

From Conversation to Conference: *The Cultural Value of Oral History*

Fiona Stewart (University of Kentucky, formerly University of Glasgow), Hannah Little (University of Glasgow) and Marc Alexander (University of Glasgow).

Sharing ideas can be dangerous – you never know what the results will be. Your vague idea may turn out to be a damp squib that goes no further; or it may be the first step on an exciting rollercoaster adventure that sees your hesitantly-broached idea take shape and form and expand beyond your wildest imaginings. The latter was our experience in organizing *The Cultural Value of Oral History: A Cross-Disciplinary Perspective*. The initial idea was broached in an *eSharp* board meeting in January 2007; the international conference took place between 24 and 26 July 2007; and the 10th issue of *eSharp*, ‘Orality and Literacy’ has now been launched, the theme of which was inspired by the conference.

Fiona Stewart’s vision from the outset was to organize an event that would bring together academics – of all levels and disciplines – and professional oral historians. The goal was to promote discussion of the cultural value of orality and oral sources. It seemed important to get beyond, but not exclude, questions of whether oral evidence is reliable (the ‘old chestnut’ of the discipline), and instead investigate how and with what success oral sources have been used to contribute to the cultural and historical record of societies, both within Scotland and across the world. Hannah Little very quickly bought into this and expanded the vision to include investigation of training and practice in gathering oral sources, and how these sources can be archived and presented in the digital age. Marc Alexander then

joined the team; although oral history is not part of his own research, he was quickly drawn to the energy around the project and has to take much of the responsibility for the expansion of the event from a one-day symposium to a three-day event including a public lecture and a reception hosted by the Lord Provost of Glasgow. Teamwork was key throughout these few months of organization; we pooled our ideas, energy and skills, and each feeding from the enthusiasm of the others meant we planned an event which seemed continually to evolve and develop into something 'bigger and better'.

Organizing CVOH (the acronym which was to haunt us for much of 2007) we were impressed by the enthusiasm with which others greeted our plans. Early soundings of Professor Alison Phipps and Dr Vassiliki Kolocotroni confirmed that we had an idea worth pursuing. One of Dr Kolocotroni's throw-away remarks was to be a constant encouragement: 'Dream big!' Enthusiasm alone was not going to make for a successful conference; several distinguished academics from the University of Glasgow generously shared their time with us in the early stages of planning. Professor Christian Kay, Professor Lynn Abrams and Professor Michael Moss were invaluable in sharing their expertise, contacts and previous experience in conference organizing. As July approached, fellow *eSharp* board members volunteered their assistance, organizing drinks receptions, staffing the conference registration desk and generally providing the manpower necessary for events to run smoothly.

The Call for Papers brought responses from all over the world: Greece, the United States, Italy, Puerto Rico, Canada, Finland, Zimbabwe, as well as UK institutions, were represented among speakers in the final programme. The range of perspectives on orality and oral history was equally diverse, as was the number of disciplines

represented: sociolinguistics, occupational health, psychiatry, photography, market research, immigration studies, not to mention studies of the use of oral sources to build a record of the history of European, African and American societies.

Events began with a public lecture given by Verne Harris, Project Manager of the Nelson Mandela Foundation Centre of Memory and Dialogue. His lecture, entitled ‘Telling the Stories of a Continuing Walk to Freedom: Nelson Mandela and the Archive’, showed the significance of an oral record in dealing with the legacy of apartheid in South Africa. This was followed by a reception hosted by the Lord Provost in Glasgow City Chambers, which was addressed by the Principal of the University of Glasgow, Sir Muir Russell. Over the next two days, papers were presented in parallel sessions which contributed to an atmosphere marked by excitement and interest. Academics and professionals alike were presented with new insights and ideas for exploring the possibilities of orality and the integration of oral sources in their particular field. The list of topics covered was reflected in the titles of the panels: from Narrating Memories: Evidential and Ethical Issues to Oral History in the Digital World; from Giving a Voice to Marginalized Communities to Silences in European Reflections on Conflict; from Alternative Forms of Cultural Agency to Critical and Ethical Investigations of Human Experience. A visit to the Oral History Project at Glasgow’s Museum of Transport allowed a ‘behind the scenes’ view of the potential of oral sources in creating a community record. A panel from the University of Glasgow presented a cohesive and engaging session on the ‘practicalities and pitfalls’ they had experienced in oral data collection. Two roundtable discussions, ‘Oral as Evidence’ and ‘Orality and New Media’, brought together

experts from different fields, including Professor Elizabeth Tonkin (Queen's University Belfast), Robert Perks (British Library Sound Archive) and Jan Walmsley (Learning Disability History Research Group), and sparked intense discussion of the issues involved. The conference dinner at The Salon in Glasgow's West End was a fitting conclusion to proceedings and much enjoyed by all – not least by the now much-relieved organizers.

Post-conference analysis shows the achievement of the organizers' initial goal of encouraging academic excellence and an exchange of knowledge between experienced academics, postgraduates and professionals. Approximately 70 delegates attended over the two days and there was a good balance between established and postdoctoral academics (40%), postgraduate students (38%) and oral history professionals (22%). Eight of the postgraduates attending presented papers alongside established academics and experts in the field. Feedback from participants shows that the careful consideration of details was appreciated, whether it was the choice of venue, production of a colour programme, or the decision to serve scones instead of biscuits. Overall the organizers felt vindicated in the close attention they had paid to catering, in the words of one participant: 'A conference stands or falls by its catering!'

Looking back, would we do it all again? And if we did, what would we change? The answer is an unequivocal 'yes, we would do it again... just not for a wee while'. It was a sizable challenge – the scale of which we did not fully comprehend until well into the project. Yet, in all seriousness, organizing *The Cultural Value of Oral History* was a unique learning experience and a highpoint of our time as postgraduates. We had the opportunity to realize a dream and in the process gained a range of experience which will stand us in good

stead as we pursue our careers. With support, fierce encouragement and a free hand when we needed it, we were able to come together as a team from three different university departments and achieve shared goals; to work with experts in our fields and with academics we respected; to bid for and secure AHRC and Graduate School funding; to win the praise and commendation of the Chancellor, Sir Muir Russell; and far more importantly, to put together an event that *we* were proud of and enjoyed. What would we change? The only recurring negative comment was the lack of coffee on arrival – born out of prudence with our budget, this could have easily been remedied. What really made the event an experience to remember was the energy that came from the unique concoction of people meeting from different disciplines and cultures, and the buzz of excitement as people discussed papers between sessions. After all, the logistical planning, the quality and breadth of papers presented and the discussions they sparked were central to the enjoyment and value of the actual event, and for that we are grateful to all the speakers and delegates who participated: they were the ones who made it all worthwhile.