

Interview with Dr Linda Fleming, by Ellen Bramwell

Ellen: Erm, so Linda Fleming, first of all I was going to ask you about the current project you're working on, "Scottish Readers Remember", erm which, I understand, it's an oral history of reading. Can you talk me through that a little bit?

Linda: That's correct, yes. Well, I should be honest to begin with and say that my background is not the history of the book, my background is women's history, gender history and migration history.

Ellen: Hmm.

Linda: But, the job came up, within the Scottish Centre for the Book, at Edinburgh Napier, for this project called "Scottish Readers Remember", and I suppose what attracted me to it was the fact that it was going to be largely based on and forming an archive of oral testimony for twentieth century Scots. And because I had used oral testimonies, and indeed collected them, and been an interviewer, and had experience of interviewing elderly people, I was the right person for the job, well, at least I was deemed to be anyway. Erm, so I've become immersed in the history of the book. And this project is situated within that history, from the point of view of readers and their engagement with the printed word.

Ellen: Right.

Linda: So the history of the book as it exists and has sort of continued to evolve over the last couple of decades has mostly been concerned in the past with the production of the printed text, you know, the writing of it, the printing of it, the making of paper even, and the dissemination of it through booksellers, and so on and so forth, and not so much...

Ellen: But not the reception?

Linda: That's correct.

Ellen: Ah!

Linda: So it's a reading reception study, that's what it's termed. The approach to it that I've taken has been to look at the situation of the readers themselves, and to place them at the centre of this rather than the text. So it's the engagement of the readers with the text rather than the text and the readers who come to... it's a subtle difference, I know, but within the history of the book that's a different approach I think, so what we've been doing is looking at not so much what people have read but how they've come to that reading.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: And how they remember it. [laugh]

Ellen: Oh, interesting! I have to ask then, by 'situation of the reader', do you mean their kind of social situation?

Linda: Indeed, yes, uh-huh.

Ellen: Right, okay. So have you interviewed quite a cross-section of Scottish society?

Linda: I've tried to do that, I mean you can never go out, I don't think, this is not a sociological study, I haven't gone out with a quota for a number of working-class readers, middle-class readers, women readers, men readers. I think I would have painted myself into a very difficult corner if I'd done that.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: What we set out to do was to try and get up to eighty interviews.

Ellen: Right.

Linda: And that's an arbitrary number, erm, and there's a story behind that...

Ellen: [laugh] Ah right!

Linda: ...but erm up to eighty interviews with Scots from as diverse a background as possible, so taking into account gender differences, class differences, cultural differences. And I think we

fairly well managed to do that. There's a wee bit of imbalance in that we have slightly more women.

Ellen: Right. I have to say that's probably not surprising in this kind of study.

Linda: Not at all. Er, not at all surprising, we knew women live older, er live to be older, rather. Erm, and also the likelihood is that women read more.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: Women also tend to be in the sorts of places where we've recruited interviewees for this project, more commonly, and those places are libraries and book-groups.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: Erm, so we knew we would likely get more women, and that's turned out to be the case.

Ellen: Right.

Linda: But actually not to the extent perhaps that we feared. [laugh]

Ellen: Oh that's good. [laugh] That's very good. But it was it was the over-sixties that you were looking at, was it?

Linda: It was, yes, eighty interviews with people born on or before 1945, although we bent the rules occasionally...

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: ...erm for people who'd been very keen to take part, and who seemed like good er respondents, you know, interesting respondents, so we've not been totally hard and fast with that, but for the most part, most people were born before 1945...

Ellen: Right.

Linda: ...making the oldest respondent ninety-six when she was interviewed, and I think the youngest just on the 1945 mark so sort of sixty-three. With the exception of the ones who were born in the early fifties, and I think there's two of them.

Ellen: Okay, but I think with any project it's the same though, you have to just be a little bit flexible, and erm, go with where the research kind of takes you, I don't know if you'd agree with that, or...?

Linda: Well absolutely, yes. Uh-huh, I think sometimes it's too good to resist.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: If someone says, "oh I would like to take part", you know, you'd be foolish to say no. I think as well, I mean my view of oral testimony is that it, although you can direct it towards a specific end, you can have a specific agenda, in this case to look at the reading histories of 20th century Scots, those oral histories will be useful for other things. And it's impossible for me to predict how they might be useful to other types of historians or other types of scholars in different fields, erm, linguistics for example! [laugh]

Ellen: Yeah. I was about to mention linguistics because I understand that some of the recordings have been given to the SCOTS corpus for use?

Linda: That's correct, uh-huh.

Ellen: Yeah, which is fantastic, so again linguists will be analysing them [laugh] for things which you never thought about at the time, I'm sure.

