

Ler História

77 | 2020

Varia

Espelho de Clio

“Learning to listen”, or the Practice of Oral History. An interview with Paul Thompson

*“Learning to listen”, ou a prática da história oral. Entrevista com Paul Thompson**“Learning to listen”, ou la pratique de l’histoire orale. Un entretien avec Paul Thompson*

LUÍSA METELO SEIXAS

p. 207-222

<https://doi.org/10.4000/lerhistoria.7707>

Resumos

English Português Français

In this interview, Professor Paul Thompson talks about his life and influences, and about his past and current works and projects. Thompson reflects on the ways by which his childhood in Eastern England has influenced his work, his love for architecture and art and how his pioneer work on oral history came to develop. He recalls the beginning of his interest about History and research, the role of W. G. Hoskins and other historians who introduced new perspectives in historiography and the community oral history projects developed by Ruskin College at Oxford. He describes the beginning of his practice in oral history, the foundation of the Oral History Society and the creation of the National Life Stories Collection in the British Library. Thompson also talks about his profound concern with data preservation and public archiving regarding not only oral history but also social science research, and about his role in the Qualidata project.

Nesta entrevista o Professor Paul Thompson fala acerca da sua vida e influências, dos seus trabalhos e projectos mais relevantes, bem como dos projectos em curso. Ao longo da entrevista, Paul Thompson reflecte acerca do modo como a sua infância no leste do Reino Unido influenciou o seu trabalho, a par com a sua paixão por arquitectura e pela arte e de que forma se desenvolveu o seu trabalho pioneiro em história oral. Refere o desenvolvimento do seu interesse pela História e pela investigação, o papel de historiadores como Hoskins na introdução de novas perspectivas na historiografia e o pioneirismo da abordagem às ciências sociais do Ruskin College. Descreve o início da sua prática de história oral, a fundação da Oral History Society e a criação da National Life Stories Collection na British Library. Thompson refere também as suas preocupações para com a preservação e curadoria de dados gerados não apenas pela história oral mas também pela investigação nas ciências sociais e o seu papel na criação do projecto Qualidata.

Dans cette entrevue, le professeur Paul Thompson parle de sa vie et de ses influences, de ses œuvres et projets les plus pertinents, ainsi que des projets en cours. Tout au long de l’entrevue, Paul Thompson réfléchit sur la manière dont son enfance dans l’est du Royaume-Uni a influencé

son travail, sa passion pour l’architecture et l’art et comment son travail de pionnier en histoire orale s’est développé. Il mentionne le développement de son intérêt pour l’histoire et la recherche, le rôle des historiens comme Hoskins dans l’introduction de nouvelles perspectives en historiographie et l’approche pionnière des sciences sociales au Ruskin College. Il décrit le début de sa pratique d’histoire orale, la fondation de la Société d’histoire orale et la création de la National Life Stories Collection à la British Library. Thompson mentionne également ses préoccupations concernant la préservation et la conservation des données générées non seulement par l’histoire orale mais aussi par la recherche en sciences sociales et son rôle dans la création du projet Qualidata.

Entradas no índice

Mots-clés : histoire orale, historiographie, historiens britanniques.

Keywords: oral history, historiography, British historians.

Palavras chaves: história oral, historiografia, historiadores britânicos.

Notas do autor

This interview would not be possible without the support, enthusiasm, companionship and friendship of Professor Maria Fernanda Rollo, Inês Castaño and Filipe Silva, who made it possible for us to meet Professor Paul Thompson and learn from his experience.

