One of my first interviews for this project was with Kathleen Skin, aged ninety-two and living in assisted housing in Cambridgeshire. My experience of that interview in September 2011 continues to challenge my thinking about oral history and memory. Kathleen was a lively narrator, with an eye for detail. Her father, she explained, had been blinded in one eye and lost most of the muscle in his leg when he was hit by shrapnel during the First World War, for which he received a 100 per cent pension.

Kathleen remembered a Christmas during the 1930s when her father was in hospital recovering from an attack of malaria:

KS: And anyway, came Christmas, and we’d gone to bed, and there was a knock at the door – but, of course, we didn’t know, I was sound asleep, I think – and at the door stood a chauffeur, and he had a sack, and he had boxes, and there was also a valet, all dressed up in uniform, you know, from the household ... it was the Brown Owl’s family, and she must have said to the others, you know, ‘We’ve got this family here, and we’ve got to do something.’ So they did. And we all got a present at Christmas, and we … had a roast dinner … everything that we wanted for Christmas was there. And coal! And ... [laughs] ... oh yeah, what my mother ... affected her more than anything, was not that these things came from this wealthy family, was that the chauffeur came back, and he pressed sixpence in her hand, and he was hard up, and he’d got children ... and I think that upset her more than anything. Anyway, I can see it all! [sounds tearful] Anyway, Dad came home on Christmas Day ... all wrapped up in a blanket, and so we had a good Christmas. [starts to cry] I don’t know how they managed ... so we went up, and we went down. [stops crying] Now, I want
you to see this, because every now and again, my father kept having
a letter saying, ‘Come and be examined’, because they tried to
take away his pension, because they found out that he could dig
the garden and grow vegetables …
MR: I’ll read this out then, shall I?
KS: That was when he was at Wickford, you see, that one.
Arrangements have been made for you to attend Special Surgical
Hospital, Shepherd’s Bush …’

I want to make three observations about Kathleen’s interview, both
in relation to the women and men who grew up in the 1920s and
30s after the war’s end and about the practice of oral history. Firstly,
there is tension between the vivid scene she depicts and its status as
testimony. At the time I pictured Kathleen as an eyewitness, and it
was only on reading the transcript of the interview some months
later that I realised she had said she was asleep. Kathleen’s mother
must have told her this story, and yet as Kathleen becomes upset, it
is as if the experience is her own: breaking into tears, she says, ‘I can
see it all’. The affective intensity of her mother’s reaction pulls the
daughter and the historian onto the scene.

This moment in Kathleen’s interview captures the situation of the
so-called ‘second generation’ in Britain, who were not present dur-
during the events that shaped their parents’ lives, yet whose own lives
were shaped by those events, and who have often had occasion to
imagine themselves on the scene. It is an example of what Maurice
Halbwachs called a ‘gripping abbreviation’, which condenses the
experience of coming after into a single image.¹ Marianne Hirsch, in
her study of the children of Holocaust survivors, calls the imagina-
tive reconstructions of the second generation ‘postmemories’.²

Because Kathleen’s story encapsulates the experience of living
with the consequences of a war before her time, I have often used
it in presentations and papers. In so doing, however, I have cherry-
picked from her interview, which became more improbable as it
proceeded. Like the central character in Woody Allen’s 1983 film
Zelig, she was on the scene of many key events in the mid-century.
In the late 1930s, she told me, she went on a trip to Germany and
stayed with the family of her father’s friend. She had seen Hitler,
Himmler and Goebbels at rallies and had been on a twenty-mile
Nazi Youth march, suffering terrible blisters, but ‘I never gave in’.
She practised parachute jumping with the Luftwaffe cadets and had seen children with tags being evacuated. She took photographs of international shipping in the Kiel Canal before being hurried across the border to Holland, sending her pictures to British intelligence officials on her return. During the war she was a Land Girl, a nurse and an armourer, putting guns in aircraft. She had done an operation for Special Operations Executive (SOE), rowing a boat to Guernsey under cover of the night to rescue a Polish prisoner of war who was an expert in radar.

Kathleen brought out a coin with filed edges, which she claimed SOE gave its agents as a form of identification in case they were captured, and instructed me ‘don’t tell anybody about my gold coin!’ She had ended the war as a ‘Bletchley girl’, the most revered of all servicewomen. After the war she lived in Malaya, where her fiancé collapsed during their engagement party at the Dog pub, eventually dying from cancer after a hospital bedside wedding. The cause of his cancer was radiation fallout from the British nuclear tests in Australia. Kathleen also got cancer due to the fallout from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombs and had to have a hysterectomy. Her accounts became more macabre as the interview continued and she ended by telling me that her mother had helped the coroner cut open her six-month-old baby on the kitchen table after it died from mumps.

It is difficult to establish the points of departure from actuality in Kathleen’s account. The letter was evidence of her father’s disability, and other sources corroborate much of what she described, like the Strength Through Joy rallies, or the club in Kuala Lumpur colloquially known as the Spotted Dog. Campaigners in Britain and Australia have shown that there were elevated cancer rates among British servicemen and local indigenous communities exposed to nuclear tests in Australia in the 1950s. I have been unable to locate records of Kathleen’s Second World War service and historians of intelligence and the Channel Islands tell me that there is no record of SOE operations involving the rescue of prisoners by boat. It seems unlikely that Kathleen appeared in as many roles and theatres of the Second World War as she claimed.

In our interview, Kathleen created a seamless web from remembered experience, the emotions animated by remembering, shared cultural references (Christmas saved by the kindness of strangers)
and her present concerns (to convey the injustices perpetrated by the Ministry of Pensions). Movements like these often occur in oral history and were apparent in other interviews too, a function perhaps of reconstructing memories of childhood among people in late life whose unconscious controls may be lifted, as well as the displaced relation that descendants have to the First World War, a past before their own. When interpreting such interviews, oral historians tend to go in one of two methodological directions. Some will seek to ascertain and defend the value of their sources against assumptions about the retrospective standpoint of oral testimony. Kate Fisher and Simon Szreter in their study of sex and marriage between the wars argue that hindsight can actually be an advantage, the relatively permissive standards of today enabling their elderly interviewees to reflect on their sexual behaviour in a more open way than would have been possible when they were young. Archaeologists have used oral history to investigate the uses of household goods in the first half of the nineteenth century, retrieving complete examples of crockery and pottery from shards, and bringing together groups of older people who recognise the objects from their grandparents’ homes, and who relate memories of how they were used and where they were placed in the home.

