Readers and Reading Patterns: Oral History and the Archive

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Libraries and reading are a part of everyday lived culture. Their ordinary nature means that the researcher is often trying to recover or explore events and interactions which participants remember as being unremarkable. It is however, extraordinary that a major contribution to the distribution of popular fiction during the first half of the twentieth century took place through a chain of chemist shops. Boots the Chemist operated an extensive, national circulating library, one that was renowned for service and the attractiveness of the environment it created. Researching the reasons for the existence of the Boots Book-lovers’ Library (1899–1966) casts light on values attributed to reading, attitudes towards popular fiction, the representation of the ordinary reader, and how books were accessed during the interwar period by a heterogeneous reading public. This chapter explores how oral history research can contribute to our understanding of this process.

Oral History and Book History

Research into publishing and bookselling often seems to be focused on locating – or being in a position to estimate – figures related to print runs, sales, circulation and readership, all of which seem to clarify the significance of a text or enterprise, but which commercial concerns do not want to be made public. Quantitative information about publishing and the scale of readership can seem hard won, but understanding reading patterns and cultures needs qualitative data which is just as difficult to ascertain. Oral history sources can be used to provide evidence about past practice which cannot be uncovered from conventional historical documents, but it has more to offer in confirming or elucidating how procedures, policies, and day-to-day reading were experienced in practice.

Reflecting a wider shift in the use and embeddedness of oral history in historical research, oral history has become an increasingly important part of book history and its research methodologies in recent years. The British Library’s sound recordings of “Book Trade Lives” (which covers the period from
the 1920s to 2006) sought to capture the history of the book trade in the twentieth century through recording the voices of those who worked in publishing and bookselling.¹ Other projects have focussed on the attempt to record reading experiences, notably *Australian Readers Remember: An Oral History of Reading, 1890–1930* (1992); “Scottish Readers Remember” (2006–9); and the current “Memories of Fiction: An Oral History” (2014–).²

Data from oral history recordings and transcripts can offer description and factual information that illuminates printed records and other archival sources. In the case of the Boots Book-lovers’ Library, it also provides rich data on the ways in which librarians and readers articulate subjective experiences and provide accounts of a cultural environment in which the exchange of knowledge, social attitudes and cultural values took place. Oral history research can be a means of looking at the relationships between employees and management, readers and distributing agents, and about reading cultures, with an interview about the everyday environment of the library providing insights into how manuals, terms of business and training were put into practice. It also allows the researcher to listen to, rather than imagine the reader, and to understand how reading was negotiated as a cultural activity in different social contexts. Oral history has been dismissed as an evidential tool or as a form of biography, but to become an historical account it needs to move beyond the individual experience that is its premise and provide insight into social experience.³ It is not the accumulation of individual stories – however fascinating as personal and local testimony – that counts, but the ability that large scale research projects then have to provide an overview of interpretative statements about experience.⁴

The work of Italian historian Alessandro Portelli has clearly set out the complex nature of the data that researchers create and work with: “oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed

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