Texto integral

- 1 Professor Paul Thompson (born 1935), graduated in Modern History at Oxford University in 1958 and obtained a D.Phil from the same University in 1964. He was later appointed lecturer in Social History at the University of Essex (1964), which had been recently established. In 1988 he was appointed Research Professor in Sociology, at the same university, where he continued his research and teaching in the areas of social history and sociology. He is considered to be a pioneer of social science research, specialising in life stories and oral history. He is one of the founders of Oral History Society and was founding editor of its journal *Oral History*. In 1987 he established the National Life Story Collection in the British Library, an important project gathering oral history interviews on multiple subjects. Since his early years of research, Thompson was committed to the preservation and reuse of qualitative materials resulting from social research, and was director of Qualidata at the University of Essex from 1994 to 2001. This led him to start his life story project with Pioneers of Social Research, Paul Thompson is author to a large number of publications on multiple themes resulting from life story and oral history research. From these we highlight *The Edwardians* (1975 and 1992), *The Voice of the Past* (1978, 1988, 2000 and 2017) – one of the most important written books on oral history –, *The Work of William Morris* (1967 and 1991), *Living the Fishing* (1983), *I Don’t Feel Old* (1990) and *Growing up in Stepfamilies* (1998).
- 2 This interview focuses on Paul Thompson’s influences, his interest in social research, history, art and architecture. During this conversation Thompson tells us how his work and professional life developed, the influence of W. G. Hoskins and his perspective on the history of landscape – which guided him to look to the nearby history in Eastern England, for instance. He mentions how he came to start working with oral history and the innovative approaches of the Ruskin College, the first steps in the creation of the Oral History Society and its future journal *Oral History*. Later he mentions his concern about the data generated by oral history and social research and the importance of keeping it for further use by other researchers, following the example of the work developed on the interviews recorded for *The Edwardians – the Remaking of British Society* project. Finally, Thompson shares the story behind the creation of the National Life Stories Collection in the British Library and his present interests and work. His work and life dedicated to the knowledge of the past, but also with a permanent curiosity for the things of the world, culture and people, are a true inspiration to “learning to listen”.
- 3 I would like to thank Professor Paul Thompson for his kindness in sharing his views and personal story by telephone during April 2020, whilst we were both confined in our

homes in London and Lisbon during the quarantine period established to contain the Covid-19 epidemic crisis.

4



5

Luísa Seixas (LS): You've mentioned a childhood experience that has influenced you to follow history and research. What took you to make your first steps into research and to approach the past, specifically?

Paul Thompson (PT): I grew up in an unattractive commuter town south of London. I think I was first interested in history particularly, also in architecture. Well, I know my parents were interested in the arts and architecture so they introduced me, they first got me interested. I went to boarding school at ten [Bishop's Stortford], an 'unsectarian' school just north of London, which was a very unhappy change for me, actually. But right at the end, there was a teacher who introduced me to the history of architecture and to all the different phases of English architecture which I hadn't really understood at that point. And then, when I went on to the main School there was a wonderful French teacher [Walter Strachan] who was much more interested in art than in the French language [laughter]. I mean he did teach us a bit about that, and I learned to read French certainly and tried to speak it. We first went to France in 1947, when France was completely wrecked by the war and we camped. We drove all the way to Switzerland which was in a better state. We took a lot of coffee and we bartered that for local food. This was with my parents. Our car crashed on the way back so it was quite a scary adventure...

When I got to the main school, this French teacher encouraged my interest in art and architecture. He ran a little club where we would go cycling out into the countryside nearby and find the old buildings and do drawings of them. And that's when I first

learned to draw — doing pen and ink. He was a very big influence. His son [Geoffrey] is my oldest, continuous friend. We met when we were ten. We kind of started as rivals at school and we both took up sketching and painting. He still does those things.

LS: So, this influence of architecture and architectural history made you grow an interest in the past?

PT: Yes, I think I was more interested in architecture than in anything else when I was at school. And I didn't drop that actually. My first book was a biography of William Morris and then I wrote a biography of a Victorian architect, William Butterfield.¹ By the way, for that, I did an enormous amount of travelling which involved not just looking at buildings but also getting to look at local archives. Because, in England, the parish churches kept the registers of births and deaths and marriage and so on, but they also kept documents particularly to do with the architectural work on the church. So these were not kept in regional archives, they were kept in old boxes, in the village churches' archives and so you had to go and meet the clergyman and try and get access to that material. And that was a long task, I mean it took me a long time, I brought out the book in 1971. And that's the one book I know that nobody will replicate, nobody is going to be able to do that work again. When I did it, the family had William Butterfield's architectural drawings and his private letters to a niece. She was a descendant from Butterfield's sister. There was some correspondence there. She disapproved of the way in which he wrote to her. She thought his manner was too rigid and dictatorial and so on, so she started burning the letters. She burnt some of them in front of me. So I only saw what she chose to see in those terms. That was a pretty important loss. But anyway, that was a really good experience of historical research. And what happened to the rest of the drawings and letters, I should mention, was that they were sold eventually by the family at auction, and so people from all over the world bought drawings. So nobody could do it again.