Oral history projects like these rely on triangulation to help assess accuracy and account for the effects of memory as they retrieve an aspect of the past which may otherwise be inaccessible to historians. Such a stance need not stem from naïve empiricism: discussing the methodological issues involved in interviewing child survivors of the Holocaust, Rebecca Clifford shows how their memories, fractured though they may be, nevertheless reveal the life-long implications of broken parent–child relationships in a way that the archival records of aid agencies cannot. Without oral history, Clifford concludes, a history of family reunification after the Holocaust from the child’s perspective would scarcely be possible. Contemporaneous sources do not tell us ‘what happened afterwards. They do not tell us how these reunions were subjectively experienced, nor what long-term implications the process had.’

On the other side, historians of memory tend to be as concerned with the way the interviewee remembers, and the cultural scripts and emotions that condition their recall, as with the experiences and events to which they testify. Alistair Thomson’s Anzac Memories is
a notable example of this approach: he found that when Australian veterans of the First World War remembered the conflict in the early 1980s, they did so through the Anzac legend of laconic, brave and egalitarian masculinity. They responded unwittingly to the pressure to conform to public narratives and re-told their war through the frames of mid-twentieth-century Australian nationalism. In Mark Roseman’s study of the Holocaust survivor Marianne Ellenbogen, he draws on a rich variety of sources – interviews, official documents, diaries, memoirs and mementoes – to identify the inaccuracies in her testimony, and to document how her memory of the war changed over time. Marianne’s errors and fabrications, he argues, do not undermine the value of the testimony but on the contrary, provide important clues about the emotional burdens that survivors carried. To an oral historian like this, ‘misremembering’ or ‘re-remembering’ has value as the divergencies between event and memory signal where emotional legacies of loss and hope, psychic defences and unfulfilled wishes break in.

An interview is always more than a chronicle from which facts can be plucked, as Elizabeth Tonkin once put it, ‘like currants from a cake’. But as Roseman shows, it also tells us about more than the here and now of remembering. When people reminisce, they bring an aspect of the personal past into relation with the present. The experience involves more than memory; it brings ‘a sense of the past in the present’, as Kurt Danzinger puts it. Sometimes that sense can be so compelling that the interviewer feels plunged into the scene too, and the perception of time is telescoped, as I experienced during Kathleen’s story about Christmas.

Some of Kathleen’s account of her early life is supported by external documentation and has value for First World War historians. For example, it shows the consequences for families of the Ministry of Pensions policy of subtracting the cost of hospitalisation from a man’s war pension. But Kathleen’s more improbable recollections can also be understood as evidence of the war’s impact, revealing the subjectivity of a generation that was surrounded from birth by the war-bereaved and damaged veterans, but who had no social identity as victims themselves. Their mothers, they would tell me, were the ones who suffered, had to be resourceful and had to swallow their pride. ‘We were lucky’, Kathleen said, ‘we had a good mother who managed to make food out of practically nothing.’ And
later, ‘Oh, my mother had a hell of a time. And she was a very strong woman, a very good woman. Marvellous, she was.’ Far-fetched though it seems, Kathleen’s story about the post-mortem reveals her wish to convey how tough her mother was, and how capably she held the family together in the face of her father’s incapacity. Like other daughters in this study, in late life Kathleen still felt her mother’s predicament in the 1920s and 30s: it was remembering her mother’s distress that led Kathleen to break into tears. In the Second World War, however, Kathleen had become a hero and a victim in her own right. Her account might be thought of as a form of what Alessandro Portelli calls a ‘uchronic dream’, an imaginative compensation for a childhood hidden in the aftermath of the First World War, which put her at the centre of events in the mid-century and gave her a history of her own.¹⁴

The narrative in oral history is always produced within a context and it is always more than talk. The communication in a psychoanalytic session, says the psychoanalyst Betty Joseph, needs to be understood within the ‘total situation’ of the encounter, and something similar can be said of oral history.¹⁵ It is an event, the context of which includes the communication beforehand, the initial meeting between the two parties, the surroundings in which the interview is held and what happens during and after the recording. Two people – often unknown to each other beforehand – form a relationship, the evidence of which consists of looks, gestures and silence as well as talk. Much that takes place around the visible and audible cues is opaque. This includes the emotions felt by the interviewee as they remember, and those felt by the historian as they conjure in their minds the scenes described by the interviewee. One cannot separate the ‘knowledge’ of the past that is obtained in such an interview from the feelings and imagined pasts which transpire in the encounter. Ruminating on the possibilities of clinical techniques in qualitative social research, Duncan Cartwright describes how a cough, repeated word or digression may point to unconscious meanings. He calls this phenomenon ‘noise’, a metaphor that re-centres the auditory but points to the significance of the total context.¹⁶

There are good reasons why oral historians sometimes hesitate to explore this broader context and prefer to distil their evidence in words. We might accept that emotions animate many of the stories
that people tell us in an interview, and notice moments when psychological defences break in on each side, but we do not possess the training to fathom their meanings. Even judged by the standards of the most intensive life-story interview and the least intensive therapy, moreover, the encounters in oral history are relatively fleeting. We simply do not know our informants that well.

At the same time, however, precisely because our concern is a past in mind that is composed of a mixture of reconstruction and fantasy, it is helpful to consider how the emotional state of the interviewee might bear on the narrative they construct and how the interviewer feels as they ask questions, observe and listen. Each party draws on imagination to fill in gaps in experience, memory and knowledge, and to manage the affect that is connected to events in the past and aroused by remembering. When the transcriber of Kathleen Skin’s interview inserts ‘[starts to cry]’, this denotes an emotional register picked up from listening. It is not a transcription of speech, and for every mood the transcriber picks up, many others flit between the interviewer and the interviewee and are not recorded. Sometimes the past appears as an enactment, such as when Kathleen hands me the letter from the Ministry of Pensions, and I offer to read it out. Conventionally in oral history, the audio recording is thought of as the raw data which is then converted into a transcript, the written document being easier to retrieve and analyse, and fitting the historian’s preferred forms of communication, the essay and book. The evidence changes form twice as the encounter becomes sound and then text. By that stage, the interview seems more akin to a story than a meeting between two people.

