any favourable social circumstances, and finally rarely any mention of familial support.²⁵ Peneff argues that it is essential for the oral historian to identify the myths employed within each story so that it is possible to evaluate the 'authenticity' of different aspects of a life history.

One consequence of the emphasis upon the value of subjectivity in oral testimonies has been a substantial shift away from older methods of interviewing towards a more subject-centred approach. While questionnaires are still utilized for social science research, oral historians increasingly employ techniques such as interactive interviewing in which as much control as possible over the direction of the interview remains with the interviewee.²⁶ In other words, advances

in our understanding about the way in which our memories are constructed and narrated have begun to transform the methodology through which memories are elicited and preserved.

This has not, however, obviated the need for interviewers to interpret memories, and this is where major difficulties can arise. To some extent the new theory of oral history, which seeks to problematize memory and narratives about the past, runs contrary to the earlier democratic and empowering intentions of oral historians. This problem has been recognized, particularly in the area of women's history and feminist interpretation. In a perceptive account of an interview with her grandmother, Katherine Borland was forced to confront the very different understandings held by herself and her grandmother of a story about a day at the races.²⁷ Michael Frisch has argued that in the field of public history oral historians must share interpretative authority with those with whom they work.²⁸ It is not, however, always possible to put this into practice, and as Alistair Thomson has pointed out, 'a collective project which explores the relationships between personal and collective memories, and which challenges people's life stories, will almost inevitably generate difficulty and pain'.²⁹

In conclusion, historians now argue that oral history has a different 'credibility' from the empirical evidence of documentary sources. Subjective and collective meaning is embedded in the narrative structures people employ to describe the past. All memory is valid, according to Passerini: 'the guiding principle should be that all autobiographical memory is true; it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, for which purpose'.³⁰ This means that every life history 'inextricably intertwines both objective and subjective evidence – of different, but equal value'.³¹

The powerful influence of myth and the unconscious in the process of remembering has undoubtedly undermined the initial optimism with which 'historians from below' embraced oral history as a means of rewriting history from the perspective of the marginalized or oppressed.³² But in case we begin to lose sight of individual agency, and begin to perceive memory as over-determined, it is worth remembering the following conversation between Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. 'You must learn some of my philosophy. Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure', Elizabeth tells Darcy. But he is unconvinced, and replies that 'painful recollections will intrude, which cannot, which ought not to be repelled'.³³

The following article by Alistair Thomson explores the links between private and public memory for one Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) soldier, Fred Farrall, a veteran of the First World War. Born and educated in Melbourne, Thomson's interest in the Anzacs arose out of his family history and the dominance of the myth in Australian culture. Thomson seeks to understand the extent to which national mythology about the Anzacs influenced Farrall's memories and the way in which he understood his experiences during the Great War. Consider the features of Thomson's theory of 'composure' and compare them with Farrall's memories. In this case, are the individual's memories adjusted to accord with the myth; has Farrall 'remade' his memories to achieve 'composure'? Do you think it is possible for the individual to retain oppositional memories in the context of powerful cultural myths? Where does the current direction of oral history, with its emphasis upon unconscious cultural norms and imaginative complexes in structuring our memories of the past, leave the active agency of individuals?

Notes

- 1 Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London, 1997), pp. 206–7.
- 2 Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York, 1996), pp. 45–6. See also Steven Rose, *The Making of Memory: From Molecules to Mind* (London, 1992), p. 91.
- 3 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1988), p. 113.
- 4 See Luisa Passerini, *Memory and Totalitarianism* (Oxford, 1992).
- 5 Harvey J. Kaye, *Why Do Ruling Classes Fear History?* (New York, 1997), p. 61.
- 6 Michael Roper, 'Oral History', in Brian Brivati, Julia Buxton and Anthony Seldon (eds), *The Contemporary History Handbook* (Manchester, 1996), p. 346.
- 7 Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians* (St Albans, 1977), pp. 13–18.
- 8 Roper, 'Oral History', p. 347.
- 9 Luisa Passerini, 'Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, 8 (1979), p. 84.
- 10 Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, trans. Robert Lumley and Jude Bloomfield (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 20–1.
- 11 Susan A. Crane, 'Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory', *The American Historical Review*, 102, 5 (December 1997), p. 1384.
- 12 Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 53–4.
- 13 Cited in Karl Figlio, 'Oral History and the Unconscious', *History Workshop Journal*, 26 (1988), p. 128.
- 14 Passerini, 'Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism', p. 92.
- 15 Jacqueline Rose, 'A Comment', *History Workshop Journal*, 28 (1989), p. 150.
- 16 Ron Grele, 'Listen To Their Voices', *Oral History*, 7 (1979), p. 33.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 19 Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (New York, 1991), pp. 1–28.