Linda: Nor could I have thought about, I mean, although the connection is sort of obvious because the interviews that have been used by SCOTS corpus are interviews with overseas Scots, that is, Scots who've emigrated...

Ellen: Yeah, erm.

Linda: ...so their voices are very interesting, erm you know, even for a non-linguist like me. But I couldn't have predicted that.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: That's serendipity, I think, and sort of proves my point that somebody somewhere in the future, and after all that is the purpose of this, will find these interviews useful...

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: ...even if not to look at the reading experiences specifically.

Ellen: Mmhm. And erm, I was going to ask you about your interviews with the diaspora, actually, New Zealand and Canada, from what I understand?

Linda: Yes, uh-huh.

Ellen: So, how did you find, how did they differ from your interviews with the Scottish Scots [laugh], as such?

Linda: They differed in that, obviously for these ones - I should explain first of all that the way that we've gone about talking to people about their reading is to go by the time-honoured route, and that is to follow their life course.

Ellen: Right.

Linda: So these are life-course interviews which have the implicit theme of engagement with texts. So to begin with I always talk to people about their life, their childhood, growing up, the kind of books they read, where they went to school, and so on and so forth. Erm, so for the people overseas, I also had to build in to that life-course interview ways for them to tell me about why they emigrated, and what that experience was like, why they made the choice that they did about the place of settlement and what that experience was like, and take it from there, because their lives have been different, if you like, from the usual trajectory, if you like, of people who lived in Scotland, because they made that momentous decision, if you like, to settle somewhere else. So they have a sort of wider remit, and from the point of view of reading experience, of course, what we were interested in was cultural transference...

Ellen: Right.

Linda: ...through the reading experience. Do people who move abroad continue to engage with reading in the same ways that people in Scotland do, with the same reading matter? Do they take an idea of themselves as a reader, as a literate person, away with them?

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: Is that embroiled somehow or other in their national identity, and how does that transfer to another location? And it's very clear from the wider literature on emigration for Scots that literacy and the notion of being intellectually engaged is part of the Scottish national identity, so it's sort of writ large when you take it away from Scotland and look at it in diaspora. Erm, so that's what we were interested in. So around that area has to be some kind of understanding of them as an emigrant to another place.

Ellen: And talking of them as an emigrant, and talking about national identity as you just said, do they still see themselves as Scots? I know this is slightly off the subject [laugh] but perhaps is something that came up?

Linda: Well I'm just newly back from Canada, so I haven't really had time to sort of mull over, if you like, the differences between the interviews I did in New Zealand and the interviews that I did in North America. But on the surface of things I would say there is a very big difference between the two. I think there's much more of a, mm, I think it's been more important for people in New Zealand to keep a connection with Scotland alive. And I think that's maybe, I'm being very tentative here, because their physical connection to Scotland is so much more disengaged, if you like.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: Erm, some of the people I interviewed indeed had never been back to Scotland.

Ellen: Right? And these are fairly elderly people, presumably?

Linda: Yes. Very elderly, some of them in their eighties, so having never been back or seldom been back, their connection to their country is through, you know, less tangible things...

Ellen: Like literature perhaps, or?

Linda: ...like literature. Yes. [laugh] Whereas Canadians, partly due to, you know, the easier travelling distance, I think partly also due to the fact that you're looking at a very affluent, often very affluent community of Scots in North America, so there's a lot of greater ease of travelling

backwards and forwards. And I think probably there are more connections in other media too, television, film, that kind of thing...

Ellen: Right.

Linda: ...between North America and the UK, although again that's tentative. You see a different expression of Scottish identity there.

Ellen: Mmhm. Coming back to Scotland then, obviously, you interviewed a cross-section of people, and quite a wide range of people, specifically which communities were you looking at, or was it just generally a spread all across Scotland, or was there people in particular places, or?

Linda: No, again as I said, we tried to address diversity, and having come from a background in migration history, I mean I know [laugh] just how diluted the Scots are, the Scottish population are.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: And we're a deeply urban people also, but we're an urban people who carry with us the legacy of the rural, if you like, it's still a very live issue, even in generations of Scots who've lived, you know, many many years in the city, a long time.

Ellen: Although yeah, I'd say, in the Central Belt we're a very urban people, but then there's quite a divide almost, between say the Highlands and the Central Belt.

Linda: Yeah, uh-huh. I think even the urban people carry a memory somehow, if you like, of where their families came from, and often that would have been a much more rural part of the city, of the country, rather. So we tried to address that by, yes, interviewing people in the Central Belt...