LS: You've mentioned that you found a very big affinity to the person of William Morris also.

PT: That is right. Well, that was a political influence, because in England he's a very important figure in socialist development. You see, he took on the tradition of Ruskin, especially. I was told about Ruskin by my own family, I was shown *The Stones of Venice*,² in which he has astonishing discussions and descriptions and details of the architecture. So I knew about that, and then, through that, I learned about William Morris. He is very much a hero of mine for a kind of socialism which includes the arts and which is democratic. I guess I started reading William Morris before I went to university at Oxford, Corpus Christi College, I would guess so. I'm not quite sure. Like *News from Nowhere* which is his almost anarchist socialism vision of utopia, where the churches had been turned into social centres and places where people come to eat together and so on.³ His house was at Kelmscott, in Oxfordshire, and at that time there was a really little railway line, which is now closed, quite close to the house, I remember going there with a group of friends in my first year of university.

But then at university, I had a new influence: my medievalist tutor, Trevor Aston, managing editor of the left-wing history journal *Past and Present*, who was a Marxist. A very, very clever man. He took me very seriously. He applied a Marxist analysis to medieval development. So I started writing essays about that. Interestingly enough, for now, I wrote one essay on the impact of the Black Death on the economy. He was very interested about it because I argued that it was because of the Black Death that the English got going, not only in producing wool, because they'd been doing that from the 13th century, with the Cistercian monasteries, but also started to manufacture cloth. So what became my part of England, eastern England, has a particularly rich legacy of late medieval architecture. Really beautiful churches and also farms and houses in the towns. I'd started visiting those as a schoolboy because I could cycle to that area and look at the buildings. I realized that the buildings were very striking. Now I had a kind of Marxist analysis to add up to what I could see with my eyes. So that was quite an important turning point in my thinking. I'm sure it was. I wanted then to have a bridge

between the two approaches. I was never a Stalinist type of Marxist. I didn't join the Communist Party, but for some years, I was a socialist member of the Labour Party.

I've been very interested through the recent work I have done interviewing climate change thinkers, to see that in a way they were trying to bring together a green vision and a Marxist vision. Michael Redclift was one of the interviews I have completed. He was the most sustained writer in that whole way. But my colleague Ted Benson was also a critical influence in trying to make that junction between the two. It is happening again, in another way, an attempt to fuse Marxism with another form of a more democratic way of looking at things, I think that is interesting for the present, as well as my own story [laughter].

LS: Landscape and architecture have been a big influence in the way you look at the process of change in history and Hoskins was, of course, a big influence.

PT: That's right. That came while I was at school actually. You see, I listened to the art historian Nikolaus Pevsner's *The Englishness of English Art* that was also a radio series of lectures.⁴ I think I was particularly fascinated by Hoskins on medieval landscapes, in how you could see the relics of it still today. You still can see the terracing which was carried out in the Middle Ages for agriculture in areas which were then later changed into sheep farming. If you take a train up through the Midlands on a sunny day, you can still spot this landscape from the shadows of the terracing. So I got very interested in that definitely.

LS: And were there any other big influences in your work? You have mentioned a few now, but are there any others? In your early career and start?