The discussion in this chapter draws on my experience of oral history since the early 1980s but is particularly concerned with the thirty-five interviews I conducted with British descendants between 2011 and 2014. I kept a journal in which I noted the location and surroundings of the interview, my impressions of the interviewee, and what happened during the sessions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full and were coded using Nvivo, but in developing my interpretations I often found it helpful to return to the recordings – or listen to them while reading and marking up the transcript – rather than rely in the first instance on the transcripts or thematic categories. Audio, remarks the radio documentary maker Siobhán McHugh, is a powerful source of affect. It stirs up emotions
and thoughts in the listener, who makes associations with the situation of the speaker based on their personal experience, knowledge and imagination. Digital recording makes it comparatively easy to locate particular moments in the interview, and in listening again, I found I was able to reanimate a sense of the encounter in the round. Reconstructing scenes from the interviews, my direct memory was part of the evidence and helped form my interpretations.

In what follows, I view the encounters in oral history alongside the ideas of the psychoanalyst and paediatrician Donald Winnicott. My aim is not to advocate the use of clinical techniques in oral history interviews, but to shed light on what oral history itself entails as an encounter, particularly when it concerns the inter-generational impact of war. Winnicott’s thinking here provides a vantage point from which to think about the relationships in the past that people recall and those that occur within the interview, as each is apprehended through the senses and imagination of the teller and the listener. The next section considers the interview as a form of ‘intermediate space’ between past and present, the external and the internal worlds. The final section describes four ways in which, in my interviews with descendants, I sought to maintain a sense of the whole experience, the emotional communication and the acts of imagination that go on within it.

**Oral history as an ‘intermediate space’**

The ‘transitional object’ is probably Winnicott’s most influential idea and belongs in his terms to an area of intermediate experience. The blanket or teddy chosen by the infant exists in the world but at the same symbolises the mother and is a creative source of what Winnicott called ‘illusion’. Winnicott believed that through play the infant developed a capacity to live in the world, and in his Paddington clinic he watched children move back and forth between the mother and the objects of their play, thus establishing a creative space between the ‘me’ and the ‘not me’. Through such activities, Winnicott believed, the ‘pure subjectivity’ of the newborn infant was accompanied by an increasing capacity for objectivity. The struggle to relate inner and outer reality goes on throughout life and illusions retain a positive value in managing the strain between
them. Unlike Freud, for whom growth depended on the recognition of the reality principle, Winnicott had a more positive view of illusions. Although he did not theorise the relation between them, Winnicott believed that there was a ‘direct continuity’ from play to cultural experience and the creativity of the adult. Innovations in science, art or literature or belief in religion were ‘little madnesses’ that allowed the adult to foster illusions like those of the child at play.

What then if we consider the oral history interview as a form of play? In playing, says Winnicott, the child displays ‘the ideas that occupy his life’, and something analogous happens in an interview through the oral historian’s encouragement to talk about the past. Creativity in the space of the interview entails work with what Winnicott calls ‘inherited tradition’ or ‘the cultural store’: stories, myths and images of the wider culture that are transmitted from the past and to which the individual brings their own experience, inner world and preoccupations. Let me give an example. Winifred Spray’s father was killed in 1917 when she was two and a half. When I asked her in 2011 if she had any memories of him, she responded:

Well, I’m not sure, but I remember my mother going to … we lived at Old Basford … the top of a hill, and I remember walking down this hill, the grassy banks on each side of it, and we’d gone to meet a soldier. I don’t … I don’t … I think it could have been my father, it could have been my mother’s brother, because he came home on leave about that time, but I think it was my father. And my mother let go of my hand – I’d be two and a half – to let me run to meet him. And he picked me up, and put me on his shoulder. And that’s the only memory I have. And it might not even have been my father, it might have been my mother’s brother, but I think it was my father. But … there’s no means of knowing.

As Winifred described this scene and each time I re-hear or re-read it, images of family separations and reunions in wartime come to mind from photographs, films, interviews, books and histories. Occasionally I trawl through online images – the contemporary historian’s ‘cultural store’ of first call – hoping to identify Winifred’s memory of being hoisted into the arms of a home-bound soldier. Winifred composes her account in the intermediate space between
personal experience and tropes of the veteran’s return, and her story hovers between fantasy and historically minded assessments. At one moment she claims the serviceman she remembers was her father, but at another, acknowledges that this may not be the case. She has an explanation of the identity of the man she remembers if it wasn’t her father (interestingly, she doesn’t call him her uncle), but takes pleasure in the thought that it was really him. At times Winifred is drawn towards an understanding that there may be elements of fantasy in her memory; at others, she fosters the illusion that her father was not always lost to her.

Winifred related this memory in the first couple of minutes of our interview and went on to recount other childhood dreams and apparitions of her father. Our interview gave Winifred an opportunity to rejuvenate these illusions. Her mother did not tell Winifred that her father was dead until she was six or seven, and here she talks about her hope that he would return:

**Figure 1.1** British Guardsman on home leave.
I prayed so hard, I thought, ‘This is going to happen.’ And I remember the ... [laughs] somebody knocking at the door, when my grandmother was there, and I thought, ‘This is him!’ And it was somebody came and said ... ‘I’ve brought you some rhubarb! [laughs] I met your mother, and I said, “I’ve got some spare rhubarb!”’ I always remember this wretched rhubarb! And I thought it was my father [laughs] having lost his memory, and suddenly remembered where he was. And when I was little, there used to be a lot of horses go by the ... our front garden ... well, our road, which fronts onto a road which went near to one of the ... well, two hospitals, where there were a lot of wounded Tommies, and soldiers recuperating, and I used to go to the gate and search all these men’s faces, thinking, ‘Perhaps one of them’s my father, and he’s forgotten where he is, who he is.’ Of course, it wasn’t.

