

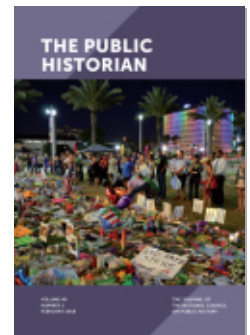


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The Voice of the Past: Oral History by Paul Thompson
(review)

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(Review)



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developed in Europe and later the United States and beyond is as much about display and visitor interest in public culture as it is about science or the need to gather and compare. The text works to connect museum history to larger developments in public culture, literature, and economics. Near the end of the book, developing trends in deaccessioning, museum interpretation, and relatively new laws like NAGPRA provide particularly useful jumping-off points for teaching and classroom discussion.

Aside from minor quibbles about historical terminology in the text, this book represents an important resource. As with any textbook, this book sacrifices some depth (more on conservation and restoration would have been appropriate, for example) for necessary breadth.

One regret, echoed in a previous review I have written in this journal's pages, is the relatively high cost of the volume, a critique significant as it makes the book less easily justified as assigned text in graduate and advanced undergraduate seminars. An eBook edition is available at about the same price as the hardcover edition. Nevertheless, I anticipate many will include this text on reading lists for undergraduate and graduate students interested in the history of museums and public history.

"Museums," the book concludes, "will continue to be important as long as humans remain curious about the world around them" (259). In providing a valuable starting point, this book will help students, scholars, and public historians better understand the fascinating history behind these important institutions.

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The Voice of the Past: Oral History by Paul Thompson with Joanna Bornat. 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. vii+484 pp.; notes, bibliography, appendix, index; clothbound, \$105.00; paperbound \$39.95; eBook, \$26.99.

Oxford University Press's publication of the fourth edition of *The Voice of the People*, nearly forty years after its first appearance and seventeen years since the last edition, marks a major milestone in oral history. The first edition challenged the preconceptions of both oral historians and their skeptics. Paul Thompson helped prod the field in new directions and open it to other disciplines. This edition is a testimonial to the upheavals its predecessor volumes stimulated. As the most obvious measure of those changes, the new book is almost double the length of the original.

A pioneer in oral history, Paul Thompson is now emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Essex. For this edition, he has partnered with Joanna Bornat, emeritus professor of oral history at the Open University in Great Britain. Both have edited the well-regarded journal of the British Oral History Society, *Oral History*, and both are keenly aware of the developments in the field. This

edition also carries an overview of oral history theory by the astute analyst Lynne Abrams.

The first version of *The Voice of the People* was terser, more argumentative, and more provocative. Now that so many of the battles have been won, the authors can step back to examine how oral evidence has reshaped our understanding of the past. Rather than having to encourage scholars to take oral evidence seriously, as was once needed, here Thompson and Bornat document how vigorously other disciplines have adopted the methodology. Although a few of the more hidebound opponents may continue to object, the debate has shifted from whether to use oral history to how best to use it. Where the first book drew heavily from British examples, and highlighted differences between western European practices and those in the United States, the new version provides a dazzling world tour, sifting through a vast accumulation of oral history literature across the globe.

In addition to having been the first serious methodological interpretation of oral history, *The Voice of the People* emphasizes the social purposes of scholarly interviewing. It argued then and now that history should not merely comfort, but should provide an understanding that leads to action, and ultimately, help “change the world” (21). The authors acknowledge that in the original edition this sentiment mirrored the spirit of idealism within the oral history movement in the 1970s, but even with their expanded focus on many different issues, they insist, “the search for social justice remains central to our work” (vii).

In fact, it was that social objective that initially rankled some of the earliest American oral historians. In the United States, oral history programs were initially concentrated in a few large university-based archives, patterned after Columbia University’s oral history research office, which Allan Nevins started in 1948. The Columbia University model promoted interviewing prominent individuals in government, business, the military, and other upper-echelon fields—paralleling the “top-down” approach that then prevailed in the history profession. Thompson had been schooled in the “bottom-up” European social history approach, in which individual scholars interviewed persons previously omitted from national narratives. They concentrated on publishing books rather than collecting archives.

What was then a clash of diametrically opposite viewpoints has subsequently meshed into a commonly accepted whole. Europeans have been interviewing the political and business leaders that fascinated Nevins, from the North Sea oil and gas operations to the Cadbury candy company and notably in Thompson’s *City Lives* project that studied British investment bankers. European oral historians have also turned more attention to archiving oral histories. Thompson, for instance, initiated the massive British Lives oral history project, housed at the British Library. American oral historians meanwhile embraced social history and social sciences, symbolized by Columbia University’s extensive 9/11 Oral History Project, which has interviewed a cross-section of survivors, first responders, and

others affected by that disaster. As these examples show, oral historians can apply the methods to either approach. Projects work best when they include a wide range of interviewees, collecting varying memories and perspectives.