PT: There was another one at school actually, that was important, a biology teacher – Arnold Darlington – because he was a researcher. At that time, a lot of people who would now be lecturers at university were school teachers because the universities were much, much smaller. The proportion of the attending population was far less. So, for innovative, creative people one way of having a career where you could combine the two was through school teaching. And we had this school teacher who actually used the boys for his own research. So, for instance, we would cycle out to a nearby field, a grass field, a meadow we called it, and he would take what we would now say a square meter, but by then we called it "a square yard" of field and try and find out what insects were there. And he actually found an unknown, unrecognized species while doing this. The other thing he did, which I remember, was cycling somewhat further, getting up to the higher land. I used to like to get up there because you could get longer views, but that was quite a longer ride. He took the whole group of us with walkie-talkie sets to spot the migration of the birds.

What I realized from that was that I could do interesting research wherever I was. And that's something I have not forgotten. I've done quite a lot of oral history as local projects. One of the projects that I would have never undertaken if not for this attitude, was when I was living in Oxford. I didn't really like the area very much, because there was a lot of very arrogant people living in North Oxford, in Summertown, which is that north part of Oxford, where I was as a research student when I was doing my PhD. There's this social cluster where there were a lot of people who too were working in other universities, as well as Oxford, and the people of Oxford University tried to keep separate from the people from the other universities, they were too proud of themselves. That made them rather insular. Anyway, we decided to do a local project and it turned out to be extremely interesting and maybe I understand the whole area much, much better.

LS: This brings me to a question about your work and the practice of oral history. What is the importance of collaboration either when you're in a dialogue during an interview, or while working with other disciplines and other professionals? I suppose this brings a lot of challenges but also a lot of groundbreaking experiences in research. Could you share your visions on this?

PT: I think learning to listen is utterly crucial in oral history, it's something basic. With a lot of people that you interview it is very simple. You've got some kind of agenda and they are willing to be recorded but they don't really want to discuss much of the issues

which lie behind that. I've always very much welcomed people who had time to talk about those issues. One of the most striking examples of that was when I was working on *Living the Fishing*.⁵ The Shetlands are islands off the north of Scotland and they are nearer to Norway than they are to any mainland Scottish city. They have a much more Scandinavian kind of culture which goes back to the fact that in the Early Middle Ages they were actually part of that area politically. I was very quickly struck by how lively and diverse people were in their attitudes. You could meet really old people who were working on what we call "crofts", collectively owned, common land which was farmed with a lot of mutual cooperation. Some had also been fishermen, some had travelled much further as merchant seamen, but even with those who had never left the islands, they had thought about their life experiences. So you could talk to them, even deeply.

Even more striking was a man that I met called Andy Noble. He was a fisherman from north-east Scotland, he didn't own a boat, he was what we call a "deckhand", which meant that he wasn't part of the local fishing elite at all. He was very interested in history but also in the economics of fishing and the social aspects of the area. So I have spent a lot of time just talking and arguing with him. Because he had ideas about how the social system and the economic system related. Part of it is that when you go on a boat – and I did that actually, going out for several days on the mackerel fishing off north-west Scotland with Andy – there is an egalitarian atmosphere although actually, what we call the skipper, the captain of the boat, is in charge and he tells the people what to do. Socially they have to treat them as equals. So you are trying to pretend that you are something that you are not, trying to pretend that you are a full, independent fisherman, but at the same time being a worker for somebody else. So that is the kind of person that if you're doing a project on a community is absolutely invaluable.

The other thing you said, which I agree with, is that you need to be multi-disciplinary and that was always easy for me. I have a BA degree as a historian with a PhD in social studies, which was like a bridge between social sciences and history. And for my entire professional career after that I have been in a sociology department. I was tremendously influenced by the practice and theory of sociology in that sense. From 1964 onwards I was trying to absorb that, I was deeply, deeply influenced. While I was writing *The Voice of the Past*⁶ it turned out to be really important, this kind of exchange. Thus the people who I find innovating today seem to be the people on the margins. They are in a multidisciplinary situation and that is where the innovations can most easily happen, not in a mainstream department. So, with my first two interviewees on climate change for instance, Ted Benton was a social philosopher working in a sociology department at Essex, and Michael Redclift was an anthropologist/sociologist teaching at a multidisciplinary agricultural college. At Essex, the whole department was created with a very broad vision, Peter Townsend wanted to incorporate social history, social philosophy and so on within sociology, and he was very successful in the early years doing that. But the mainline people, they were interested primarily in social class, they weren't really interested in the environment and climate change.