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: ...for the most part, but also taking ourselves out and trying to engage with people who were living in different parts of the country. So I went to Shetland for example. If I got the opportunity to go out into rural parts of Fife, I went [laugh] and another interviewer on the project did some in Barra.

Ellen: Right, so you got a real spread then?

Linda: So we tried to get a spread, I mean, I wouldn't say it's statistically representational [laugh] of the Scottish population, but it does represent diversity.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: And obviously in the case of reading, how people actually physically get their hands on books differs very much in 1930s' Shetland from 1930s' central Glasgow.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: So we can look at that, we can look at just how easy it was to get your hands on the latest thriller, if you like, [laugh]...

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: ...if you live in a remote part of Shetland.

Ellen: Because I was going to say, I read a conference abstract about some of your work in the Shetland Isles, and that was about the kind of oral traditions alongside the actual reading of text, and I was quite interested in that idea, so are these kind of things coming through the project as well?

Linda: Well yes indeed, of course, I mean you cannot divorce the history of the Shetlands from the narratives that exist there, the oral narratives that exist about it and about its people. And that looms very large in the public consciousness of Shetlanders. But the extraordinary and ironic thing about Shetlanders over the last couple of centuries is that they were a very literate people...

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: ...erm, and more or less always had some sort of connection to the printed word for as long as it has existed in modern Scotland, and went to lengths, you know, to get their hands on

newspapers and journals and the latest fiction and so on and so forth. So that is very interesting...

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: ...from the point of view of the history of the book in modern Scotland, and so it is not an urban phenomenon, if you like, it's very much also a phenomenon of remote places, and in fact you could say it was even more important for Shetlanders to be able to do that, and to be able to read, and to have access to that. From the point of view of the connections between an oral tradition and a tradition of reading, one of the things we were interested in was the persistence of people reading aloud...

Ellen: Right.

Linda: ...in communities such as Shetland where newspapers came late, they would perhaps have to be shared, they would perhaps make the rounds if you like, of different communities, because they were fewer in number, in terms of the newspapers themselves, and yes we did find that, that there was a persistence of someone reading aloud the Herald [laugh], the Glasgow Herald as it then was, to sort of assembled families. And that's a practical measure.

Ellen: And also, if you're looking at different parts of Scotland, were you looking specifically at literature in English, in Standard English, or were there Scots, Gaelic, was any of this coming in to it?

Linda: Well Gaelic obviously loomed large for the Western Isles. I didn't do those interviews, and we've still to properly digest them in fact. The Shetland, local Shetland dialect of course, is an issue, and that certainly did come up in interviews about the lack of availability...

Ellen: Right.

Linda: ...of that kind of reading material until relatively recently. I would say the literature in Scots, it comes up incidentally, if that's part of that person's experience of reading, and it matters to them and they want to mention it.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: But I don't usually introduce it.

Ellen: Because you don't want to influence them in any way?

Linda: Erm, no. I think this project has been a huge learning experience for me, as an interviewer, because it's a very very difficult thing [laugh] to do, to interview people about their reading. Erm, and the reason, well if I were to ask you, can you remember what you read last year in terms of fiction off the top of your head? [laugh]

Ellen: [laugh] Yeah, that's a difficult one!

Linda: You can't, I can't, I can't. I would have to sit down and think about it. I'd have to have some sort of cues. Erm, but the problem I think with this subject is you can't really deliver cues in terms of texts...

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: ...because of the way we view reading and how it forms a part of ourselves, you know? It's still one of the easiest ways of making short-hand sort of assumptions about people.

Ellen: Right.

Linda: And I certainly don't want to give the idea that I'm imposing a sort of test of intellectual [laugh] stamina upon people or trying to measure their intellectual worth, if you like.

Ellen: Yeah, absolutely.

Linda: And I think unfortunately, because there is a hierarchy, a cultural hierarchy embroiled in what we read and how we read it...

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: ...even if it's an unspoken one, people perceive that, so one of the things I have to do in interviews is dispose of that...

Ellen: Right.

Linda: ...so that people don't feel that they're being subjected to an examination, if you like, of their reading tastes. So I don't give people, by and large, cues in terms of texts, I don't ask them "Have you read...?"

Ellen: Absolutely. Because "Have you read Jane Austen?" is quite different from "Have you read Westerns?" or...

Linda: Exactly. I mean, how do you make, how can I encourage people to tell me that they do in fact read "Heat" magazine, which, I'm quite happy to admit, so do I! [laugh]

Ellen: [laugh] So do I, on occasions!

Linda: It's one of the best parts of going to the hairdressers.

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: Erm, it's a secret pleasure, isn't it, reading "Heat" magazine? But ordinarily when someone from a University comes to interview you, you're maybe not going to be happy.