This kind of remembering draws on the post-war trope of the soldier who has lost his memory. When in 1922 the Ministry of Pensions
in France published a photograph of the amnesiac soldier Anthelme Mangin in national newspapers, dozens of families from among the 250,000 missing French servicemen came forward to claim the man as their own.\textsuperscript{31} Children orphaned by the war held on to the hope that perhaps their fathers were not dead after all.\textsuperscript{32} Winifred draws on the shared post-war imaginary of the amnesiac soldier to express the deep personal wish that her vanished father would return.

Her memory of childhood was structured around the moments of his possible reappearance:

I was once very feverish, with probably just a sore throat and cold, sitting on my mother’s knee, on that rocking chair, and ... the back door opened, and there’s a door into this kitchen/living room, and this soldier walked in, and I was sure it was my father. Whether it was ... I don’t really believe in ghosts, but ... I remember saying to my mother ... ‘That’s my daddy coming in’, and she just ... she said I was delirious. Well, probably I was. And I still see it ... in his Army uniform.

Winnicott believed that hallucinations fall outside the definition of play because the person hallucinating has lost a sense of the external reality.\textsuperscript{33} When Winifred says ‘I still see it’, she is not hallucinating, but conveying a memory of her hallucinations, and is thus in the transitional space. Preparing for our interview the day before, she had written notes about her memories and apparitions (she handed them to me at the end of the interview) and had dreamed about her father that night. Her interview was, in essence, a history of her dreaming, a transitional object in reverse which created an illusion of reality around the father she never knew.

Winifred’s interview illustrates the complex shifts that take place in oral history between imagination and experiences of the world. The genre might be considered a transitional space in two senses. Firstly, it shifts between orientations in time, crossing between past, present and an imagined future. Adam Phillips remarks that the analyst must ask, ‘what am I being used to do?’, and that is a question the historian should also ask. Both the interviewer and interviewee imagine a future audience as they work in the present on the past, and each uses the other to help them reach that audience.\textsuperscript{34} As I shall describe below, in the Afterlives project it has been important to understand where the interviewee wants to go via the oral historian.
Secondly, oral history interviews straddle the internal and external worlds. They belong in Winnicott’s terms to ‘an intermediate area of experiencing to which inner reality and external life both contribute’. The interviewee moves between the inner and outer worlds: at one moment Winifred Spray is immersed in her memories, and at another, she reflects on their status as dreams or hallucinations. In ‘Uchronic Dreams’, Alessandro Portelli notes that fantasy may be more prominent in interviews with elderly people as the conscious controls on memory diminish and the narrator is less able or concerned to locate their account in relation to actuality. Substitution and fabulation may also be common among descendants, for whom an ‘inherited culture’ of war and its aftermath takes the place of experience. When the narrator did not witness the events of whose consequences they speak, ‘composure’ leans hard on established cultural forms and learned histories.

Oral history leads in two directions: it supposes that the interviewee will try to describe their experience as accurately as they can – this, after all, is the presumed value of the ‘eyewitness’ – but at the same time recognises that nobody tells it as it was. I opened the Afterlives interviews by asking about the dates, places of birth and occupations of family members. I asked people to describe the houses in which they had lived as children, their relationships with siblings and parents, and their memories of growing up. I sought clarification when the account seemed unclear or was at odds with my assumptions, and sometimes pressed people for more exact descriptions, bringing them into touch with historical themes. Being interviewed by a historian, the interviewee may make a conscious effort to align their accounts with known historical events and conventional understandings. Kathleen Skin’s memory was jogged by the coming visit of the historian, and she found herself remembering a time when she personally witnessed a ‘historic’ occasion:

I suddenly thought of something last night, and I wrote it down, about watching the ‘101’ disappear into the distance in 1929. I was lying on the grass, looking up at the sky, and I saw this silver ball going along. I called my father, and he was milking the goat, so he had a look, and he said, ‘Oh, it’s an airship!’ And it was the last voyage of the ‘101’ and it crashed in France. And that was the last airship they used. So that’s historic, but it was also during the War … I mean after the War, in the thirties … no, ‘29 it was, I think it crashed. You can look it up.
Talking to the historian, an interviewee may feel anxious that their recollections do not fit in with accepted versions of the past and might be proved wrong: Kathleen prevaricates about the date of the ‘101’ crash (October 1930) and eventually passes to me the responsibility for accuracy. Our presence can invite what Winnicott called a ‘compliant’ attitude, a pressure to construct a self that is congruent with prevailing historical accounts and satisfies the imagined requirements of the historian. Some of my interviewees, for example, having volunteered for an interview about family legacies of the war, were embarrassed when I asked about their parents’ war service as they had few details. Some had contacted me in the hope that I would help them find out more. They knew the war not as participants or historians, but as children growing up afterwards.

At other points in an interview, our attitude and questions may work in the direction of fantasy. As Portelli puts it, ‘We want our narrators to tell us not only what they remember seeing but also how they perceived events, how they felt and dreamed about them, what meanings they take away, how they see their place in history.’ An approach like this entails the interviewer helping to create a space in which the interviewee can enter what Winnicott calls a ‘non-purposive state … a ticking over of the unintegrated personality’, in which the illusions attached to the past are brought to mind.

The oral historian’s research questions and epistemological assumptions will tend to take them in one direction or another. Our informants, however, reminisce in a transitional space between experiences in the world and fantasy, and their accounts do not belong wholly in either. Winnicott believed that the analyst should not ask the child ‘Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?’ Oral historians often ask themselves whether a testimony is accurate or ‘true’ to the historical record, but when gauging matters of fact, they might also ask how history writes itself on the psyche and how people draw on memory, culture and emotions to work on past experience. As the historian of women in the Soviet Army, Svetlana Alexievich, comments, ‘Remembering is not a passionate or dispassionate retelling of a reality that is no more, but a new birth of the past, when time goes into reverse. Above all it is creativity. As they narrate, people create.’
The oral historian participates in this productive space, drawing on the store of cultural and historical knowledge to compose his or her own illusions about the past of the interviewee. This is part of the appeal of oral history, which is often pursued with enthusiasm and a sense of mission that goes beyond the strictly professional. Part of the allure is the promise to transport us to a different time and place and be in the skin of another. Vivid pictures of the interviewees’ pasts often come to my mind during an interview: when Kathleen sees her mother accept sixpence from the hard-up valet, or Winifred has a vision of her father at the kitchen door, so do I. Listening again to an interview or reading a transcript, we consolidate these images and construct further scenes in our heads. No matter how vivid our imaginings, however, we know that they are not replicas of past times and places. More than once I have been pulled out of a reverie about the interviewee’s childhood to see the elderly person in front of me struggle to get up from their chair and disentangle themselves from the lapel mic. Visions of the past fill the imaginations of both the interviewee and the historian, composed from experience and the ‘cultural pool’ of images and narratives about the past.