LS: Going back to *The Edwardians*,⁷ the first book that you wrote drawing on a lot of interviews. You have mentioned that this was revealing to you about the potential aspects of oral history. How do you look at this experience now?

PT: Well, I still think about it. The interest in the family is part of what's different with *The Edwardians*. From the interviews we got all those direct details of non-elite ordinary people's family lives. When I wrote it there weren't a lot of people interested in that, although very quickly social historians turned and saw its potential. And they were quicker using other people's data. So that was something. I think that the other thing which it gave me was a surprising theoretical way of looking at the world, a new way of looking at the world which was that social change came from two different directions, one was from the top, particularly from politics, but there was also change being fuelled by individual behaviour. The most obvious example of that was migration. It also happens with who you choose for marriage, and in whether people have children or not, how large a family they are going to have and so on. I mean, governments have never actually succeeded in controlling population change and they get into a lot of trouble

about it. So that was completely new, I wouldn't have thought of all that without doing that project.

LS: Have you thought about going back to those materials and looking at them with different perspectives?

PT: I could still do that. I am interested in some of it now actually. I want to do this piece of work on climate change, to stimulate a team of younger people, a younger generation to do that. I think that the ideal way would have been if we had kept contact with the families from the 1970s and then we could measure the changes through that. But we didn't. By that stage, I had not come in touch with longitudinal studies, and that is what they do. One of the books I did later was about stepfamilies, where we attempted to measure the generational change and we had quite good information. I think that *Growing up in Stepfamilies* is my most sociological book, actually.⁸ I did that with my then-wife Natasha Burchardt, who was a child psychiatrist, and two family therapists who had a different kind of family system theory. I got very interested about that, there is something about that in *The Voice of the Past*, the way that changes in one part of the family affect the whole family system and how you need to look at that as well. You couldn't do that kind of work with *The Edwardians*, you see, because they're single narratives and we don't have the follow-up materials.

LS: Just going back to the Qualidata project, to which you were the director. This relates to some of the biggest issues around historical and social sciences research. Could you talk about this experience and how you see these challenges today? How can we manage, curate, preserve and make data available for further research?

PT: We originally kept the *Edwardians* interviews in a department store room at Essex, and a lot of social historians used it for their own publications. I became increasingly concerned that no effort was being made nationally to archive interviews from other key social research projects and from the late 1980s actively campaigned for a change. We conducted a survey which showed that nothing had been kept from many very important projects, such as the series of early studies of black communities in Britain. This eventually led in 1994 to the founding of Qualidata, which I directed until 2001, with Louise Corti, setting up a national system which means that funded projects need to be considered for archiving. In 2001 its funders, the Social Science Research Council, merged Qualidata with the UK Data Archive, which is also based at Essex. I worked with them until 2008, when I retired. So I was in very active touch with them. And my own materials on pioneer social researchers still go to them.

I think we are still facing quite a few challenges. The fundamental one is the way there's this continuous drive to improve the technology. Partly because the big firms earn money through that, so they are always changing how the systems work. There is always a danger of getting stranded on the wrong system. I mean, the first computer on which I worked on was a machine called the Amstrad and nobody could use those now, there is probably only a few of those computers around, and the danger is that nobody keeps any working models of that kind. So that is one problem, so there's been a huge effort in England to convert cassette tape materials, to digitise them. The British Library is being given millions of pounds for that. But the trouble is that there are basically two kinds of important data. One kind is about what is typical, which needs to be based on a good sample. The other is the unique material which might be about a particular, unusual place and nobody else has got that information. Or it might be on a theme that is rare and not many people are interested in. That material is likely to get stranded. So it is fortunate that in England we've got two powerful bodies really, which to go to, the UK Data Service and the British Library. The British Library is much more conservative in its practices, it's also more prestigious, so there is a contradiction there. I am also working with them. You know I have set up National Life Stories there.⁹

LS: Yes, and I wanted to ask you about the moment when you founded National Life Stories. How was this process and how did you approach or they approached you to create this collection, and what motivated you?