In the fourth edition, the authors identify new issues that have emerged over the past four decades, particularly those dealing with memory studies and how people present themselves in their personal stories. They note that our general understanding of memory has grown subtler, shifting away from a preoccupation with establishing an objective reliability to realizing that people's reshaping of what they remember offers telling clues for scholarly analysis. Indeed, oral history has prompted a general awareness that subjective perception shapes all historical evidence. The authors weigh the problem of hearing confused stories, when individuals and communities might combine separate events into one, or when interviewees offer their own "personal truths" that may not coincide with reality. They compare oral history interviewing with psychoanalysis and family therapy and devote attention to the effects of traumatic memory, post-traumatic stress, and other issues related to telling painful stories. They consider the application of oral history to "reminiscence therapy" among older people and its connection to the life-review interview. They discuss the impact of race, gender, and social class on the interview relationship. Collectively, these issues provide a greater understanding of how the basic one-on-one interaction of an interview influences both the interviewer and interviewee and shapes the results.

The essence of oral history is to record those in the present as they remember and reflect on the past. Successful interviewing requires a multitude of skills, from conducting advance research to mastering the equipment, setting the right environment, and demonstrating an empathy that fosters trust and candor. Oral history also demands an acute sensitivity to ethical issues to avoid harming interviewees during the interview or in its subsequent uses. *The Voice of the People* provides clear guidance for each step of the oral history process, cautioning interviewers to remain aware of their responsibilities. The book promises that the results will be worth the effort. Collecting and using oral evidence has transformed the "objects" of study into "subjects," making "for a history which is not just richer, more vivid, and more heart-rending, but truer" (187).

Archiving was more of an afterthought in the original book, compressed into a chapter about "Storing and Sifting." The current volume shows greater awareness of the need for the professional preservation of recordings, now that the digital era has made it clear that no storage system can be trusted as permanent. Similarly, this edition is more attuned to the thorny legal issues involved in depositing interviews in an archive for future use.

Although the authors devote scant attention to public history, their evaluations of oral history sources and the ways that people try to understand and explain the enormous changes that have occurred during their own lifetimes parallel the concerns of public historians. With so many public history programs relying on oral history for preserving the past and presenting it to modern audiences—as archives,

and through documentaries, museum exhibits, audio tours, and other creative applications—the advice and admonitions in this volume will assist projects of any scope and purpose.

Anyone seeking to trace the dramatic evolution and international impact of oral history in our times will find *The Voice of the Past* a most beneficial guide.

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Interpreting American Jewish History at Museums and Historic Sites by Avi Y. Decter.

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. ix + 231 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$80.00; paperbound, \$35.00; eBook, \$33.00.

Attention, public historians: this is a rewarding read. This is especially true if you work or volunteer on museum exhibits, site interpretation, or public programing. First the disclaimer: as a public historian and historian of American Jewish history, I am cited in this work. To the author's credit, so is almost every other American Jewish historian. The footnotes and bibliographies are an important component of this "how-to" book. Avi Decter and his three contributors have produced an engaging volume that is written without jargon and stimulates creativity. Created for public historians by public historians who understand the challenges of public programing, it encourages thought, diversity, and ingenuity.

Part of the *Interpreting History* series published by the American Association for State and Local History, the book's goal is "to provide expert, in-depth guidance in interpretation for history professionals at museums and historic sites" and help them become more inclusive and "expand their interpretation" (frontispiece). Books in the series serve as "quick references to practical considerations, further research, and historical information" (frontispiece). In all these areas the book succeeds.

The book "is designed and organized to help you advance methodically through the subject, moving from the general to the particular" (17). The introduction and "Getting Started" chapters taken together present themes and methodology. Five thematic chapters follow, developing the topics first explored in the introduction: "migration, movement, and social mobility; family and domestic life; community life and communal organizations; cultural expression; and prejudice, discrimination, and tolerance" (17). These chapters orient the reader to the topics with clear narratives, reinforced by scholarly arguments and illustrated with first-person accounts. A case studies chapter follows each thematic chapter. These chapters showcase four projects exhibited by secular local history museums or historic sites. Decter chose the case studies because of their "effective efforts to tackle difficult or little-known subjects" and their relevance to a variety of stakeholders and constituents, not necessarily because they are models (18). None of the case studies come from Jewish institutions. They expand the book's goal of