- 20 John Bodnar, 'Power and Memory in Oral History: Workers and Managers at Studebaker', *Journal of American History*, 75 (1989), pp. 1201–21.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 1221.
- 22 Raphael Samuel, 'Myth and History: A First Reading', *Oral History*, 16 (1988), p. 15.
- 23 Julie Cruikshank, 'Myth as a Framework for Life Stories: Athapaskan Women Making Sense of Social Change in Northern Canada', in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds), *The Myths We Live By* (London, 1990), pp. 174–83.
- 24 Jean Peneff, 'Myths in Life Stories', in Samuel and Thompson, *The Myths We Live By*, pp. 36–48.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 26 Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack, 'Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses', in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York and London, 1991), pp. 11–26.
- 27 Katherine Borland, 'That's Not What I Said', in Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*, p. 64.
- 28 Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York, 1990), p. xxii.
- 29 Alistair Thomson, Michael Frisch and Paula Hamilton, 'The Memory and History Debates: Some International Perspectives', *Oral History*, 25 (1994), p. 35.
- 30 Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington, 1989), p. 197.
- 31 Thomson, Frisch and Hamilton, 'The Memory and History Debates', p. 34.
- 32 See Samuel, 'Myth and History', pp. 16–17.
- 33 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Harmondsworth, [1813] 1972), p. 377.

Additional reading

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ANZAC MEMORIES: PUTTING POPULAR MEMORY THEORY INTO PRACTICE IN AUSTRALIA

Alistair Thomson

Australian soldiers of the Great War of 1914–1918 have been making regular appearances on British television and in the cinema in recent years. The Anzacs (named after the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps—the New Zealanders tend to be left out of Australian films) have swaggered across our screens in *Gallipoli*, *Anzacs* and *The Lighthorsemen*, and even made an honourable appearance in the controversial British series, *The Monocled Mutineer*. A feature of these films is their characterisation of the Australian soldier, and of Australian manhood in general, which can be summarised as follows. The digger, as he is also nick-named, is usually a bushman from the colonial frontier, strong, sun-tanned and resourceful. He's also a bit of a lad, a 'larrikin' in Australian slang, a boozier and gambler who's not too concerned with military spit and polish, and who despises the military discipline of the British army and the snobbishness of British officers. Of course there are no such tensions within the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), in which the ruling creed of mateship includes the Australian officers, who come from the ranks and thus from the same social background as their men. Respect for talent rather than status, and the encouragement of individual initiative, contrast sharply with British military and caste tradition, and make the diggers among the best fighters of the war and the AIF the most effective army.¹

Australian war films are a product of a recent resurgence of this 'Anzac legend'. According to the legend, during the Great War Australian soldiers proved to themselves and to the rest of the world that the new breed of Anglo-Celtic men from the south was worthy to rank with the nations of the world. Gallipoli, where the Australians first went into battle on April 25 1915, was regarded as the baptism of fire of the new Australian Commonwealth, and the commemoration of Anzac Day on April 25 each year became the Australian equivalent of American Independence Day or Bastille Day in

¹ See Amanda Lohrey, 'Australian mythologies: *Gallipoli*: male innocence as a marketable commodity', *Island*, nos. 9 and 10, 1982, pp. 29–34.

France (without the revolutionary overtones). Like all commemorations, the meanings and forms of the Anzac legend have been contested since its inception, and it has many different variations. Recent Anzac films are simply the most powerful and popular representation of what Anzac means in Australia today. For a European audience they may have different meanings, especially because the manliness and military prowess of the Anzacs contrasts so markedly with the usual European imagery of western front soldiers as passive victims of modern warfare and military incompetence.²

This essay focuses on the life and memories of Fred Farrall, one of about twenty Melbourne working class veterans of the Great War whom I've interviewed over the last six years.³ I don't pretend that Fred Farrall was a typical digger, far from it. The search for national character has been one of the obsessive dead ends of Australian history-writing, and in this essay I won't be analysing the extent to which the Anzac legend is an accurate representation of the 'typical' Australian soldier.⁴ I'm more interested in the interactions between Anzac legend stereotypes and individual soldiers' identities, in the experience of difference as well as conformity, and in the ways that 'typical' can be oppressive. I want to assess the relationship between Fred Farrall's memory of the war and the national mythology which publicly defines his experience as a soldier, and to use his case study to make sense of the general relationship between individual memory and collective myth.

