



Handout 6: Paul Thompson's Definition of Oral History

Session: Significance of Oral History

Paul Thompson is a British sociologist who is credited as the founder of oral history in Britain. He founded the Oral History Society in Britain in the 1970s and several oral history journals, putting oral history on the map as a field of study and practice. In general, his approach has been credited with breaking down barriers between teachers and students, giving back to the people and communities who have shared their experiences of the past. His description of oral history is most vivid and inspiring:

“ Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but also from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow workers. It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less-privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact – and thence understanding – between social classes, and between generations. And to individual historians and others, with shared meanings, it can give a sense of belonging to a place or in time. In short, it makes for fuller human beings. Equally, oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgment inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for the radical transformation of the social meaning of history.¹ ”

¹ Paul Thompson, "The Voice of the Past: Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader* (2nd ed.), eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Routledge, 1998), 31.