PT: You see, what happened, happened rather gradually. First of all, we realised very quickly that the material from *The Edwardians* which was being recorded from, I think 1968 onwards, would be interesting to other people. So we were lucky that Essex University was a big new building with quite a lot of empty space, so we were given a windowless cupboard next to the Sociology Department and we set up an archive there, as hard copy. You could look at it as a whole interview or according to the themes following the interview guide. We had a lot of people who came and wrote from it. I felt pleased because I thought you could get five times as much use from your material by making it available than you could ever create from it yourself.

So that was the first stage. The next one was when I began to think that there was a lot of similar material probably in peoples' offices and homes which would be thrown out when they retired and we ought to try and preserve it. So around 1986 I conceived of the idea of setting up National Life Stories as a project based in a section of the British Library. I used various contacts, but especially my mother-in-law, to recruit the first set of trustees, and crucially through her, I met Jennifer Wingate, who has been an active supporter and interviewer ever since, and who ran our big programme with survivors of the Holocaust. It was through Jennifer and Roger Wingate that I got half of the support to launch National Life Stories, and the other half actually came from me, in a way [laughter]. It was partly an accident. I had decided to try and raise money, and I thought: "Well I should raise some of it myself". My father had recently died and left me a bronze by Henry Moore — which went back to the influence of my school teacher. He was always saying: "Henry Moore is going to be so important, your father should buy a Henry Moore". So eventually, one day my father rang up and said: "I've bought a Henry Moore, was that the right thing to do?" I think he paid about five hundred pounds for it, you see. Later on, when my parents retired and eventually moved to sheltered housing that statue was in the communal garden. I decided that it wasn't safe for it to stay there and took it to Sotheby's. I gave it to National Life Stories, before the sale, and then it was sold for two hundred thirty thousand pounds [laughter] which at that age, was an awful lot of money. So that's how it got going.

Jennifer knew many important people in the business world, including the Governor of the Bank of England and was a friend to Nicholas Goodison, who was then the Chairman of the Stock Exchange. So we went around meeting these people and trying to persuade them to support our other initial project on the lives of the city's financiers, called *City Lives*.¹⁰ Quite a few people were willing to sponsor interviews. Not just from the top people, but a range of people including manual workers. But there was also a group who thought that this should be paid for nationally and they weren't prepared to help. Nicholas immediately grasped what we were trying to do. Now, the reason why he was able to understand it was that as a hobby, he was a furniture historian. He was very keen on the crafts generally, he wrote articles about furniture history. He quickly joined our team and eventually became the chairman. He was very, very influential and when he was our chairman, he got us some big grants, including a grant to launch our major life story collection about British scientists which, along with our recordings with artists, I think stands as one of the most important things that we've done. So he was invaluable. I loved working with him.

LS: Related to the creation of the Oral History Society, and as I understood it, it was also a reaction to some scepticism being shown by some historians in the academy, is this right?

PT: What actually happened was that, first of all, right at the end of the 1960s, a small number of social and labour historians were experimenting with biographical recording, mainly of older working class people. We were unaware that there was parallel activity in Europe and the United States — we hadn't even heard the phrase "oral history". At that point, there was a place called the British Institute of Recorded Sound, which was mainly music and also bird and animal sounds. There wasn't a national sound archive of any kind. And I went to them and asked if they would like to be associated. So they seemed quite keen — mainly Patrick Saul, who was the director. I started to deposit materials with him, but then, one of the times I went to their archives to listen to some of what they had, and he couldn't find any playback machine which would work. So I thought that wasn't good enough. But it was through him that, in

December 1969, we called a meeting of people who we knew were experimenting with oral history. I produced a report on it which was circulated to all the people who we knew were interested in it.