The theory of memory (and national myth) which informs this essay was developed by the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. The group focused on the interactions between 'private' and 'public' memories, and used the following approach to individual memory. We compose our memories to make sense of our past and present lives. 'Composure' is the aptly ambiguous term used by the Popular Memory Group to

² See Robin Gerster, *Big-noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1987.

³ I'd like to thank Fred Farrall for his assistance and cooperation, and for sharing his memories with me. The interviews with Fred were recorded in July of 1983 and April of 1987, and the tapes and transcripts of the interviews, together with others from the project, are available in the 'Australian Veterans of the Great War: Oral History Project' collection of the library of the Australian War Memorial. I am grateful for a Research Grant from the Australian War Memorial which paid for the transcription of the tapes.

⁴ For such a critique see my chapter, 'Passing Shots at the Anzac Legend', in Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), *A Most Valuable Acquisition: A People's History of Australia since 1788*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne 1988.

describe the process of memory making. In one sense we 'compose' or construct memories using the public language and meanings of our culture. In another sense we 'compose' memories which help us to feel relatively comfortable with our lives, which give us a feeling of composure. We remake or repress memories of experiences which are still painful and 'unsafe' because they do not easily accord with our present identity, or because their inherent traumas or tensions have never been resolved. We seek composure, an alignment of our past, present and future lives. One key theoretical connection, and the link between the two senses of composure, is that the apparently private process of composing safe memories is in fact very public. Our memories are risky and painful if they do not conform with the public norms or versions of the past. We compose our memories so that they will fit with what is publicly acceptable, or, if we have been excluded from general public acceptance, we seek out particular publics which affirm our identities and the way we want to remember our lives.⁵

Some critics of oral history have claimed that the fact that we compose our memories invalidates the use of memory by historians. That might be true for oral historians who have sought to use memory as a literal source of what happened in the past. But if we are also interested, as we must be, in the ways in which the past is resonant in our lives today, then oral testimony is essential evidence for analysis of the interactions between past and present, and between memory and mythology.

This approach to memory requires a review of interviewing technique. In my initial interviews with Melbourne war veterans I wanted to see how the experiences of working class soldiers contrasted with the Anzac legend, and used a chronological life story approach as the basis for questions. The interviews did reveal many differences between their lives and the legend, but I was also struck by the extent to which memories were entangled with the myth; for example, some men related scenes from the film *Gallipoli* as if they were their own. Therefore, guided by the ideas of the Popular Memory Group, I devised a new approach for a second set of interviews with some of the same men. In the new interviews I wanted to focus on how each

⁵ Unfortunately the now defunct Popular Memory Group did not publish its most pioneering exploration of myth, memory and identity, though I'd like to thank Richard Johnson and Graham Dawson for letting me read various drafts. A relatively crude initial outline of their approach is 'Popular Memory: theory politics, method', in Richard Johnson, et al (eds), *Making Histories: Studies in history writing and politics*, Hutchinson, London 1982.

man composed and told his memories by exploring four key interactions: between public and private, past and present, memory and identity, and interviewer and interviewee. The personal information which I had already gained in the first interviews made it possible for me to tailor my questions specifically for each man in terms of his particular memories and identities. If I had not done the original interviews I would have needed to integrate the life story approach with the new approach.

To investigate the relationship between public and private memories I made the public myth a starting point for questions: what was your response to various war books and films, past and present, and to Anzac Day and war memorials? How well did they represent your own experiences; how did they make you feel? We also focused on specific features of the legend: was there a distinctive Anzac character; how true was it for your own nature and experience? Were you so very different from the soldiers of other armies? I asked each man to define certain keywords in his own words—'digger', 'mateship', 'the spirit of Anzac'—and discovered that some of the men who seemed to be uncritical of the legend had contrary and even contradictory understanding of its key terms.

Another section of discussion focused on experience and personal identity: how did you feel about yourself and your actions at key moments (enlistment, battle, return)? What were your anxieties and uncertainties? How did you make sense of your experiences and how did other people define you? How were you included or excluded, what was acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (what was not 'manly'), and how and why were some men ostracised? Of course these memories, and the relative composure of memory, had shifted over time (the past/present interaction), so we discussed how postwar events—such as homecoming, the Depression and World War Two, domestic change and old age, and the revival of Anzac remembrance in the 1980s—affected identity and memory. The new interview approach showed me that what is possible to remember and to articulate changes over time, and how this can be related to shifts in public perception.