Ellen: Yeah, so it's the cultural baggage, that even comes from the fact that you're from the University, you're a researcher, you're doing an academic project.

Linda: That's right, uh-huh. And it's as simple as, well often people say to me "Oh, I don't know what I can tell you that will be of interest to you," [laugh] "because I'm sure you'll want to know about things that are just way above my head."

Ellen: It's really interesting, in the interviews that I do for my research project, I get exactly the same thing, before the tape recorder goes on, it's always "Well, you know, I'm not an expert on this, I don't really...", it's like, "No, I just want to ask you about the names of your family, you are an expert on this", but yeah, people don't realise that.

Linda: Yes. You're quite right, in some way or other, you have to communicate to people that they have the expertise, that they in fact are doing something for you. On this project I always write to people...

Ellen: Oh right. Mmhm.

Linda: ...an old-fashioned letter. [laugh] Even if they use email, and increasingly a lot of older people do use email, I always write to them, and one of the things that I say is, "you're making a contribution". I know it sounds a bit pompous, but "you're making a contribution to Scottish history". It's true.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: And the idea that I want to get across is that *you* are doing *me* a favour...

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: ...not the other way round, you know? We may feel a bit uncomfortable about it, but people do get nervous...

Ellen: Yes.

Linda: ...about the idea of someone from a University coming to visit them, and I have to try and find a means to dispose of any kind of "awe" [laugh] that might be inspired by that. I think as you can see I'm not awesome!

Ellen: [laugh] Well me neither!

Linda: [laugh] A small woman, and not threatening, and I think that's important, you know, we shouldn't actually dispose of that notion.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: My physical presence as an interviewer matters for how-, my approach to the interview and my personality has an influence on how the whole thing emerges.

Ellen: Yeah, because you can get completely different results. So how do you go about that then, how do you go about making people feel kind of comfortable or not overawed, or...?

Linda: Well I'll sound like some kind of cheap saleswoman, without wishing to sound like that, I think you do actually have to work quite hard at being personable.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: Erm, and I know some people in academic communities may find that rather shocking. But who is going to let someone into their house, who is going to welcome someone into their house, as I am, often, and talk with them for several hours, and trust that person with aspects of your life if you don't make a connection with them if you don't find that person empathetic in some way?

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: And I'm not there to make friends with people, although often I do really like the people that I interview...

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: I'm not there to make friends with them, but I am there to be an unthreatening presence.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: I am there to try and engage with them as people and bring out the best of them as interviewees, and that's my agenda, and it's an explicit one. That's the way it is! [laugh] That's the sell, if you like, it's not a hard one, it's not a hard sell but I have to be the kind of person that people will feel comfortable with...

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: ...particularly having them in their own home, and that's usually where I do interviews and the idea behind that is to try and give some sense of empowerment to the person that I'm engaged with, because it's on their territory.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: And with their props, in the case of this project, that prop may be a bookcase, for example...

Ellen: Oh absolutely.

Linda: ...or a notebook, or some old diary where reading was noted down, so, it's much much easier to come to people in that way. But as I said, you know, I'm going into their territory, it's me who has to do the work, being the kind of person they want to talk to.

Ellen: Right. And do you meet them beforehand, or is this the first time that you've met them in many cases?

Linda: Erm, some of the interviewees who have been very elderly, I've been quite happy to go along and visit to begin with.

Ellen: Right, yeah.

Linda: Usually, I'll take my recorder along and see how it goes. For very elderly people, although they usually protest strongly, I do find that there is a finite amount of time you can spend asking them to remember the past, because it's tiring.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: It's very tiring. So quite often I will go along and just have a chat with them first of all, stay for maybe an hour, make another arrangement and come back later.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: So in some cases I have been to visit people as much as four times, which is quite time-consuming on a project like this where there's a large number of interviews, but it does make for better interviews if we split them up.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: I think when you've been doing a lot of interviews over a period of time, you do get to know, there always comes a point where you can see people struggling to remember and not really having the energy...

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: ...and that's time to say, "I think we stop!" [laugh]

Ellen: Yes. But yeah, interesting, I find something similar, some of the people, not even just my elderly ones, sometimes there comes a point where you do see people drifting a little bit, and you kind of say "will I just come back?", and sometimes it's easier, so...

Linda: Yeah, I think, possibly it has, I mean it's partly to do with age, I think, but also as you say it may happen with younger people, and I think that's because you then go into your own thoughts...

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: ...and become distracted by that, you're maybe remembering something else that you aren't happy to talk about but it's there are the back of your mind, whatever you've been talking about has sparked off something else. Again, embroiled in the ethics of this is that sometimes interviews like this can be very personal, and they can actually, unwittingly, stumble upon upsetting things for people, so again I think if you see that happening it's time to turn the recorder off.