So after that would eventually become Oral History: the Journal of the Oral History Society, of which I was the editor — before there was a society. I didn't immediately see the need for a society. I thought a network would be enough, but then, the new Social Science Research Council — which at first encouraged experiments in oral history, and that was how I got the money for *The Edwardians*, which I think was thirty thousand pounds, quite a lot at that time —, after three years [SSRC] decided they wouldn't give any more money until they had reviewed what had been produced. They were quite generous for a bit. They funded our first national conference. But this soon changed. As you rightly suggest, there was indeed scepticism, even among outstanding social and labour historians. Key supporters included John Saville, ex C.P. labour historian, the urban historian Asa Briggs (soon to be head of the new University of Sussex), and Raphael Samuel, who had been leading spirit of the New Left Movement and became an activist committee member of the Oral History Society. But to our surprise, E. P. Thompson remained sceptical, and Eric Hobsbawm became openly hostile to oral history. He commissioned me to write *The Edwardians* but then tried to persuade me to cut out the oral history sections. So we were then in a situation where there wasn't any kind of pressure group to try to press for some kind of ongoing funding for oral history. We decided in 1974, at a meeting at York, which was part of a series which was being organised through the journal, to set up the Oral History Society, to have a chairman and a committee. John Saville was its second chairman and Asa Briggs first chairman of National Life Stories.

LS: Going back to *The Voice of the Past* and oral history as an instrument for the democratisation of knowledge and the process of building identities and also the connection with communities and history, could you mention how these dimensions have developed through the years in the use of oral history?

PT: Well, there is an immense amount of oral history work in Britain. Politically I would say, it hasn't changed very much. It is not part of any political programme. There continue to be some projects that are about aspects of politics. The most dramatic examples of that are the Northern Irish ones. Because they were so controversial. But otherwise I feel the current situation is somewhat disappointing. It's good that so much oral history work has become linked to social work, with the big reminiscence movement which Joanna Bornat led for quite a long time with *Help the Aged*, using oral history as a form of therapy for old people in homes and hospitals. This has shown to be very effective in encouraging them to talk about themselves and to relate to other people and so on. The danger is that you start promoting an image of old people as just dependent and not active in their own ways. I should like to see more community projects in which historians and local people work together focussing on major historical themes. In fact, there is a huge amount of volunteer activity by older people in Britain. Probably the largest scale example is the National Trust. Their volunteers, drawn from a national membership of two million, effectively staff the opening of their historic houses, and are trained to a high level of historical awareness. This could provide a different model for oral history work in a diverse range of communities, from smart suburbs to immigrant areas around the ports and airports.

And then there is the Heritage Lottery Fund that originally was quite interested in professional historical work and was willing to fund academics. But it ceased to be so in recent years. They are fairly reluctant to have anything to do with academics. Now they focus on the short term impact on the communities, and so what they do there is getting volunteers, or sometimes they pay, training local people in interviewing, transcribing or technical audio skills. That could be younger people or older people. The whole point is that there is a brief training which may have a lot of impact in terms of teaching skills, but is not sustained in terms of developing historical interpretations. They do also try to get the historic buildings accessible and used by the communities.

LS: Could you talk about your main interests and research areas nowadays? I know you have been writing a book called *Pioneering Social Research*.

PT: Yes, well, with my two colleagues and co-authors, I am trying to finish off that project.

LS: You have just mentioned two of the areas in which you think oral historians could focus on — using oral history as a form of therapy and collaborative community projects. Are there any other areas or main themes that you would like to look at now?

PT: There are two major themes I would like to address. The first would be climate change. The other would be about migrant refugees. There are three things you'd need to do as well as recording current refugees. You'd need to record earlier migrants, to compare to what's there and now, but you also need to keep in touch with the people you are recording so you can follow up in five or ten years time, to see what happens to them. And then, it would be important both in oral history terms and sociological terms and longitudinal studies, much more useful. And I think that is enough to go on with! I am interested with the religious side too, but I don't think I am getting involved in that, that could be about Britain and somewhere else, a comparative sort of analysis that might be interesting. I want climate change and Pioneering Social Research¹¹ finished off and then decide what to do.

LS: How did this project [Pioneers of Social Research] unfold? What were your main goals? And how did it develop?