Another related and difficult focus of the new interviews was upon the ways memories are affected by strategies of containment, by ways of handling frustration, failure, loss or pain. This required a sensitive balance between potentially painful probing and reading between the lines of memory. What is possible or impossible to remember, or even to say aloud? What are the hidden meanings of silences and

sudden subject changes? What is being contained by a 'fixed' story? Deeply repressed experiences or feelings may be discharged in less conscious forms of expression, in past and present dreams, errors and Freudian slips, body language and even humour, which is often used to overcome or conceal embarrassment and pain. Discussion of the symbolic content and feelings expressed by war-related dreams suggested new understandings of the personal impact of the war, and of what could not be publicly expressed. And my interview notes about facial expression, body movements and the mode of talking were revealing about emotive meanings of memories which would not be apparent in interview transcripts.

This approach raised ethical dilemmas for me as an oral historian. Interviewing which approached a therapeutic relationship could be damaging for the interviewee as well as rewarding for the interviewer. It required great care and sensitivity, and a cardinal rule that the well-being of the interviewee always came before the interests of my research. At times I had to stop a line of questioning in an interview, or was asked to stop, because it was too painful. Unlike the therapist, as an oral historian I would not be around to help put together the pieces of memories which were no longer safe.

One partial response was to make the interview, and the interview relationship, a more open process. I tried to discuss how many questions affected remembering, and what was difficult to say to *me*. To encourage dialogue instead of monologue I talked about my own interests and role. In some ways this change in my role (limited by the fact that I never gave up my role as interviewer) affected the remembering. Sometimes it encouraged a man to open up to me and reconsider aspects of his life, though others resisted that opportunity. The explicit introduction of my attitudes into the interviews may have encouraged men to tell stories for my approval, though I usually felt that it facilitated discussion and provoked dissent as much as agreement. In Fred Farrall's case that was not such an issue, as by the time we met his memory of the war was relatively fixed. Although over the years we developed a close and trusting relationship, in which Fred's remembering was actively encouraged by my interest, he seemed to tell the same stories in the same ways to his various audiences, including me. Fred's war story had not always been so fixed, and I gradually realised that his memory of the war, and his identity as a soldier and ex-serviceman, had passed through three distinct phases, shaped by the shifting relationship between Anzac meanings and his own subjective identity.

Born in 1897, Fred Farrall grew up on a small farm in outback New South Wales. He didn't like farm work and, inspired by the patriotic fervour which swept the country after the Gallipoli landing, was glad to join a 'Kangaroo March' of rural recruits for the AIF. He enlisted in an infantry battalion and was sent to France and the Somme in 1916. By his own admission Fred was not much of a soldier. He was young, naive and under-confident, and wasn't very good at fighting and killing. Like many soldiers of all nationalities, he was terrified in battle and miserable in the trenches, and began to doubt his own worth and that of the war itself. His best mates were killed and mutilated at his side, and though Fred survived the war in one piece, he was a physical and emotional wreck:

When I came home I was admitted to Randwick Hospital for six months to see what they could do with the trench feet condition, and the rheumatism and a nasal complaint that I contracted on the Somme. . . . I didn't realise this at the time, but I long since realised it. But I had neurosis, that was not recognised in those days, and so we just had it. You put up with it. And that developed an inferiority complex, plus, really, I mean extremely bad. . . . Well, I had reached a stage with it, where, when I wanted to speak I'd get that way that I couldn't talk. I would stammer and stutter and it seemed that inside me everything had got into a knot, and that went on for years and years and years.

From the fortunate, retrospective stance of a survivor who overcame his neurosis, Fred attributes his shell-shocked condition to the effect of constant bombardment on the Somme. He admits that he was unable to express his fear during and after the battle, and was discouraged from doing so: it was not manly or Australian. Many of Fred's stories contrast his own inadequacy with the supposed bravery of other Australians. The legend of the Australian soldier—the best fighter in the war—caused many diggers to repress their feelings, and worsened the psychological trauma of the war.⁶

Fred's condition, and his sense of personal inadequacy, was worsened by his return to Australia.

