



Words & Silences W&S
The Journal of the International Oral History Association

Palabras & Silencios P&S
Revista de la Asociación Internacional de Historia Oral

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A Book Review**

Words and Silences, Vol 6, No 1
December 2011
Pp. 9-11

cc International Oral History Association

Words and Silences is the official on-line journal of the International Oral History Association. It is an internationally peer reviewed, high quality forum for oral historians from a wide range of disciplines and a means for the professional community to share projects and current trends of oral history from around the world.



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BOOK REVIEW

Moving Stories

By Alistair Thomson

With Phyllis Cave, Gwen Good, Joan Pickett and Dorothy Wright
Australia: University of New South Wales Press, 2011

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Elaine Bauer and Paul Thompson (2004, 334) observe that ‘both migration and gender are—separately—two areas in which oral history and life story evidence have been recognised as having a special power’. *Moving Stories* (2011), written by Alistair Thomson in collaboration with Phyllis Cave, Gwen Good, Joan Pickett and Dorothy Wright, demonstrates oral history’s ‘special power’ to ‘connect, on the one hand, the transitions that [women] experience through migration between cultures, and, on the other hand, the often hidden connections and differences between men’s and women’s experiences in work and family life’ (Bauer and Thompson 2004, 334). The book’s focus on personal, emotional, and domestic detail reaffirms oral history’s role in exploring historical phenomena through subjective experience. *Moving Stories* also makes a valuable contribution to the discussion about the co-production of historical accounts.

Moving Stories is divided into two parts. The first, ‘Women’s Lives’, consists of a biographical account of Phyllis Cave, Gwen Good, Joan Pickett and Dorothy Wright’s migration to Australia. In

this section, Thomson, in collaboration with his subjects, focuses particularly on the emotional and domestic detail in the women’s lives, drawing out themes that emerge from interviews and other ‘rich complementary sources’ (Thomson 1999, 26). The second part, ‘Moving Stories’, is a detailed analysis of how each woman used different modes of communication—such as letters and photographs sent back to England—to make sense of their migrant experience. In this section, Thomson highlights common themes that emerge from the four women’s lives, and explores how the women represent their experiences in written, visual and aural forms. He emphasises the value of oral history as a ‘new way of making sense of story’ (2011, 305). This is demonstrated through the contrast between the stories the four women told during their migration experience, in letters and photographs, and their re-interpretation of those experiences in Thomson’s interviews with them, as well as their collaborative efforts to produce an account of their lives. The interaction of the two sections produces a text that is at once embedded in subjective experience, and aware of

the complex process of its own production.

In 'Women's Lives', Thomson's reliance on individual life stories provokes a deeper understanding of the personal significance of migration. Thomson's emphasis on biographic accounts reflects a wider 'biographic turn' in historical studies and the social sciences (Wengraf, Chamberlayne and Bornat 2002, 245). As Valerie Yow (2006, 428) reflects, 'the study of a life enables us to [...] see how intricately bound up the other's life is with outside influences. And we can catch a glimpse of the interplay of these with the individual's inner compulsions'. This is certainly the case in *Moving Stories*. The representation of four women's lives allows Thomson to explore such diverse topics as the emotional and ideological effects of World War Two in Britain and Australia, women's roles and expectations in domestic life, changes in attitude sparked by feminism, education, and the importance of household objects. As Thomson demonstrates, the biographic form allows historians a more organic way of exploring significant topics in life stories. Kathryn Nasstorm (2005, 77) describes this as 'the element of chance' that helps 'tease out seemingly unrelated issues' that emerge in the study of lives. In one case, Thomson transforms Gwen Good's description of 'opening up to absorb some of the warmth and mellowness of the country' during her first years in Australia (2011, 37) into a metaphor of 'blossoming' (2011, 196) to encapsulate all four women's experience of migration as a turning point in their lives. Such interpretations, made in the second half of the book, demonstrate the complex processes of negotiation and interpretation at play between historian and subject/co-collaborator in the production of both oral stories and written text.

Joanna Bornat and Hanna Diamond (2007, 27) note that studies of gender and oral history 'present us with another arena: how history'. They state that 'how history enables us to question and to understand the processes of being a historian'. The second half of *Moving Stories* offers a valuable contribution to the discussion of 'how history'. Thomson draws on Michael Frisch's notion of 'a shared authority' to reflect on the processes of in-

terpreting and producing life stories (2011, 316). The collaborative role the women played in the production of the text complicates the tension between the subject's and the historian's interpretation. The women's input in the production of their life stories is shown textually through the editing choices. Thomson not only revised chapters based on the women's suggestions (2011, 321), but also printed in italics the women's words, drawn from letters and interviews. This produces a multi-layered text where Thomson's third-person voice intermingles with the first-person voices of the women. The result is a rich account that encompasses a broader historical context, the emotions experienced at the time, and a later interpretation.

Moving Stories demonstrates 'how experience, memory, and history become combined in, and digested by, people who are the bearers of their own history' (Frisch 1979, 76). Thomson (2011, 305) emphasises, for example, the transformative power of new ideologies, such as feminism, in one of the women's re-interpretation of her life:

Phyl explains it was not until 2005 when she read *Ten Pound Poms* and noted its gender analysis of migrant families' relationships that she began to rethink her family's departure from Australia [...] Phyl now explains [her husband's] homesickness as jealousy of her professional success [...]

Thomson observes how his contextualising encouraged the women to re-examine their lives. Joan Pickett (2011, 7) states she hadn't 'considered the social and psychological aspects of my travels before'. This adds a further layer of complexity to the collaborative process as the subjects revise their life stories based on Thomson's analysis.

Thomson's act of negotiation can be read between the lines of the text, and is also stated explicitly. As Paul Thompson (2006, 27) warns, 'history should not merely comfort; it should provide a challenge, and understanding, which helps towards change'. Thomson frequently nav-

igates the ethical tensions between affirming the women's life stories, and the need to challenge or re-interpret them. For example, Dorothy Wright's chapter (2011, 49-97), entitled 'I'm not a good mother', begins with an extract from one of Wright's letters to her mother that describes her 'hampered feeling' when looking after children (2011, 50). This reinforces the impression given by the title (taken from an interview with Wright) of Wright's ambivalence towards her role as a mother. Thompson counteracts this impression by beginning with the statement 'Dorothy Wright was a perfectly good mother' (ibid). Assertions like these, which pepper the text, reveal the tension between the subjects' interpretation of their own lives, the need for biographies to ultimately affirm the subject as a 'good' human being, and Thomson's own analysis. As Thomson acknowledges, the historian has a privileged role; ultimately it is his or her interpretation that is emphasised, even if the relationship is an uneasy or 'scary' (2011, 321) one. Wright, for example, told Thomson she felt as though she was being 'psychoanalysed' (2011, 10). Later, Thomson refutes this statement, explaining why his approach was not psychoanalytic (2011, 322). Thomson's self-reflection on this matter is not only honest, but makes problematic the processes of historical construction.

Bornat and Diamond (2007, 34) state, 'the most important contribution that feminists have brought to the discipline [of oral history] has probably been to complicate understandings of methodological issues'. *Moving Stories*, through a detailed analysis of the interaction between subjects' representations of their experiences and a historian's negotiated analysis and interpretation of these life stories, is a rich exploration of these methodological issues, and sets a high standard for the work that follows as a result of the biographical turn in the social sciences.

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