

Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive. Nancy MacKay. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2016. xv, 225 pp. ISBN 978-1-61132-856-1

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Most books on the subject of oral history focus on doing oral history – the process itself, interview techniques, and project management. *Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive*, by Nancy MacKay, is different: it deals with what happens after interviews are completed and oral testimonies become records. The second edition of the book – it was originally published in 2007 – has been updated to reflect rapid changes in the realms of technology and cultural sensitivity as well as the author’s increased awareness of institutional and community contexts.

Oral histories are a notoriously difficult subject for archivists. They are complex and different from other types of archival records – square pegs in round holes in terms of description, copyright, and overall management. The recordings, on audiovisual media, are interactive in nature and not standardized, and they often lack key metadata or vital associated records. These are just a few of the challenges archivists may encounter when processing and caring for oral histories. Navigating these challenges requires expert guidance, best practices, and templates. This book can offer some much-needed help.

The term *curation* refers to processes including acquisition, processing, preservation, and access. This use is specific to the US discourse and might be unfamiliar to readers in Canada or other countries; the issues and solutions,

however, are universal and relevant to archivists around the globe. MacKay is a librarian by training and experience. As Head of Technical Services at the Mills College Library (1989–2012), she managed the college oral history program. Over the last ten years, she has lectured at the School of Information, San Jose State University; co-edited the Practicing Oral History series; and worked as Book Review Editor at the *Oral History Review*. Her perspective as a librarian is evident in the terms used throughout the book; she discusses cataloguing, evaluation, and archiving, while archival concerns such as appraisal, arrangement, and description are found only in the glossary. The book is not written specifically for archivists; instead, it aims at a broader audience, which also includes oral history practitioners, librarians, and heritage workers. This broad appeal limits the depth of the discussion, but the book compensates by offering a larger perspective and robust practicality.

Explaining oral history records in chapter 1, MacKay uses the familiar records life cycle model: interview projects are conceived, carried out, processed, and preserved for access. MacKay's working definition of *oral history* is refreshingly simple: "oral history is a method of documenting recent history through recorded personal accounts of those who lived it" (p. 19). The simplicity of this definition helps anchor the discussion in practical issues. MacKay emphasizes the importance of third-party access and use of oral histories. She views oral historians as "stewards of cultural heritage" who have the responsibility to ensure long-term, continuous access to and use of the materials. "The curation of oral histories is as important as their creation," stresses MacKay (p. 26).

The MacKay's emphasis on use is well justified; only a small percentage of oral history projects ends up in publicly accessible archival repositories.¹ Best practices in this respect include transferring records directly from the creator to a repository. MacKay points out that the relationship between the oral historian and the archives, which should ideally be established during the planning stage of an oral history project, creates a framework that enables maximum capture and retention of the content, provenance, and metadata necessary for the administration of rights management and privacy issues in oral histories. In chapter 3, "Collecting Oral Histories," MacKay briefly discusses five possible scenarios through which oral histories enter repositories. According to MacKay,

1 Holly Hendrigan, "An Examination of Oral History and Archival Practices among Graduate Students in Select Canadian Comprehensive Research Universities," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 36 (2016).

serendipitous acquisition is the worst, but also the most common, scenario. MacKay advises repositories to cultivate relationships early and act as stakeholders (p. 42).

Addressing the mechanics of the acquisition process, MacKay offers some useful advice on what curators (archivists) should ask for from donors. The donor packet described by MacKay includes an inventory of materials; a memorandum of understanding outlining the responsibilities of each party and the timeline for delivery; an incoming collection description form, filled out by the oral historian; legal release agreements for each interview; and an interview summary form, which serves as a basic finding aid (p. 45). MacKay's discussion of born-digital records is limited, but she suggests other resources, referring the reader to emerging protocols such as the one developed by Doug Boyd and Sara Price at the Nunn Center for Oral History, the University of Kentucky.²

It is disappointing to see little attention paid to appraising oral history recordings. For archivists, it would be useful to know how to distinguish between a quality oral history project and materials of marginal value. MacKay breezes through her discussion of appraisal criteria such as "subject matter," "legal papers," "collection size," "physical condition," "formats and media," "documentation," and "repository's capacity" (pp. 43–44). Some other important criteria – the creator, the purpose of the interviews, and the fidelity and overall quality of the recording – surprisingly did not make the list.

Ethical considerations and legal implications, including the risks of defamation, invasion of privacy, and breach of confidentiality, are addressed in chapters 5 and 6. In order to protect interviewees' safety and privacy, repositories might conceal interviewee's names; avoid including accompanying photographs, video footage, or identifying information; or restrict access for a defined period of time. The author insists that safeguards regarding (or protections of) safety and privacy should extend beyond the acquisition stage: "Since interviews have a long life in the archives, sometimes issues arise in the course of history that may jeopardize the narrators' loved ones or descendants. Governments change, public sentiment changes, and what could be sympathetic readership in one time and place could be quite different in another" (p. 63).