I was something like pet dogs and cats that are turned out in the Dandenongs [a mountain range near Melbourne] . . . If anyone was to ask me now what I was like at that time, I would say that in some respects, it could truthfully be said, and I suppose this applied to many others, many

⁶ For an analysis in these terms of the nature and effects of shell shock, see Elaine Showalter, 'Rivers and Sassoon: The Inscription of Male Gender Anxiety', in M.R. Higonnet, et al (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1987, pp. 61–9.

others, that we wouldn't be the full quid. In other words, we weren't what we were like when we went away. I don't know whether you've heard Eric Bogle's songs. Well he mentioned that in something he said about Vietnam. . . . And then when I got into civilian life, well this was something new, and to some extent it was, it was terrifying. You're out in the cold, hard world. Nobody to look after you now. You've got to get your own accommodation, your own meals. In short, you've got to fend for yourself.

For men like Fred who were teenagers when they enlisted, the social experience of repatriation was especially traumatic. Fred was lucky. Because of his ill-health he couldn't go back to work on the family farm, but a cousin and her digger husband gave him a room in their home in Sydney, and got him back on his feet. He enrolled in a government vocational training scheme to become an upholsterer, but the scheme was badly organised, and though the government subsidised trainees' wages, employers were not interested when the subsidy ended. Fred searched for work for almost two years before he got a job in a motor car factory. I asked him whether his war service badge helped him to get a job. It didn't, and he wouldn't wear it for many years:

Well, we didn't value it.

Why?

Well, it'd be hard to explain other than that first of all, we, of course, had been disillusioned. What we'd been told that the war was all about, didn't work out that way. What we'd been told that the government would do when the war was over, for what we'd done, didn't work out either.

In what ways?

Well, you see, the pensions in the 1920s, unless you had an arm off or a leg off or a hand off or something like that, it was almost as hard to get a pension as it would be to win Tatts [an Australian lottery]. There was no recognition of neurosis and other disabilities. . . . And anyway, the doctors that they had in those days, I suppose they were schooled in what, how they were to behave and so they treated the diggers as they interviewed them and examined them as though they were tenth rate citizens. Something like we look upon the aboriginals. There was great hostility between the diggers on one hand and the Repatriation officials on the other. . . .

Fred felt that ex-servicemen were regarded as 'malingerers', and refused to use the Repat. until 1926, when he had a breakdown and had no choice.

Despite this hostility, the war remained a haunting memory for Fred. He chose to marry on the anniversary of his war wound, he named his house after the places where his two best mates were

buried, he remembered (and still recites) in exact detail the places and dates where many friends were killed. These private forms of commemoration, which transformed grotesque experience into relatively safe lists and rituals, were Fred's way of coping with the past. Experiences and feelings which he could not cope with were unconsciously expressed in his dreams:

Oh well, the dreams I had were dreams of being shelled, you know, lying in a trench, being in a trench or lying in a shellhole, and being shot at with shells. And being frightened, scared stiff. Here, to now, I didn't know there were so many others like me until I read this book on Pozieres.⁷ That most of them had this fear, and when you come to think of it, well how could they be otherwise . . . You don't know when the next shell that is coming is going to blow you to pieces or leave you crippled in such a way that it'd be better if you had been blown to pieces. . . . [In the dream] you'd be going through this experience and you'd be scared stiff, you'd be frightened. You'd be frightened, and wakened up, probably, by the experience.

One reason why Fred could not come to terms with his wartime fears and feelings of inadequacy was because he could find no appropriate public affirmation of his experience as a soldier. He found that he could not talk about his war:

Well, well it was a different atmosphere in the 1920s for instance, and the early 1930s. First of all those that were at the war were reluctant to talk about it, and those that were not at the war, didn't go to the war and the women and that, didn't seem to want to hear about it. So the war slipped into the background as far as the average person was concerned. . . . I never talked about it. Never. For years and years and years. Now just why that was I don't know. But, the soldiers, generally speaking, were not very enthusiastic about army life and were ever so pleased to get into civilian clothes again. . . . When we got back, there was a sort of hostility towards anything to do with the war, by a lot. . . . All they wanted to do was to distance themselves as far as they could from anything to do with the army, with the Repat., or the war.

Fred shut away his beautifully embossed discharge certificate in a dusty drawer, and he declined to wear his medals or to attend Anzac Day parades or battalion reunions. The nature of Anzac Day and of other public forms of commemoration, and the perceived neglect by the government, was partly to blame for Fred's inability to express or resolve his ambivalence about his war experience. This was not true for all diggers. Many of the men I interviewed describe how they

⁷ Peter Charlton, *Pozieres; Australians on the Somme 1916*, Methuan Haynes, North Ryde 1980.

enjoyed the celebration of their digger identity on Anzac Day, and the humorous reminiscence of veterans' reunions. Public remembrance and affirmation helped these men to cope with their past, filtering out memories which were personally painful or which contradicted the legend. The nascent Anzac legend worked because many veterans wanted and needed to identify with it.

