

Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson (eds.) *Oral History and Photography* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 252pp.

Review for *Photography and Culture* by Annebella Pollen a.pollen@brighton.ac.uk

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In his 1994 text, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, the late great socialist historian Raphael Samuel eloquently documented the enthusiastic embrace of the visual by historians in the 1960s and 1970s after many years of disciplinary suspicion and neglect. Yet, Samuel noted, it was curious that the same scholars “who are normally so pernickety about the evidential status of their documents”, as he put it, “are content to take photographs on trust and to treat them as transparent reflections of fact.”¹ Despite the intervention of nearly twenty years of substantial and sophisticated research in photographic history and theory since Samuel published these words, oral historians Freund and Thomson take his accusations as their first point of departure in the first pages of their edited collection. They reflect that, while the pictorial turn is now firmly embedded in broader historical practice, oral historians in particular “risk becoming disconnected” unless they improve their methodological and theoretical interpretations of photographs (p. 19).

Oral History, as a method, is dedicated to broadening participation in history through faithfully recording the life stories of those usually excluded from consideration. As a discipline, its aims are noble, and its reflexive methodologies - examining practices of narrative, memory and history-making - are well-established through its societies, degree courses and extensive scholarly publications. Oral historians commonly use photographs within an interview setting, most usually as mnemonic prompts. Despite this, Freund and Thomson observe, oral history publications frequently do not include any photographs, and where they do, it is mostly as illustrations or supporting ‘evidence’. Freund and Thomson note that in all of the major English-language oral history handbooks, photographs are mentioned only in passing, if at all. Guidance on how to interpret photographs is rarely explicit, and case studies that reflect on the particular methodological implications of using photographs in oral history work are few and far between. As such, this volume attempts to fill a much needed gap and has a valuable ambition: to consider how photographs can reveal not just what is shown but how history is produced and used; to understand how photographs can construct as well as reveal and retell the past; and, finally, to consider photography not simply as an object of investigation but as a category of analysis.

The extent to which this objective is realised varies considerably throughout the twelve chapters of the collection. Locations for study stretch from Canada to Brazil, Australia to the UK, and the period covered ranges from 1920s to 1980s. Various made up of contributions

¹ Samuel, Raphael (1994). *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*. London: Verso. 329

from anthropologists, educationalists and historians of all kinds, each chapter presents a photographic case study. Contributors vary in their backgrounds but few would consider themselves to be photography scholars, with the notable exceptions of Carol Payne and Penny Tinkler. This produces some mixed results, as will be discussed. While not seeking to be a prescriptive how-to guide, but rather function a “showcase of best practice” (p. 18), most of the strongest essays in *Oral History and Photography* usefully spend considerable time reflecting on the implications of their particular concerns for the larger debates of the publication. Reflections on the limitations and potential of using photographs in oral history interviews constitute the largest majority of the text’s focus, and constitute its most successful area of achievement. Personal or family photographs dominate the material examined, although press, publicity and state sponsored photography are utilised as foci for life narratives in places across the volume. In other chapters, photographs may be generated to create new content to accompany oral history interviews. In the final three chapters (which felt like they belonged to another volume), photographers contribute oral testimony about their practice, and photographs are used alongside other mnemonic media to generate multistranded, experimental or interactive histories.

Payne’s fascinating contribution, entitled “‘You can Hear it in their Voices’: Photographs and Cultural Consolidation among Inuit Youth and Elders”, is a particular highlight. As with almost all chapters, the sometimes dramatic disjuncture between what photographs show and what is said in oral interviews is the central dynamic of the paper. For some essays, such as the contribution by Freund and Angela Thiessen, the presumed richness of photographs to furnish additional historical data runs aground when interviewees fail to respond as expected. For others, such as Lynda Mannik, in her work revisiting the experience of refugee transportation in the 1940s with Estonian migrants, even photographs of smiling family groups disrupt the expected flow of memories: the events they refer to are too traumatic to be discussed. Payne established a project that brought together Inuit youths and elders as interviewers and interviewees, using images taken by the National Film Board of Canada’s Still Photograph Division as the shared focus for their oral history-making. These photographs, produced in the 1950s and 1960s as part of a national campaign to glorify progress and promote government agendas, are approached as a ‘visual repatriation’ project, whereby images of marginalised people – sometimes never before seen by them – are recovered and recontextualised by the same groups. Although the photographs do not depict the trauma that resulted from the devastation of Inuit traditional life through showing the effects of relocation and the forced shift from nomadic to settlement existence, Payne understood the photographs to carry implicit messages about all these things. In oral interview, however, Inuit people read the photographs against the grain, not just of their original intention, but also against the grain of the project organiser. As Payne reflects:

