

“There Are a Lot of People Now Who See Themselves As Historical Subjects” - An Interview with Alistair Thomson

Alexander Freund

“When I first started doing oral history in England in the mid-1980s,” Alistair Thomson recounted in a recent interview, “and you turned up at a working-class house to interview members of the family for a project on working-class women, the woman would say: ‘You do not need to talk to me. Talk to my husband Joe. He knows all about history.’ There was a sense that a working-class woman’s life story was not of historical significance. That’s not true anymore,” Thomson emphasized, “because there has been so much oral history work done just in Brighton in England where I lived that working-class women know that their stories are history. They will say: ‘Yes, I have got a story that is important.’ They have been affirmed. It is one of the great successes of oral history: There are a lot of groups of people now who see themselves as historical subjects.” The field of oral history, according to Thomson, has been successful not only in changing how historians do history, but also in how people understand history and view themselves as historical actors.

To listen to the whole 25-minute interview this leading practitioner of oral history, download the mp3-file and play it on any media player.

The following is a bit of information about Thomson, the interviewers, and the interview setting.

Alistair Thomson is the past president of the International Oral History Association (IOHA). He has been involved in the international oral history movement since the 1980s and served as IOHA’s president from 2006 to 2008. Dr. Thomson is a professor of history and the director of the Institute for Public History at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. His publications include the *Oral History Reader*, which he co-edited with Rob Perks. He also authored *Moving Stories: British Women and the Postwar Australian Dream* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2009), *Ten pound Poms: Australia’s Invisible Migrants* (with A. James Hammerton) (Manchester University Press, 2005), and *Anzac Memories: Living With the Legend* (Oxford University Press, 1994). For more information about Al Thomson, visit his website at <http://arts.monash.edu.au/historical-studies/staff/athomson.php>.



Alistair Thomson during the interview (photo: A. Freund)

Miroslav Vaněk is the director of the Oral History Centre at the Institute for Contemporary History, Academy of Sciences in Prague, Czech Republic (<http://www.coh.usd.cas.cz>). He is also the founder of the Czech Oral History Association (<http://www.oralhistory.cz>). One of his current projects is to video interview the pioneers and best-known practitioners of oral history. He asks them five questions:

1. When and how did you meet oral history, the moment you realized this is what you want to do?
2. What is the power of oral history?
3. What do you tell skeptics of oral history?
4. What is the future of oral history?
5. What advice would you give to oral historians in the Czech Republic?

As co-editor of the *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, I had wanted to interview Al Thomson about his views of the development of oral history on the international level for our new journal section "Oral History in the World." Therefore, Mirek and I decided to do the interview together.

The interview was conducted on September 26, 2008, during the 15th International Oral History Conference in Guadalajara, Mexico, at the main library

of the University of Guadalajara's University Centre for the Social Sciences and Humanities - one of the quietest places we could find on the campus (you would not believe it from the background noise despite the use of a clip-on microphone. The noise you hear in the background is mostly created by people setting up the place for an oral history performance).

Listen to Al Thomson talk about his personal fascination with oral history and the field's importance and future. The interview is 25 minutes long, the mp3-sound file is 5.3 MB big.

Cite the interview (Chicago style):

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