Fred's initial interview explanation of his non-participation is that Anzac Day was a drunken binge, and that he wasn't a drinker. He stresses his own sobriety and complains that the popular larrikin image of the digger—boozier, gambler and womaniser—has not accurately depicted his own experience and view of the AIF. I hadn't expected this response, but it shows how another aspect of the digger stereotype—larrikin as well as fighter—could misrepresent an individual's experience, exclude him from public affirmation rituals, and make him feel uncomfortable about his own identity. Several other old diggers expressed the same unease about the larrikin image which has featured prominently in recent Anzac films, and remembered that even during the war they were made to feel uncomfortable by this behaviour and reputation. Others revelled in the stereotype, which conjured up exciting memories of their own wild youth.

Fred also avoided Anzac Day because its patriotic rhetoric did not match his wartime doubts about the worth of Australian involvement, or the bitterness he felt about the postwar treatment of the soldiers. But the main reason for his non-participation in Anzac ritual was the extreme confusion and distress he felt about the war. The public celebration of Anzac heroes was a painful reminder of his own perceived inadequacy as a soldier and as a man, and Fred was unable to enjoy the solace and affirmation it offered to other returned servicemen.

Although Fred Farrall was traumatised by his memories and identity as an Anzac throughout the 1920s, he gradually found another life and identity in the labour movement, which in turn helped him to compose a sense of his war which he could live with more easily. Fred recalls that he was politically confused after the war, but that a work-mate persuaded him to join the Coachmaker's Union in 1923: 'that was the beginning of my active part in politics . . . [and] sowed the seeds for my socialism that I developed a few years after and have had all my life'. He became active in the union, joined the Labor Party in 1926 and then, unemployed and disillusioned with the Labour government of 1930, he joined the Communist Party. In the labour movement Fred found supportive comrades and gradually

regained his self-confidence. The new and empathetic peer group—many of them were ex-servicemen—and eager reading of radical tracts about the war, helped him to articulate and define his wartime and postwar disillusionment. He believes that was true for many other diggers, and cites the example of his friend Sid Norris:

In that respect, the making of a big change politically speaking, Sid was but one of thousands of diggers who abandoned their prewar opinions of God, King and Empire being worthy of any sacrifice. The bitter experience of what wars were all about, the making of big profits for some people, was a lesson that changed the diggers' political ideas from conservatism to radicalism. And Alistair, this is one part, or side, of the Anzac legend that has never been dealt with by the writers of the Great War. Maybe you can give it some thought.

Although Fred had not himself made that recognition during the war, in the late 1920s his new political understanding helped him to emphasise particular senses of his experience as a soldier. Thus Fred now ironically stressed the story of an Irish labourer on his father's farm who had warned him not to go and fight in the rich men's war, and he represented himself as an unwitting victim of an imperialist war. He also stressed that the relationship between officers and men in the AIF was not so very different to that between employers and workers in peacetime Australia, and that the diggers were often rebellious towards authority (he recalled one incident in which he and two mates planned, unsuccessfully, to kill an unpopular officer). These understandings of the war were part of a more radical Anzac tradition championed by some activists in the labour movement.⁸ As a proponent of this tradition Fred also articulated his disillusionment about repatriation, and deduced that Anzac Day was 'a clever manoeuvre' intended to bring the soldiers back together again and stifle their anger about pensions and unemployment:

Well I would say that if it wasn't for Anzac Day, the First World War would have probably been—met the same fate as the Eureka Stockade [an armed rebellion of gold miners in the 1850s]. That is, it wouldn't be recognised. It wouldn't be recognised. And whoever thought up celebrating Anzac Day, which was a—had nothing to recommend it in a way, first of all we were invading another country, Turkey. . . . Secondly, it finished in a defeat. So what was there to celebrate, looking at it from that angle? So they celebrated it for another reason. That was to cultivate a spirit of war in the community. Of admiration or respect, or honour or something for war.

⁸ L. F. Fox, *The Truth about Anzac*, Victorian Council Against War and Fascism, Melbourne 1936.