The Afterlives interviews have made me think about how the oral historian’s situation of coming after might relate to the children’s sense of coming after, as both parties work with phenomena that are before their time yet are sometimes experienced as if they were in the present. It is not just our interviewees who construct illusions about the past, the historian does too: we seek to reanimate the past and make it intelligible to the present while knowing all the time that history is only in our heads. Below I will describe four ways in which I have sought to capture a sense of the total situation of the oral history interview as it weaves between past experience and imaginative reconstruction.

## Places and things

My interviews took place in the homes of the interviewees, where they were sometimes only just managing to live independently. Even now, a century after the war, its effects could sometimes be seen in the location of the house. Winifred Spray was living just
outside Oxford where she had brought up her three children. Her mother, she said, gesturing towards the bottom of the garden, had lived just over there. The local council allocated her a house on the estate that backed onto Winifred’s house, and there was a connecting gate between the two properties. The arrangement reflected the sense of obligation and responsibility that she – and the local council – had felt towards the elderly war widow living on her own.

Harriet Pollock’s two daughters sat with me throughout her interview, two generations of war-bereaved daughters. Both Harriet’s father and her husband had died from war-related health conditions. She had lived close to her mother in Middlesbrough, as had her daughters. Harriet had a bed in each of their houses and would go from one to the other. The north-east is characterised by strong matriarchal relationships, as Elizabeth Roberts showed, but in Harriet’s case the absence of husbands and fathers had also brought mothers and daughters close. Housing histories, then, could reveal the effects of the war across generations and the century.

Figure 1.3 Harriet Pollock and her daughters. Author’s own. All rights reserved.
The war heritage in homes was also revealing. A pair of shell cases were on display in the front room of Marie-Anne Careless’s house on the Welsh border. They had been engraved by an English soldier billeted at her grandparents’ farm in Hazebrouck in northern France and depicted her mother and her mother’s cousin, both of whom were engaged to British soldiers. The cousin’s fiancé was later killed, but she never married and continued to wear the engagement ring. In the early 1920s, Marie-Anne’s parents settled in Bertincourt, the scene of the 1918 Spring Offensive, where her father worked as head gardener in the local war cemetery.

During the Second World War, Marie-Anne’s father was imprisoned outside Paris, and she and her mother moved into a tiny flat in Paris. The family returned to Bertincourt at the end of the war to find that most of their furniture and household possessions had been taken. The shell cases had survived, however, and were now on display in the front window of Marie-Anne’s house on the Welsh border, where she lived with her British husband. Highly polished, they were symbols of the relationships between British soldiers and French families that had defined her family’s history through the twentieth century and two world wars. Yet despite their importance, Marie-Anne did not romanticise them. I emailed her later to ask whether the soldier who had crafted the shell cases had been the fiancé of Marie-Anne’s aunt or mother. She replied that although this might make for a nice story, she did not know who the artist was. Sometimes it is the interviewee rather than the interviewer who moors the account in actuality.

I changed my approach to the interviews as I began to realise the significance of mementoes of the war and childhood, asking people in advance if they had any objects they wished to show me, and looking over them in the second half of the interview. I kept the recorder on, but there are only snatches of narrative in the transcript – it is a record of what was said in passing as we pored over photographs, trench art, medals, mementoes, official documents and letters. I became interested in the histories of these objects after the war: when did the descendant acquire them, and when had they been brought down from the loft and passed to grandchildren for school projects on the war? Were they usually on display, or had they been retrieved from a suitcase or cardboard box in anticipation of my arrival?
Difficulties in understanding

Misunderstandings, resistance to questions, the forgetting or mis-hearing of what the interviewee has said and problems with the recording equipment can be instructive, although, as Valerie Yow notes, they tend to produce an immediate impulse to forget them. The difficulties experienced by an interviewee can communicate themselves in such a way that they trouble the interviewer’s competence. Early in the project, I interviewed an eighty-seven-year-old man who I shall call Mr Grey, who had served in the Navy in the Second World War. This was my second interview that day and I arrived slightly late, feeling tired. I struggled to keep the interview on track during the first hour and a half, as Grey talked at length and in a rather detached way about the village where he had grown up. We broke for afternoon tea, and Grey then began a detailed account of joining the Navy in the Second World War. I had a sense of the interview circling around and found it difficult to follow his train of thought. ‘Where is he going with the interview?’ I wondered. He described being aboard a Merchant Navy boat bound for the French coast where they had been sent to inspect landing facilities and realising that they had approached the wrong beach. He began to weep, but I could not fathom why, as there was, he said, ‘nothing’ on this beach. They checked their bearings, and eventually landed on Omaha beach. It was not the empty beach that Grey was upset about, but the corpses stacked up on the sand at Omaha beach from the landing the previous day. Breaking into tears again, he explained that at that moment, he saw how life could be taken away ‘just like that’, and he clicked his fingers. He had not told anyone about it for forty years – not even his uncle, who had worked with battle-stressed soldiers – until he travelled to the battlefields with his wife in the mid-1980s.

My interview with Mr Grey shows how the emotions attached to past experiences can be re-animated in an interview, and that the interviewer’s reactions can repeat aspects of the problems the interviewee experiences. On getting home, I realised to my dismay and intense embarrassment that I had failed to turn the recorder back on after tea. Discomfited by Mr Grey’s difficulties in getting to the point – and sensing, perhaps, that his story might be about to lead somewhere difficult – I had enacted his feeling, not just that he
might not be able to explain what happened to him, or that people
did not want to hear his story, but that his story was unbearable and
unlistenable to. Neither of us, at that moment, was able to sustain
the interview as a transitional space.