Ellen: Right. And do people open up to you with these things that are slightly upsetting or do you find that that depends on...?

Linda: I've, yes, I've had people get upset, and I'm not a therapist, so I usually take a hard line on this, I turn it off, I turn the recorder off, I'm not there to, er... I mean, I go into people's lives and then I walk away.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: I think it's important for me, for my own integrity as an interviewer, to walk away in the knowledge that I've not unwittingly - wittingly and knowingly caused harm.

Ellen: Yes.

Linda: So no, I turn it off, interesting though it may be.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: And of course often once I've turned it off, people will tell me what what has upset them. And... I don't know, it's a moot point, isn't it? Sometimes these things would make for really really fascinating insights, but...

Ellen: Yeah, yeah, ethically, you know, ethically it's not comfortable.

Linda: [laugh] I don't think they should be there, ethically.

Ellen: It's not maybe fair, so...

Linda: No, it's not fair. And I think it probably does us no good in the long term, you know, as a professional body who conduct interviews, to go there, we'll leave that to the tabloid press. [laugh]

Ellen: [laugh] No, absolutely. Actually, going on to ethics then, I suppose going on to the practicalities of it a little bit, how do you get informed consent from people, presumably you get informed consent, and you get some kind of demographic information from them, this kind of thing?

Linda: Erm, well because I'm doing life-course interviews, I don't need to collect a written account of where they were born, that always comes up in the interview. There are some aspects of people's lives of course that are not relevant to me, because the person themselves during interview doesn't talk about them...

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: ...er, divorces for example is a common one. If I were to sit down at the very beginning with a form collecting biographical data, of course I would get that, but I don't think that's really relevant for this particular project. I suppose arguably it may be relevant for researchers in the future who come into the archive, but I'm sorry...

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: [laugh]

Linda: ...I'm not doing it, I'm not doing it because I'm there to talk to people, or talk with people about their lives and their reading experiences and that's the agenda I set out for them. I try to stick to that, I'm not there to probe the quiet corners that they'd rather not talk about, so no, I don't collect biographical data. The release form that I ask people to sign has very much to do and is targeted at how that interview may be used by the archive.

Ellen: Right. Mmhm.

Linda: The other pieces of paperwork that go with interviews may have a short biography on them but that's as far as it goes. And that will be collected from what they actually choose to tell me.

Ellen: Yeah. Right, so you basically collect what's relevant to your particular piece of research?

Linda: Yes.

Ellen: And is that something you'd recommend to students who might be listening?

Linda: I think I would recommend that absolutely because there is no end to what you *might* like to ask people.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: And if you ever come out of an interview thinking you asked absolutely everything you possibly could have, then you've probably not done a very good job! [laugh]

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: Because you never can, I mean if you go in with a very set agenda, one, you would probably be there for a long time, to actually work your way through that, because people always tell you other stuff and you'd have to be constantly going back to your questionnaire, if you like, interjecting and artificially getting them to talk about what you want. So it would take a long time, it probably wouldn't make for a very good oral history, I think, because it would be more about you, and what you want, [laugh] what you want to know. I think there's only so far you can go down that road...

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: ...of sticking to a set questionnaire, a formal questionnaire, if you like. The other problem I think you will get with that is yes-no answers.

Ellen: Mm, and very short and confused presumably?

Linda: And very short interviews, I mean if you, if you go in expecting to get answers to specific questions, and if people aren't able to answer them, they will say yes or no. And also they'll switch off to you as an interviewer.

Ellen: Yeah. And again it may seem more kind of academic, school-like, kind of people-being-tested really, yeah.

Linda: A test, yes, mmhm.

Ellen: So, I'm taking from this that you don't have structured interviews then?

Linda: Erm, we have a semi-structured questionnaire...

Ellen: Right. [laugh]

Linda: ...and, do you know, I don't even bother taking it any more. [laugh] It's important I think to have it because if you're going to interview someone you should know what you would like to find out.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: You should have an ideal of that. And in order to do that you probably have to sit down and think your way through, what are the questions that might elicit information about the areas that you're interested in, and it has to be as broad as that.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: It can't be any more specific. So for me, if I'm doing life-course interviews, of course, they always begin with the very obvious ones, "Where were you born?", "What was your family like?", "Your brothers and sisters?", and so on and so forth. And then built in to that will be sub-questions about class and culture...

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: ...obviously formulated in a way that engages with that person's life experience, so that semi-structured questionnaire then has to be structured in your head for the person that you're actually sitting down to talk with.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: So for example if I go somewhere and the person tells me they were born in Pollokshields, and had one brother and one sister, and a maid in the house...

