

Review: *Oral History and Photography*

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Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson, eds. *Oral History and Photography*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 252 pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-28062-6

Few can argue that the discussion of photographs and images has only been addressed in a piecemeal fashion within the field of history. Considering their connection to the social history movement after the 1960s, this should come as a bigger surprise than it does. As the editors of *Oral History and Photography* remind us, while such ideas were challenged in the 1970s, it has not been since the “pictorial” or “visual turn” of the past two decades that greater critical scrutiny of photographs and their relationship to history has in fact occurred.

In *Oral History and Photography*, Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson have put together a collection that goes a long way in substantively rectifying this situation as it pertains to oral history. Setting out to address the “lack of reflection and discussion on the systemic use of photographs in oral history,” the collection, as the editors suggest, explains why “oral historians’ use of photographs has been sporadic” (2). The work as a whole does an excellent job in demonstrating that any such concentrated analysis needs to capture the transnational nature of the “photographic turn” in oral history.

Organized into two sections, the twelve contributions to the collection are linked through their exploration of the interconnections between theory, method, practice, and challenges that exist in oral history and photography. What makes this collection stand out is the convincing way in which each contributor demonstrates how photographs can both frame oral narratives and how oral history challenges the notion that photographs capture, to borrow from Ranke, “history as it happened.” In essence, this collection demonstrates that photographs need to be used as much more than a mere social document in oral history (3).

Beginning with Freund and Angela Thiessen’s case study-based discussion of the “fundamental questions” about the relationship between photographs and oral history, the first section’s six contributions are organized around “Remembering with Images.” They demonstrate that far from being merely a tool used to invoke memories, the use of photographs can represent and expose alternate lived experiences that are fundamentally different from traditional oral narratives. The remaining six articles are grouped in the second section “Making Histories.” While still dealing with the same questions as the first section, they focus more on how history is constructed, for example, through the creation of photographic albums and how, as Maris Thompson argues in her analysis of German-American families, photographs are a mechanism to “discern the discontinuities between the reading of oral testimonies as productive spaces for analysis of complex social history” (165).

For those who have used photo-elicitation in their research, it comes as no surprise that many of the contributors also discuss the emotions evoked through the

reflective discussion of photographs and images and the transmission of the participants' lived experiences that result. The works establish in a convincing and compelling manner the way in which photographs/images are much more than merely "documents of social history" or "mnemonic devices."

One of the most interesting aspects is the both explicit and implicit discussion of photographs as tools for political action, engagement, and even activism. While some contributions, such as that by Ana Maria Mauad, are much more overt, others subtly demonstrate that photographs can also play an important role as a focusing and transmuting lens for political engagement, or what she refers to as "a form of authorship" (230). Some of the most compelling discussions are found in those contributions that explore often neglected and marginalized groups such as immigrants, youth, and Indigenous Peoples. Carol Payne's discussion of the repatriation of photographs of the Inuit taken by the Canadian government in the 1950s, for example, shows how photographs can create a sense of identity across generations transformed into a form of political engagement (97-114).

Perhaps the most valuable contribution to the collection, though, is its introduction. Not to take away from the excellent, original, and nuanced contributions within the collection, but the introduction should be required reading for anyone thinking of undertaking oral history. Insightful, thorough, and engaging, it goes beyond merely providing a solid foundation for the rest of the volume. In a time when introductions to collections often are no more than chapter breakdowns, the introduction to this volume is an original contribution and a formidable piece of methodological writing in itself.

What the volume does lack is diversity of topic, scope, and contribution. Fully half of the chapters deal with some aspect of family and/or private photographic collections. The contributions are primarily drawn from those regions that are historically, culturally, and socially Anglo-dominated (Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom). A more balanced approach that includes aspects of the francophone world, Russia, and, in particular, Asia and Africa would have been appreciated.

In addition, while the editors acknowledge that video and digital photography are beyond the scope of the volume (6), considering that most photographs are now taken and shared through digital means, their role in oral histories and the construction of both individual and group lived experiences could have been explored. While historically marginalized peoples are included extensively (e.g. Indigenous Peoples, immigrants, women), photography throughout history has been largely a class-based experience, defined by socially constructed circumstances with the lower classes and poor appearing often as the subject and passive participants. The proliferation of cheap cellphones with digital cameras has changed the "playing field" over the past decade and ensured greater representation of these groups.

Although the editors claim that *Oral History and Photograph* is not intended to be "a guide or handbook for oral historians seeking concrete advice on using photographs in their practice" (18), the collection, and introduction in particular, goes a long way in fulfilling this unintended goal.