Traumatic experiences can place exceptional emotional demands
on the interviewer and are particularly likely to lead to mistakes,
mishearings and suppression, in the process, exposing aspects of
the emotional communication between interviewer and interviewee
that are normally hidden. Even a trifling misunderstanding, how-
ever, can tell us something about the subjectivity of the child grow-
ing up in the war’s aftermath. Ray Burgin grew up in the remote
village of Thurgoland in South Yorkshire where his father, blinded
in 1917, ran a poultry farm. As he described his childhood, Ray
often switched between the first and third person, and I sometimes
found it difficult to follow who he was talking about:

RB: He was … found his way around the farm all right. And I remem-
ber when I went to school, in the local school, he would walk
along the lane, sort of meet me coming home, sort of as it was
getting dark in the winter time. I don’t think I was, you know, too
pleased about doing that, but it was only a sort of straight lane …
MR: You mean you weren’t pleased about him doing that?
RB: Yes. I wasn’t pleased about me being, you know, out there alone!
MR: Okay.
RB: It was dark…. So he did that. But … if he walked anywhere else,
it was always with my mother, basically. When he got … moved
down to the South Coast, they walked quite a lot.
MR: And how would he walk … would he be holding … she would
hold his arm?
RB: Yes, you would hold his arm. If you come to a step, you warn
him. But otherwise, he just walked along.

Burgin switches perspective here, beginning with an account of his
father’s capabilities, then recalling a memory of himself walking
down the ‘straight lane’ at dusk. The blind veteran who could ‘walk
alone’ was considered the epitome of the war hero, and perhaps this
is in the back of Burgin’s mind, but what emerges is his childhood
fear of being alone in the dark, a fear which his blind father had
perhaps tried to assuage by meeting him. There was no electric-
ity at the farm in Thurgoland, only paraffin lights and then Calor
gas lighting, so the winter evenings at home were also spent in the gloom. My confusion listening to Burgin, I realised, was a pointer to the double subjectivity he had experienced as a child, anxious about the unsighted world that his father inhabited, but encouraged from an early age to assist him (‘You just hold his arm’). Burgin had gone on to become an electrical engineer and designer of fluorescent lights, an interesting choice for a man whose memories of childhood were marked by darkness.

Moments in which the interviewee resists a question or comment can reveal the differences between the emotional codes of the mid-twentieth century and those of today. Jefferey Flower told me that during the first bombing raid on Bristol in November 1940, he watched his father, who did not usually drink, finish off half a bottle of whisky: ‘it must be terrible, I mean, the bombs were dropping around like nobody’s business, and we were just there in the house … we didn’t have no shelters at that time, no arrangements made’. Earlier in the interview, Jefferey had told me that his father was ‘the only survivor’ in his section after a shell burst over their trench on Christmas Day 1915. Thinking of that, I commented that the bombing raid ‘must have been quite […] disturbing to him’. Jefferey assented at first but on second thought he was not comfortable with my interpretation: ‘Yeah, I think so. He didn’t show it. You know, he wasn’t saying, “Oh dear!” or anything like that. I mean when war was declared, he said, “Here we go again!”’ Jefferey went on to describe one of the last raids of the blitz when an incendiary bomb landed on the roof of their house and his father fell through the rafters in the loft trying to retrieve it: ‘But, I mean, to approach a flaring incendiary bomb, you know, that showed he had experience! [laughs]’

Casting my mind back to his story about the whisky, I was more explicit: ‘this is someone who’s had some bad things happen to him before, and it’s coming back again?’ ‘No. No’, he said, ‘I think I was just telling tales! [laughs]’. It is not clear to me what Jefferey meant by this, whether he felt bad about mentioning his dead father’s anxieties behind his back, or whether he was suggesting in a teasing way that I should not take his story seriously as he had made it up. Either way, the comment reveals Jefferey’s resistance to my speculation that the bombing had brought back memories of the First World War. He responded with a counter-narrative that positioned
his father within the norms of what Jessica Hammett calls the ‘useful masculinity’ of the civil defence worker and veteran, whose familiarity with combat was a source of sound judgement and calmness under fire.\textsuperscript{51} As Jefferey explained, ‘he’d had war experience, he’d had bomb experience, grenade throwing and all the rest of it … He wasn’t scared of picking up a flaming bomb … he was more scared of his house burning down than possibly getting hurt.’

This exchange reveals a generational tension between the understandings of war and masculinity that Jefferey inhabited as a young boy in the war and those of the historian of war today. Jefferey recognises that my questions position his father as a victim, and he responds by trying to convince me otherwise. Fleeting thought it is, the push and pull between interviewer and interviewee reveals emotional worlds in tension, one associated with the two wars, which values endurance, the other with the psychological culture of confession and victimhood in the early twenty-first century. Clients in psychoanalysis, remarks Winnicott, have contrary impulses: they willingly subject themselves to its pressure to uncover their deepest thoughts and feelings, but also want to remain hidden. Jefferey Flower’s reaction is an instance of the desire to avoid his memories being fixed by the interviewer’s interpretations.\textsuperscript{52}

Voices

In ‘The Listening Guide’, Carol Gilligan, Renee Spencer, Katherine Weinberg and Tatiana Bertsch establish a methodology for discerning the ‘invisible inner world’ of an interviewee through attention to voice. Voice, they argue, provides the ‘footprint of the psyche, bearing the marks of the body, that person’s history, of culture in the form of language, and the myriad ways in which human society and history shape the voice’.\textsuperscript{53} Their approach involves listening for repeated metaphors and images that indicate the plot of the story, constructing ‘I’ poems based on key words repeated by the interviewee and detecting the ‘contrapuntal’ voices, often in tension, that may be detected in the course of the interview.

In this study, focused as it was on vertical relationships, I found that attention to voice provided a sensitive register of feelings about parents and how the interviewees had internalised parental
authority and norms. Describing the excitement of the Blitz as a twelve-year-old child, John Frost paused, then said he had done ‘two really bad things’. He had taken home an unexploded incendiary bomb that fell in the woods in Kingsdown, Kent, where he had been evacuated with his cousin, but panicked when he woke up the next morning: ‘I thought, “Dad’ll kill me if he sees this” … [laughs], so I put it in my coat, and as I was walking to the bus stop, I threw it over somebody’s garden, front garden.’ Here the internal voice of conscience and authority, Freud’s super-ego, takes the persona of John’s father.