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: ...they were middle class. [laugh] So you can then change your questions into a more structured format for that person, you know, about where they went to school and whatnot, and, you know, what may have been important to them, more or less than say someone who came from the Gorbals.

Ellen: Right, yeah, absolutely.

Linda: Although, again, I mean I've just admitted there, obviously I've got certain...

Ellen: Preconceptions?

Linda: ...preconceptions.

Ellen: Of course, everybody does, but I think it's recognising that you do, and working with them.

Linda: [laugh] Of course, you know, because, obviously I'm immersed in the history of twentieth-century Scotland, I've read about what may have been normal for the middle classes, what may have been normal for the working classes, so when I go to speak to someone I may have those ideas confirmed, or I may have them confounded.

Ellen: Mmhm. [laugh]

Linda: Quite often the latter! [laugh] But you have to help people out, obviously, you have to have some questions for them to answer them, to allow them to answer, to talk generally around things so the semi-structured questionnaire I think works...

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: ...and you don't have to be slavish about it, you don't have to get through every single item on that list, but it's a guide, if you like, to these general areas of historical interest.

Ellen: Yeah. Yeah, and it allows them to go on certain tangents, or yeah, bring their own ideas to the table, which is quite nice.

Linda: That's right, and it allows you as well to think through just what it is that you're hoping to uncover by talking to this particular person. So as preparation, as preparation it's quite important I think for anyone planning an interview to sit down and try and work out something like that. But then, to do that with the knowledge that when you actually encounter the person, there may be other questions that come along that actually will elicit more interesting stuff and that in fact the worst case scenario is that none of it will be relevant.

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: [laugh] That's never happened, I might say, but there's always something that's relevant, but a lot of it could turn out to be not relevant.

Ellen: Yeah, so flexibility is obviously important in this trade! [laugh]

Linda: [laugh]

Ellen: Okay, and erm I was going to ask about oral history a little more generally, actually, because students that'll be listening to this will mainly be doing linguistics courses. Erm, so what seems to you to be the main difference between oral and text-based histories, other than the obvious? [laugh] What kind of different information can you elicit really, from using these different methods?

Linda: Oh, [laugh] uh-huh. This is the huge question, isn't it? It simply has not gone away. It's a bit more respectable in history now to consider what uses oral testimony may be put to.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: I suppose people working in oral history would have hoped that the big question mark over how reliable oral testimony is, the ways that it can be used, and the relevance that it has for particular areas of historical experience, people working in that area would hope that that question mark has gone away, but I don't think that it quite has, unfortunately. I think it's still playing out there somewhere...

Ellen: Right.

Linda: ... amongst the sort of historical establishment, who still look askance, if you like, at personal testimony as evidence. Sometimes, if I'm absolutely honest, I think people working in this area haven't always done themselves any favours. In trying to right that wrong they've been too anxious to prove the case that personal testimony is valid evidence.

Ellen: Right.

Linda: I have always taken the view that it's evidence like any other.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: There are question marks over it. There are question marks over all historical evidence.

Ellen: Absolutely.

Linda: And everything is about interpretation, everything. And as I say, I think some people in this field have perhaps muddied the waters sometimes by being too keen to theorise in this area, and doing so sort of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Ellen: Right. [laugh]

Linda: [laugh] If we, you know, carry on navel-gazing about how people remember, then what they actually say...

Ellen: It gets lost. Mm.

Linda: ... becomes less relevant. And I suppose this is embroiled in bigger issues at the moment in historical discourse about the importance of narrative as against theory, social theory. So I think oral testimony is a good-, or the use of it is actually a good case in point for uncovering that whole bigger picture, if you like, of narrative against theory, and the balance that needs to be struck between the two.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: And I think there's very much, [laugh] and I know I'm sitting on the fence here, a place for finding that balance between the two, because theories, if you like, are also narratives, of a type.

Ellen: [laugh] And they're all to do with interpretation, again, so... [laugh]

Linda: [laugh] Indeed, uh-huh, indeed.

Ellen: But yeah, I know that one of your specialisms is in women's history, and your PhD was in gender and immigration history, is, actually [laugh] I was going to say is this better represented through oral history rather than traditional approaches, but then I don't know if that's a very good question now that I've articulated it.

Linda: No no, it is a good question, I think, because this is one of the areas that women's history has been exemplary...

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: ...if you like, and in the vanguard of all these new approaches to oral testimony, because the notion existed, I suppose, in the past, when women's history got off the ground, that one of the difficulties of uncovering the experience of women in the past is that the evidence had not been saved, it didn't exist, and that may have been a bit of a chimera, really. At the time I think really the best way of examining or uncovering women's past is to look at sources, wherever they are...