2 Douglas A. Boyd and Sara Abdmishani Price, "Case Study: Born Digital Accession Workflow: The Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries," in *Oral History in the Digital Age*, ed. Doug Boyd, Steve Cohen, Brad Rakerd, and Dean Rehberger (Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2012), accessed 19 November 2018, <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/borndigital/>.

MacKay encourages custodians to be aware of public perception and adjust access provisions accordingly. This opinion echoes an emerging sentiment within the archival profession at large. The Association of Canadian Archivists Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (2017) states that archivists should be “sensitive to the evolving contexts of individuals (living or dead), organizations, or communities that are the subjects of the records, reconsidering access conditions as necessary in light of that sensitivity.”³ In Canada, this mindset has been at least in part informed by a more enlightened understanding of Indigenous culture and history, specifically as prompted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

While efforts to protect privacy and ensure cultural sensitivity are commendable, the approach advocated by MacKay has its downsides. First, it creates a management burden for archivists as they are encouraged to second-guess decisions made by predecessors. Second, the attitude might result in overzealous application of restrictions and adverse consequences for public access and freedom of information. Any restrictions come at a cost: they diminish the practical value of the records to researchers. At times, archivists have no choice but to restrict records based on donor’s wishes; do they need to complicate access even further by overriding industry standards with personal judgments? MacKay’s position on the matter appears to be overly protective. It should not be forgotten that public archives serve the society at large, and open access is the ultimate expression of this mission.

In addition to privacy issues, MacKay offers an excellent discussion of the anatomy of legal release and its functions. She points out that consent documents are informational rather than legally binding. Several samples of release forms are included and help clarify various scenarios. In terms of copyright management, MacKay outlines three options: transferring or assigning full copyright, applying a Creative Commons (CC) licence, and releasing material to the public domain. The CC licence appears to be emerging as an alternative to the restrictions associated with copyright; it allows the holder to share the work with the public while exercising a degree of control over its use. In the world of oral history, a CC licence is a practical way to open up an oral history interview to users without depriving the interviewee of their copyright.

3 Association of Canadian Archivists, “Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct,” 18 October 2017, accessed 29 November 2018, https://archivists.ca/sites/default/files/website_files/policy/aca_code_of_ethics_final_october_2017.pdf.

Later in chapter 6, MacKay briefly explains various legal issues related to the use of oral history materials, including fair use provisions, restrictions, and orphan works. MacKay outlines different options for making oral histories accessible online, including providing free access, posting a copyright warning or clickwrap agreement, storing them in a digital repository, and posting only pointers or excerpts. MacKay's frequent references to John Neuenschwander suggest that his work would offer a more in-depth discussion of legal issues.⁴

Chapter 8 offers practical value with regard to preparing finding aids. MacKay explains that a verbatim transcript – notoriously laborious and time-consuming to produce – is merely one option in the array of choices available to the archivist dealing with an oral history recording. Three alternative voice-to-text tools include the interview summary (a narrative outline of content), the timed index (a log of topics indexed by time markers), and the named index (an index of proper names). The author outlines advantages and disadvantages of each tool and suggests ways of combining them. For archives that own sizable oral history projects but lack resources to transcribe them, summary and index formats might help solve some intellectual control and access issues.

From an archivist's perspective, the chapters dedicated to archival management and preservation are not quite adequate. MacKay argues that libraries and archives are no longer exclusive keepers of cultural heritage as many other organizations, including cultural/community centres, historical societies, and corporations, have assumed roles as stewards. "Each type of organization contributes an approach to curation based on its organizational structure and mission," argues the author (p. 49). With this diverse audience in mind, she caters to the lowest common denominator, offering rather basic advice – at least for professional archivists – on recording essential information, using forms, and so on.

Chapter 10, "Backlogs and Other Backroom Secrets," is a catch-all survey of problems including backlogs, digitization, technology obsolescence, orphan works, restrictions, and missing documentation. Finally, in chapter 11 MacKay discusses public access and use, which is the ultimate goal and the last stage in the life cycle of oral histories. MacKay advocates the user-centred "more product, less process" (MPLP) approach, which focuses on minimizing archival processing work in favour of delivering fast and easy access.⁵ She defines three

4 John A. Neuenschwander, *A Guide to Oral History and the Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

5 Mark A. Green and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Pragmatically Revamping Traditional Processing Approaches to Deal with Late 20th Century Collections," *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208–63.

main criteria or indicators of success in processing – findability, usability, and sustainability – and demonstrates how these criteria map to users' diverse needs.

Despite the limitations discussed, *Curating Oral Histories* has many qualities that make it valuable for any archivist looking for guidance on oral history records. The book's comprehensive treatment of the subject – its useful tips, relevant examples, and prepared templates – and MacKay's practitioner's wisdom make it a worthy addition to the archival reference shelf.