John went on to remark in a serious tone that ‘I mean, the house is still there’, as if he still half-feared that it might have been blown up. Traces of the panic he felt then surface in the interview. When I tried to put to Frost that he must have been thinking to himself, ‘Did it go off? Did someone get hurt?’, he replied quickly, ‘No, it didn’t’, as if his mind was still fixed on the potential disaster.

The voice of Winifred Spray’s mother can be detected as she describes what it was like for mother and daughter to live off the widow’s pension. As a child, Winfred had sometimes felt ashamed of her mother. Winifred was given ‘the best of everything … the very best quality of everything, lovely toys and … the practical things, I didn’t suffer at all. But my mother used to look a bit shabby, I used to think.’ On one occasion Winifred’s school friends passed by when Winifred was having coffee in Nottingham with her aunt, ‘who was always well-dressed’. The girls assumed the woman was Winifred’s mother: ‘I just let it pass. And forever after that, I was so afraid of them seeing me with my mother, looking so … not exactly shabby, but … she bought good clothes which had to jolly well last, and … it’s a dreadful thing to deny your own mother, isn’t it?’

There are three voices in play at this point in Winifred’s account: those of her mother, herself as a child and the elderly woman who now feels ashamed of the ‘dreadful thing’ she did. Her mother’s voice is apparent when Winifred corrects her initial description of her mother’s clothes as ‘shabby’ and endorses the value of economy (‘clothes which had to jolly well last’). That phrase, we might conjecture, is one which the young Winifred had heard her mother say, and as she utters it, the memory of her mother presents itself with such force that she immediately breaks out in self-reproof. She follows up the story with redoubled assertions of her mother’s
goodness, which seem designed to countermand the shame she had felt as a child. She ‘was a wonderful mother really’, who ‘would sacrifice her own pleasures for me, and ... as I say, never married again, never ... would never have married again, I don’t think’. Her mother’s single-minded devotion to Winifred, however, had clearly also been a cause of some difficulty for Winifred. When I asked her later in the interview if she would have liked her mother to re-marry, she said yes, and described her regret that her mother had rebuffed a suitor from next door, a man who was also widowed and had a daughter. Alongside the voice of the ninety-four-year-old, asserting what a good mother she had had, it was possible to hear the voice of a child who at times had felt ashamed of and responsible for her mother.

Repetition of words or phrases can also point to emotional states in the past that were unresolved or difficult to express. Reading through the transcript of Marion Armstrong’s interview I realised she had used the phrase ‘not deprived’ four times:

She was very very good. I was lucky. I don’t have visions of a ... a deprived childhood. We had no money, but we had everything that mattered. She was very loving, very kind, very capable, and I had good grandparents.

And I actually had a holiday every year ... I’ve had holidays at York a lot, Skipton a lot – that’s where her sisters were – as I say, don’t imagine it was a deprived childhood, it wasn’t.

She was thrilled with the ... winter coat he got [a gift to her brother for grammar school] ... it was very good quality – and this was all paid for by the British Legion, because my dad had been an Army man, you see. But as I say, don’t think of it as a deprived childhood, it wasn’t. We had everything that matters.

It wasn’t a deprived childhood at all. He met us from school every day. He had a sweet in his pocket for me, ‘Don’t tell your mum, because she says I’ll spoil your dinner!’

Marion here measures her experience by the standards of a working-class northern childhood: she had a loving mother and father, annual holidays, good clothes and treats. There seems to be a voice telling her that she should feel grateful, and in each of these moments in the interview, her gratitude felt genuine. Yet there was a history
of bereavement in the family which leads me to consider Marion’s statements as more than a testimony of a happy childhood: by her late teens Marion had lost both her father and brother, but the family was stoic throughout.\textsuperscript{54} The repeated negative ‘\textit{not} deprived’ in Marion’s interview could be a kind of reaction formation, which in the very act of asserting what she had, expresses what she lost. Statements like these reveal the emotional situation of the sons and daughters of war disabled, growing up in a society which did not recognise them as ‘secondary’ victims.

Many such voices can be detected in an interview, and as ‘\textit{The Listening Guide}’ suggests, in identifying them, we learn much about the subjectivity of the interviewee. The voices I heard during my interviews, however, while they represent aspects of the selfhood of the person being interviewed, were often evocations of actual people, mothers and fathers in particular. Animated by the invitation to remember, the interviewees gave renditions of characters and relationships from childhood. Winifred’s remark about clothes lasting, for example, felt almost like ventriloquism. At the same time, voices form only part of the communication with an interviewer, who on occasion may be being invited to hear and experience something different from what the words on their own assert.\textsuperscript{55}

\section*{Motivations}

Voices, then, need to be heard within the overall situation of the interview and that includes the interviewee’s reasons for putting themselves forward as a participant. It is commonly assumed in psychoanalysis that the analysand has an unconscious project into which they will try to draw the analyst. As Betty Joseph remarks, ‘Much of our understanding of the transference comes through our understanding of how our patients act on us to feel things for many varied reasons; how they try to draw us into their defensive systems.’\textsuperscript{56} Oral historians think at length about what they want to achieve in their interviews, and what kinds of approach and questions will best facilitate their aims, but in a parallel vein to the clinician, we might also ask about the motives of the interviewee and the kinds of projects which they seek to enlist us in, conscious and unconscious.
This is a question I needed to think about from the start of the project, when over one hundred people got in touch in response to an appeal for descendants published in local newspapers across the UK. I was astonished – and overwhelmed – by the response, and spent the next few weeks ploughing through emails and letters and answering phone calls and phone messages. People sent me written recollections of their childhoods and their parents’ lives, photographs and military records.

In addition to the reasons people got in touch, I have tried to think about how they wished to make use of the interview. When Kathleen Skin passed the letter from the Ministry of Pensions to me, for example, I was unsure what to do. She had only just recovered her composure and having been passed the letter, I felt a pressure to do something with it. What was going on here? I was, I think, responding to Kathleen’s wish that the Ministry of Pensions be called to account for submitting an unwell man to constant reviews. As the interview is an aural record, and the letter, being a written text, offers no proof, I offer to read it aloud. In so doing, I commit her testimony to the record.