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: ...and look at them in a different way. But in the beginning certainly, people working in this area struggled, or felt that they struggled to find good sources that provided clear evidence about the lives of women, and so personal testimony, of course, as a new type of historical- or a new area of historical research was opened up, often by women, so I think the two have gone hand in hand in a way...

Ellen: Right.

Linda: ...and had a closer relationship than other types of history. So... and a lot of the foremost proponents of oral testimony have been women, women's historians, so there is a clear relationship there. And now I've lost the thread of what I was saying, Ellen, remind me!

Ellen: [laugh] That's quite alright, we were talking about women's history and whether that was better represented through oral history than through traditional sources, through traditional approaches.

Linda: Well I think I probably did answer that.

Ellen: Yes, yes, absolutely.

Linda: No, I don't think so, I don't think any source is off-limits for any area of history.

Ellen: Right.

Linda: I think personal testimony may be as useful to men's, history of masculinity, if you like, and men's history, as distinct from just gender-free history...

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: [laugh] ...which was very much text-based.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: So we take personal testimony into the future for all areas of historical enquiry, and I don't think anything is off-limits, really.

Ellen: Mm. So it's another source to be used alongside everything else that's possible to get?

Linda: The only, and the only limit on it is temporal, obviously, we can only really deal with the recent past.

Ellen: Well yeah, absolutely, for obvious reasons!

Linda: [laugh] Yes.

Ellen: Although, saying that, I know that your PhD was on the Jewish community in Glasgow from 1880 to 1950, were you able to interview people going back far enough, or...?

Linda: No.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: No, this is one of those areas where, you know, criticism has been made about personal testimony, I have to take that on the chin because the people I interviewed were for the most part second generation.

Ellen: Right.

Linda: Erm, but the area of experience I was interested in was the place of gender in the formation of a community.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: So, actually second-generation people were ideal from my point of view because they are always in migration histories the pivotal generation, if you like, for how things evolve in terms of the relationship with a specific ethnicity, and the relationship with the reception community, so second-generation was perfect for me, but I wanted to know about the experiences of those second-generation immigrants' parents...

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: ...in other words, the first generation. So yes, those memories were not personal. They were second-hand.

Ellen: But the thing is, that's the only way you can access them, so...

Linda: It is.

Ellen: I mean, it's better to access them than just leave it and never access them at all, I think.

Linda: Indeed, uh-huh, and the texts that would be available in that area are actually no different from, [laugh] because they're second-hand too, you know, memoir, biography, and so on and so forth. And I suppose if you wanted to extend that argument you would have to say well actually the histories written about it are third-hand, you know, being an amalgam of all those things. None of us ever engage in historical writing without some engagement or some influence being placed upon us by all of those secondary texts, you know? I think oral history

may be one of these areas where historians have to open up and they have to be actually honest about what they do and not pretend what they do is in the least bit scientific.

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: [laugh]

Ellen: Oh I don't know, I think you can probably say the same things for certain areas, for linguistics as well, there are similar arguments going on I think. [laugh] So you've worked on different oral history projects then, you've worked on this and you've worked on your PhD, sorry, and you've worked on the "Scottish Readers Remember". How have you found the experience of doing these really very different projects, but both using recordings, both using interviews?

Linda: Hm, well I suppose the first thing to admit is that I've got better at it.

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: [laugh] Practice, if it doesn't make perfect, it does at least make for a smoother ride, if you like...

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: ...although listening back to some of the early interviews I did, they're not so different really.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: They're not so different, because I'm not so different, I suppose. I haven't changed and the way I talk with people hasn't changed. I think what has changed is that I'm much more aware of myself actually.

Ellen: Right.

Linda: I'm aware of the role that I play in this whole process.

Ellen: So the effect of your personality on the responses and on the interview?

Linda: Erm, I think, do you know, I don't know how to answer that but...

Ellen: Sorry! There have been reams written on this in linguistics so, no you don't have to.

Linda: [laugh] You've stumped me. [laugh] I don't know how to... It's a difficult one to answer, that, because I think, although I'm very well aware of my presence there, I have to be cognisant of the effect that it has.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: We still do, in history, want to try and be self-effacing, we want to try at least to take ourselves out of the equation, as much as possible.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: And I think that's what I'm better at doing.

Ellen: Right.

Linda: I'm a better listener than I used to be, and I'm better at coping with silences in interviews, whereas in the beginning I would have wanted to jump in there and say something. It's a natural thing to do in a conversation with someone, you want to help them out when they stop talking. Whereas now I'm better at waiting. I'm more patient.