PT: I came to see that a lot of people were doing interesting research in Britain but not caring about what happened to their interviews, their materials. So I started a campaign to do something about that, to look for what were significant earlier materials and get them archived so it could be used in the long-term. You could look at the change over the long-term and go back and reexamine these interviews. Well, that was 1995, when we set up Qualidata. We were archiving materials. And then I thought that what we really needed to know about was what researchers were trying to do and who they were and their own lives and so on. I only started that in 1997 with Peter Townsend, which was one of the longest interviews I have ever done. Seventeen hours in five sessions, actually. He was a wonderful person to interview because he spoke so clearly and in straightforward English. You could just type that out and almost publish it without any alteration. He was remarkable in that way.

LS: My last question is about your recent presence in Lisbon as a keynote speaker and visitor to the "Memory for All" Conference.¹² What were your impressions on some of the work that has been developed in Portugal within the field of oral history and with communities?

Notas

1 Paul Thompson. *The Work of William Morris*. London: William Heinemann and Viking Press, 1967 (with revised paperbacks by Quartet Books, 1977, and Oxford University Press, 1993). Paul Thompson. *William Butterfield*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.

2 John Ruskin. *The Stones of Venice*, volume I – *The Foundations*. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1851, followed in 1853 by volumes *The Sea-stories* and *The Fall*.

3 William Morris. *News from Nowhere*. London: Reeves and Turner, 1891. For a paperback, see *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*. London and New York: Penguin, 2004. Paul considers that the best biography of Morris is E. P. Thompson. *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955.

4 Series of seven lectures by the Art Historian Nikolaus Pevsner broadcasted by the BBC in 1955, included in the Reith Lectures series. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0oh9llv/episodes/player>.

5 Paul Thompson, Tony Walley, Trevor Lummis. *Living the Fishing*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983.

6 Paul Thompson. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, with a fourth edition, revised with Joanna Bornat, published in 2017.

7 Paul Thompson. *The Edwardians. The Remaking of British Society*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975.

8 Gill Gorell Barnes, Paul Thompson, Gwyn Daniel, Natasha Burchardt. *Growing Up in Stepfamilies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

9 National Life Stories, established in 1987 in the British Library was set up as the National Life Story Collection. For further information: <https://www.bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories>.

10 Paul Thompson, Cathy Courtney. *City Lives. The Changing voices of British Finance*. London: Methuen, 1996.

11 Paul Thompson, Ken Plummer, Neli Demireva. *Pioneering Social Research*, due for publication by Bristol University Press in February 2021. Paul Thompson is principal investigator of the Pioneers of Social Research project, encompassing in-depth interviews with around 50 pioneer researchers and their research data, building a special collection in the UK Data Archive. More information at: <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/teaching-resources/pioneers/background.aspx>.

12 This conference (13-15 November 2019) was organized within the framework of the Memory for All Programme (www.memoriaparatodos.pt), from the research unit History, Territories and Communities/História, Territórios e Comunidades – HTC, CFE NOVA FCSH (<https://htc.fcsh.unl.pt/portfolio/centered-stack-full-width/>).

Índice das ilustrações



URL

<http://journals.openedition.org/lerhistoria/docannexe/image/7707/img-1.jpg>

Ficheiros

image/jpeg, 144k

Para citar este artigo

Referência do documento impresso

Luísa Metelo Seixas, «"Learning to listen", or the Practice of Oral History. An interview with Paul Thompson», *Ler História*, 77 | 2020, 207-222.

Referência eletrónica

Luísa Metelo Seixas, «"Learning to listen", or the Practice of Oral History. An interview with Paul Thompson», *Ler História* [Online], 77 | 2020, posto online no dia 30 dezembro 2020, consultado no dia 18 janeiro 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lerhistoria/7707>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/lerhistoria.7707>

Autor

Luísa Metelo Seixas

HTC-CFE e IHC NOVA FCSH, Portugal

luisaseixas@fcsh.unl.pt

Direitos de autor



Ler História está licenciado com uma Licença Creative Commons - Atribuição-NãoComercial 4.0 Internacional.