Winnicott writes that creativity occurs when the individual contributes to the store of common culture, and when they ‘have somewhere to put’ what they find. The oral historian might be thought of as an agent in this process, offering the prospect of a home for memories composed from experience and the ‘cultural pool’ of publicly circulating heritage of the past. The second generation understands that their experience of having lived amidst the aftermath of the First World War will soon be lost, and that historians will then possess the monopoly on historical understanding. As their historian, I ask myself: how do they wish to make use of me in navigating between the evanescent past of ‘communicative’ family memory and the enduring forms of ‘cultural’ memory of the First World War? What do they want to get on the record before they pass?

I have tried to describe here what I learned during my interviews with the sons and daughters of those who witnessed the First World War firsthand. I did not set out to adopt an experiential method. In the early interviews, I did not think to ask people to show me their material heritage of war, and my journal notes were as much
an aide-memoir of their stories as my experience of the interviews. I did not envisage listening to the recordings to renew my memory of the encounters but found this valuable because it picked up clues about context – tones of voice and shifts in emotional states, the ‘extraneous’ noise of people getting up and down, the presence of others in the house, the voices from the past that echoed in interviews. I was certainly aware of misunderstandings and my lapses of professional competence, and it took some deliberation before it was possible to glean their significance as evidence of the situation of the second generation, mediating between the war’s eyewitnesses and the historian.

An approach like this is not without its problems. Reflecting on the methods of documentation used by psychoanalysts, Donald Spence describes the degradation of meaning that occurs in the transition from the clinical encounter to the written case study, likening the former to a rain forest and the latter to a mud field. The analyst’s ‘on-site observations’ are subjective and impermanent: the resulting case studies are often written up long after the event and are based on a diminished memory of the sessions. Notes and even recordings are poor substitutes, amenable to ‘retrospective falsification’ and the forgetting of embarrassing moments or gut reactions that do not fit conventional understandings. The result, says Spence, is a tendency to confirm existing theoretical preconceptions: ‘Only by looking in great detail at the actual session can we displace our comfortable assumptions about how psychoanalysis is practised and find out what actually happens and how a given session was understood by both parties’, he concludes.

An experiential method in oral history faces some of the same issues. It too is subject to the historian’s reconstruction of the event, and a flattening out of the encounter. Referentiality to the interviewer’s personal experience may make it difficult for another person to assess the interview. The relative brevity of the encounter may limit the oral historian’s capacity to test their interpretations through experience, and to establish what motivates the interviewee to create the illusions they do.

The attempt to account for the context as comprehensively as we can, however, is a counterweight to the tendency in oral history, and in qualitative research more generally, to treat the enduring artefacts – the audio recording and the transcript – as self-contained...
entities. A study of voice that does not find a place for the person who speaks, or a narrative methodology that disembodies the narrator, is impoverished. Studies in which the researcher delegates the interviewing or relies on previous interviews (the so-called ‘secondary use’ increasingly promoted by funding councils) must do without direct personal experience of the interview, and this tends to increase the reliance on text. Attention to the interview relationship provides more than supporting evidence ‘off the record’ but is crucial to understanding how aspects of the past of the interviewee appear in the present. Pausing over mistakes and technical glitches, listening again and using the transcript to re-imagine the encounter help to mitigate the ‘smoothing tendency’ that occurs as the relationship becomes a record and, ultimately, part of a work of history. As Portelli remarks, the value of oral history lies in the evidence it gives of the ‘creative imagination’ of the interviewee. That evidence, however, is not wholly contained within the stories the narrator tells, but inheres in everything that happens in the interview, a creative relation in which the ‘oral’ is just part.

Notes

2 The historian of women in the Soviet Army, Svetlana Alexievich, was born in 1948 and grew up in a rural Russian village. She describes the sensibility of the second generation growing up after the Second World War: ‘We didn’t know a world without war; the world of war was the only one familiar to us, and the people of war were the only people we knew.’ S. Alexievich, The Unwomanly Face of War (London: Penguin, 2017), xii.
3 Many thanks to Louise Willmot and Gilly Carr for their responses.


8 Clifford, ‘Families after the Holocaust’, 45.


Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 118.


38 Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 76. Yow observes how the wish to be eloquent and to impress the interviewer may lead the interviewee to embellish. ‘What Can Oral Historians Learn from Psychotherapists?’, 35.
40 Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 60, 64.
41 Alexievich, *Unwomanly Face of War*, xv.
42 Yow describes the ‘deep impression’ that an interview can make on the interviewer: ‘the words so deep they last a lifetime’. ‘What Can Oral Historians Learn from Psychotherapists?’ 39–40. For me the impression is visual as much as aural. I hold vivid memories of people and places long after the interview and continue to imagine the events and people from the past that the interviewee describes.
44 It was not only daughters who took on responsibilities like these as the war generation aged. After his wife died, David Smith’s father came to live with David and his family. The grandchildren learned to clear their toys away and keep doors closed so Granddad would not trip over. Interview with David Smith, 10 January 2013.
Dominick LaCapra comments of historians interviewing Holocaust survivors that: ‘His or her manifest implication in an affectively charged relationship to the survivor or witness and the special, stressful demands this relationship places upon inquiry may have more general implications for historical research, especially with respect to highly sensitive, emotionally laden, and evaluatively significant issues.’ ‘Holocaust Testimonies: Attending to the Victim’s Voice’, in D. LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2001), 87.


See Introduction.

Cartwright describes the gaps between what the interviewee says and how the interviewer feels about the communication. ‘Psychoanalytic Research Interview’, 227.


Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 117.


‘It is probably the lack of context’, Spence remarks, which accounts for ‘why recorded segments of sessions often seem dull, pointless and boring to a degree that we rarely experience in an actual session’. D. Spence, ‘Rain Forest or Mud Field?’, International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 79 (1998), 643.

Spence, ‘Rain Forest or Mud Field?’, 644–5. Ironically, perhaps, Spence recommends the methods of history from below to clinicians since those who practise it ‘can almost always count on being surprised by the actual fabric of specific happenings’ (645).
