

*Remembering and Becoming: Oral History in Aotearoa New Zealand.*

Edited by Anna Green and Megan Hutching.

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Anyone who has conducted an oral history interview can attest that it is a highly personal means of conducting research. Interviewers strive to build trust and develop rapport to collect the memories and observations of their narrators. Those being interviewed share their often deeply personal stories. Strong relationships are frequently formed between the collaborators.

Each of the contributors to *Remembering and Becoming* experienced such connections. The personal accounts they collected helped them to reach beyond written sources and record the exceptional accounts of people who thought they were unexceptional. Their interviews “people” their studies and illuminate otherwise disregarded aspects of the past. This allows for challenging assumptions, re-examining prevailing narratives, and measuring the uneven effects of cultural change.

*Remembering and Becoming* presents Aotearoa New Zealand as a composite society of indigenous Māori and multiple settlers: Europeans, Pacific islanders, and South Asians migrants. Instead of shaping a singular narrative, editors Anna Green and Megan Hutching have adeptly compiled multiple viewpoints of the past from diverse contributors – historians, anthropologists, and curators. They divide these into two broad approaches: the oral transmission of knowledge and experience from one generation to the next in Māori culture and individual interviews conducted with other groups – although even these can be intergenerational, recalling grandparents and other forebears.

Contributors cover an extensive range of subjects, from farming and kitchen toil to prison of war camps, ship jumping, and sex work. Illegitimacy, children raised in care institutions, racial prejudice, fissures of class and caste, and memories of trauma, embarrassment, and pride are recounted and analysed. The deceased are also included, as in the reconstruction of the life of Miss Marion Steven (who died in 1999) through interviews with her family members, colleagues and students. Shaping their memories was a prevailing sense of place. Steven’s house, and her eccentric housekeeping, stuck in people’s minds. The interviewer, Natalie Looya, did not specifically asked about the house, but it came up naturally and unlocked many memories.

Oral history excels at revealing the stories of those whom standard histories have tended to omit. Helena Cooks offers a powerful example in her interviews with Will ‘Iloahia, a founding member of the Polynesian Panthers. He recounts the Dawn Raids of the 1970s that targeted Pacific people suspected of having overstayed their work visas, which left a legacy of hurt and shame, a painful past that continues to intrude on the present.

Interviews with immigrants offer insights into the changing social norms of Aotearoa New Zealand, examining their sense of identify within their new home. Robyn Andrews’ study of Anglo-Indians retrieved otherwise invisible or forgotten experiences. Recalling racially

discriminatory entry policies, she has identified how earlier generations sought to hide an identity now proudly embraced by their descendants.

Oral history can also offer powerful authority, as demonstrated by Māori participation in the Treaty of Waitangi claim process. Margaret Kawharu's interviewees recounted the agreement to permit construction of a train line through Māori land in Kakanui in exchange for free passage on the train to Auckland, a claim that the railroad later denied. The Waitangi Tribunal wanted facts, while the Māori offered oral evidence. Thirty clamant witnesses gave testimony before the tribunal, and their memories, combined with written evidence pried from the government's archives, eventually led to a settlement. As one narrator told Kawharu, "unless you own your own memory as a people, you have no functional narrative about who you are, where you are from, and you're not in a position to discuss what you want to be" (p. 39).

The personal collaborations represented in this volume offer much to ponder, both about oral history and about a multicultural society, reconstructing its past through memories to explain present inequalities and shape its future.