I saw visual evidence of subjugation, othering, and enforced cultural assimilation dressed up in the cheerful colors of jingoistic nationalism. They say family members,

long lost neighbours, hunting techniques, social gatherings and old friends. Where I witnessed cultural disruption, they experienced intergenerational continuity. (p.105)

As well as reflecting on photography's capacity to disrupt expected meanings, the conventional expectation that photographs might help assist the flow of oral interviews is also countered by several chapters in the volume. Samuel suggested in 1994 that using photographs in conjunction with oral testimony, that is, "using one to expose the silences or absences of the other" is a productive procedure that historians "can bring to bear on the explication and interpretation of old photographs."² In the case of Tinkler's excellent contribution, this advice is moot. As in her article in *Photography and Culture* 3:3, 3010, Tinkler examines the ways in which women reinterpret their past through albums compiled during their girlhoods in the 1950s and 1960s. In one poignant example of how photographs can silence oral testimony, one of Tinkler's interviewees is unable to speak about aspects of her history due to the pain caused by having photographs of her and her friends ripped from the pages by a jealous and controlling husband. As Tinkler puts it, "His presence in the collection is almost palpable... as it is his hands that vandalized her album by tearing out photographs, leaving corners and scraps of photographic paper." (p. 57) Tinkler is notably sensitive to the particular material and sensuous qualities of the album in question – the torn fragments and marks on the pages where photographs no longer exist matter as much as the detail of photographs still there, just as the interviewee's silence can be telling.

This sensitivity to the distinctive and variable material qualities of photographs is unfortunately not shared by all the volume contributors. This seems a shame as part of what the collection aims to do is disrupt naive ideas about photographs as 'windows on the past'. I was frequently frustrated by the lack of basic information about photographs' formats, original size, colour and so on. Press photographs, for example, are reproduced without full reference to their context. The quality of images throughout the volume is also very poor indeed - grainy and low-resolution. Given the condition of some of the images as newspaper clippings or instamatic photographs, this is understandable, but rarely explained. Perhaps it is one of the effects of few of the contributors coming from photographic backgrounds that accounts for the exclusion of core photographic information. This is more than a captioning issue: few contributors consider that the material form of the photograph shapes its meaning, and that its final condition results, at least in part, from various technical and material imperatives. In a notable exception to this, Thomson's rich contribution on the subject of British women's experiences as migrants to Australia in the 1960s details both the original condition of the historical photographs in question and the unexpected effects of enlarging them on his laptop screen during interview. In the case of one of his migrant interviewees, a photograph sent home to her parents in 1970 ostensibly shows her standing proudly by the car her husband had won in a lottery. Yet it reveals another subtle message when scaled up, for in the woman's hand is an envelope containing her first Australian wage

² Samuel, 332.

packet. The image thus stands as a symbol of changing fortunes for a family down on their luck but also documents, in its second meaning, the interviewee's increasing independence from her financially unreliable and unsupportive partner. This message is only foregrounded, and the memory prompted, once the photograph is enlarged.

Most, if not all of the contributors to the collection, note that photographs can not only enrich memories but also disrupt the composure of oral testimony accounts. The best of the submissions explore this complexity as their central point of reflection, and examine the disjunctures between smiling images and unhappy pasts, for example, or the tensions between public images and private experiences. The weakest assume that an observation that there are contradictions between the two forms is, in itself, sufficient, or worse, assume that they are the first to have observed this point. A few essays make only the most cursory of references to any previous photographic thinking, offering up merely a misreading of Barthes' punctum and a single footnote to *Camera Lucida* (or *Camera Lucinda*, as one author repeatedly puts it) as their total photographic knowledge. It is hard to imagine a parallel volume by photography specialists paying such lip service to the literature on orality, for example, but it may be testament to the apparently self-evident nature of photographs that some think they can write about them without grounding in scholarship. The most satisfying of contributions – including those mentioned above - embed their reflections firmly within the latest of photographic theory, acknowledging that debates about the making of history and memory are of central concern to both disciplines, and that photographic studies have generated a vast body of literature in these areas. The work of Martha Langford, Marianne Hirsch, Annette Kuhn and Elizabeth Edwards rightly features most frequently among well-informed contributors' frames of reference. Ultimately, photography scholarship's concerns about the relationship between photography and memory mirror closely the concerns of oral history – questions about the subjective reinterpretation of the past, its adaptability to multiple reviews and retellings, and the nature of memorialisation as transformative of its object. Reflective oral historians consider their interview recordings as active sites of historical encounter; the editors of the volume encourage them to now consider photographs in the same way.