And that's all Anzac Day really does. But they had to do it in a certain way, and it was done in a way whereby they could get them together on a social basis. First of all they marched and paraded and showed themselves to the public. And then when that was over they got into their clubs or their pubs or whatever, and did what they wanted to do.

Fred also became sceptical of the returned servicemen's organisations which controlled Anzac Day. He recalls that the soldiers in the trenches talked about the need to organise for decent conditions after the war, and that he joined the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA—now the powerful RSL) on the day he was demobbed. But the RSSILA had been created and controlled by an alliance of citizen and ex-servicemen conservatives, and was granted government recognition as the official representative of returned servicemen 'in return for defending the powers that be' (who were frightened by the violence of dissatisfied diggers and the presence of more radical veterans' pressure groups).⁹ In the early 1920s Fred's inner turmoil and physical handicaps had probably kept him away from RSSILA meetings, but this alienation was now confirmed by political suspicion:

In other words it was the officers in somewhat the same position in civilian life as they were in the army. . . . It was not an organization in the best interests of the ordinary digger. . . . It was a political organization of the extreme right wing and there was no place in it for anyone that had any democratic principles.

By the end of the 1920s Fred Farrall had aligned himself against the RSSILA and was fighting with members of the communist-led Unemployed Workers' Movement in street battles against RSSILA club men and the proto-fascist New Guard movement. By 1937 he was a confident opponent of the official legend and its RSSILA organisers, and was arrested for distributing pacifist leaflets at an Anzac Day parade.

Ironically, by the time Fred had consolidated his radical view of the war, the RSSILA's more conservative Anzac legend, which celebrated the triumph of Australian manhood and the baptism of the nation, was well entrenched. Radicals did contest that version of the war—in Melbourne, for example, some ex-servicemen protested that the proposed Shrine of Remembrance would glorify war, and cam-

⁹ See Marilyn Lake, 'The Power of Anzac', in M. McKernan and M. Browne (eds), *Australia: Two Centuries of War and Peace*, Australian War Memorial/Allen and Unwin, Canberra 1988.

paid for the more utilitarian memorial of a veteran's hospital—but by 1930 radicals had lost the battle for the Anzac legend and the label 'radical digger' was a contradiction in terms. Fred Farrall gradually shed his identity as a returned serviceman and settled into the role of 'a soldier of the labour movement'.

Although the labour movement's version of the war did help Fred to feel relatively secure with an analysis of the war as imperial and business rivalry, and his sense of himself as a naïve and then begrudging victim, it did not (maybe could not?) help him to express or resolve his traumatic personal feelings about the war. Theories about arms profiteers made him angry, but didn't help him to cope with memories of terror, guilt or inadequacy. Nor could he enjoy the wider public affirmation of Anzac Day, which helped other ex-servicemen feel proud of their war service. Thus, for many years Fred usually ignored his military past and tried to forget his painful memories.

There's a third phase in Fred Farrall's war story. Some time in the 1960s or early 1970s he started to read and talk outside of the labour movement about his war. He attended the annual Anzac Day ceremony and reunion of his old battalion. He pinned his war service badge back in his lapel, and retrieved his discharge certificate from its dusty hideaway and stuck it up on his living room wall (above a more recent photo of himself as the Mayor of the Melbourne municipality of Prahran). After years of silence he now talks eagerly and at length about the war to students, film makers and oral history interviewers. Why?

Fred explains the change in a number of ways. It's partly the renewed interest of an old man about his youth: 'I suppose as you get older you have some sort of feeling for what happened long ago. He's also enjoying the respect, even veneration, which the few remaining Great War diggers receive, from people in the street who notice an AIF badge, and from Veterans' Affairs officials who tell them it is a 'badge of honour' and pay their increasing medical costs.

Well, there was a time when it just didn't fit into that picture at all. Well, we've never had much over the years of value from that sort of thing so if there is anything now, even to the extent of getting some respect, well I think it's worth doing.

Those comments hint at more general processes. In the resurgence of interest in the Anzacs, the specific and often contradictory experiences of individual veterans are being clouded by a generalised, almost nostalgic version of the diggers and their war. Furthermore,

in this modern re-working of the legend aspects of their war experience which were once taboo are now publicly acceptable. The Vietnam War and the influence of the peace and anti-war movement have altered public perceptions of war so that the soldier as victim is a more acceptable character—though he still takes second place to the Anzac hero. Fred can now talk more easily about his experience of 'the war as hell', and of his own feelings of inadequacy as a soldier, because those aspects of the war are portrayed in the history books and films of the 1980s. He marvels at how well some recent Anzac historians and television directors depict the horror and degradation of trench warfare. The personal pleasure of having his experience as a soldier recognised and affirmed after years of alienation was vividly expressed when I asked Fred about his visit to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra (second only to the Sydney Opera House as a national tourist attraction):

Nearly got a job there. I was there about eighteen months ago, you know, and oh gee, look here, I got the surprise of my life. . . . I was treated like a long lost cousin [and was asked to talk about the western front to other visitors]. 'Well', I said, 'I wouldn't mind doing that, but', I said, 'I'm a worker for peace and not for war'. 'Oh', the bloke said, 'you know this place was built as a Peace Memorial and so you're at liberty to express your opinions along those lines as you see fit'. . . . So up I went. Well I was there for two or three days really. It looked as though I was going to have, at eighty odd, as though I was going to get a permanent job.

No doubt Fred brought the old models to life with his stories of the misery of trench warfare—the rain, mud, rats, lice, shellfire, explosions, fear—and felt satisfied that at last his story of the war was being told. And he believed that he was making a message of peace.

Yet in this profoundly important reconciliation with his wartime past, and between his own memory and the public story of the Anzacs, Fred's political critique has been displaced. The War Memorial and war films admit that for the poor bloody infantry 'war is hell', yet they still promote the digger hero and the Anzac legend. Fred is so pleased with the new recognition that he doesn't see how other aspects of his experience are still ignored. He doesn't consider the absence of any depiction of tensions between officers and other ranks in the AIF, or of the postwar disillusionment of many diggers, or of the analysis of the war as a business, all important themes in his discussion with me. Fred assumes that any museum depicting the horror of the western front must be a 'peace memorial', but doesn't

recognise the political ambiguity of a museum in which little boys clamber over tanks and want to grow up to be soldiers.

Fred's memory still has a radical cutting edge. He still condemns the artificial patriotism of Anzac Day and carries his war medals on Palm Sunday peace rallies, using the new interest in the Anzacs to make his own criticism of war and Australian society. But he doesn't direct that critique at the Anzac writers and film makers who are the most powerful mythmakers of our time. The effectiveness of the 1980s Anzac legend is that it convinces even radical diggers like Fred that their story is being told, while subtly reworking the conservative sense of the war, national character and Australian history into an appropriate form for the 1980s. This 'hegemonic' process seems similar to that undergone by the diggers who did join the RSSILA and Anzac Day back in the 20s. On each occasion individuals are included and their memories selectively affirmed by the public rituals and meanings of remembrance. That affirmation may be essential for individual peace of mind, but in the process contradictory and challenging memories are displaced or repressed.

Fred Farrall's case study highlights the dynamic relationship between individual memory and national myth, and suggests ways in which oral history can be more than just the 'voice of the past'. Oral history can help us to understand how and why national mythologies work (and don't work) for individuals, and in our society generally. It can also reveal the possibilities, and difficulties, of developing and sustaining oppositional memories. These understandings can enable us to participate more effectively as historians and in collective struggle for more democratic and radical versions of our past and of what we can become.

10

Gender and history

Gender history arose from women's dissatisfaction with their historical invisibility, but subsequently expanded its scope to investigate specifically masculine history as well.¹ While historians such as Alice Clark, Ivy Pinchbeck, Eileen Power and Mary Beard had been researching women's lives from early this century, it was during the 1960s' women's liberation movement that women began actively working to redress the absence of their lives and experience from most historical writing. Lerner pointed out that '[w]omen's history is indispensable and essential to the emancipation of women'.² Indeed, '[t]o be without history is to be trapped in a present where oppressive social relations appear natural and inevitable. Knowledge of history is knowledge that things have changed and do change'.³ This chapter concentrates on the analysis of women and the development of feminine identities in history. While it is fair to say that gender historians have mainly written from a woman-centred perspective, a considerable proportion of the research to date deals with both women and men, and the relationship between the two. Nevertheless, only recently has masculinity been addressed as a topic in its own right. We aim here to outline the main theoretical directions taken by gender history, and to show the huge diversity of research mainly concerning women in the past.

One traditional category used to divide humanity is sex, that is, the biological difference between women and men. Since sex is only rarely subject to change, it is not a useful concept for most historians. 'Gender' has proved to be central, however, in its two major definitions: 'the cultural definitions of behaviour defined as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time', and 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and . . . a primary way of signifying relationships of power'.⁴ If gender is a social construction, then gender has a history and we