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: And I think that is because I've just done so many.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: I've done so many, I know that sooner or later that person will come back to themselves, and I'm better able to gauge the points when I do need to step in and help them out.

Ellen: Right. And does the person-, well the interviewee's personality, does that impact on the interview as well? Because we talked about kind of your personality coming into it a little.

Linda: This is really dodgy, this one, isn't it, you know, people that you don't like. I have to say, hand on heart, I've met very few, but that's maybe because I'm in and out of their lives quite honestly, erm...

Ellen: Oh, sorry, I didn't specifically mean people that you didn't like, I just mean in general, you get people who are quite shy, you get people who are very forward, I mean there's...

Linda: [laugh] Er, well maybe again that's the sort of thing that I've got better at making judgements about how to approach people...

Ellen: Right.

Linda: ...and yes, a lot of women in particular actually are very shy, and reluctant.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: Although increasingly, I must say, people are not fazed by tape recorders. That's another thing I've noticed, now that you come to mention it. When I started doing this, if you brought out a tape recorder lots of people would say no, that was it, they were scared of it. But obviously in wider culture, I think people do know now, they know about placing their voice in the public domain.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: They've seen it on television, they've heard it on the radio, they know about the use of oral testimony at some level, and they're much less intimidated by recording equipment.

Ellen: Ah, right. So do you find that people speak in quite a natural way when they're being recorded in the interviews then?

Linda: Absolutely everybody eventually forgets that they're being recorded.

Ellen: Oh that's good. [laugh] Okay.

Linda: [laugh] That may be, I don't know, I cannot comment on this, the result of the talent of the interviewer, Ellen!

Ellen: Well I don't know about that. But yeah, so you find though that the speaking style is the same, it's not...?

Linda: They will stop, yes... They'll stop talking to the microphone, they'll start talking to you.

Ellen: Yeah, because again I've found, maybe the first five, ten minutes, especially if somebody doesn't know me that well, because some people I've, you know, taken some time to get to know, I'll maybe do some ethnographic work first of all. But first of all, they maybe put on their posh voice a little, [laugh] and then within five or ten minutes they're chatting away, they've forgotten it's there really.

Linda: Mmhm.

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: We all do, we all do, I can assure you. I have, almost, forgotten the microphone! [laugh] And yes, then you begin to engage with that person. So, I mean, you asked me, you know, how things have changed for me and I think, that's changed for me too. I'm less aware.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: I can actually forget about the microphone after a while. I was probably much more aware of it.

Ellen: Right.

Linda: You will have experience too of that kind of anxiety, "Is it recording?"

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: "Have I pressed the right button?" Erm, and there's still a wee bit of that for me, every time, because I have had one recording failure...

Ellen: Oh no!

Linda: ...on this project, so it can happen.

Ellen: And did you lose the entire interview in that case?

Linda: Yes, I did.

Ellen: Oh! That must be absolutely sickening!

Linda: [laugh] It is.

Ellen: Oh! [laugh]

Linda: [laugh] It is.

Ellen: So a top tip then is to check your recording equipment as you're going along?

Linda: Yes, no matter how long you've been doing this for, yes. But don't let it rule you. I think I probably did that in the beginning, I was always, sort of "is it recording, is it recording?" very anxiously looking at the gauge.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: It was an old Sony cassette recorder, which I have huge affection for now.

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: We've moved to digital voice recorders. In between times I used a Sony mini-disc recorder...

Ellen: Oh right.

Linda: ...which I never formed an affection for...

Ellen: Mhm.

Linda: ...and was very glad to get rid of. I think it was the most nerve-wracking, and the most difficult to work with, in terms of knowing that it was recording, knowing when the disc was full...

Ellen: Right.

Linda: ...knowing when the battery had lapsed.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: So yes, do check everything, check it beforehand, before you go, because another unnerving thing, that can unnerve you too, is if you get flustered over your equipment.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: And on the day that I had my recording failure, I was flustered over the equipment.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: And that's possibly why I didn't notice that the microphone was not in fact attached...

Ellen: Oh!

Linda: [laugh] ...to the recorder properly.

Ellen: Yeah. So even things like spare batteries and things like that, as well, I always find, I take that.

Linda: If you're using new equipment, as I was that day, I was using mini-discs, I hate them, and a new microphone, a brand new microphone...

Ellen: Oh...

Linda: ...which, it wasn't clipping properly into the recorder. I went into a space, and this is another thing to be aware of, because when you go into people's homes, you have to work with what's there.

Ellen: Mhm.

Linda: And it may be an imperfect space for recording, and that's hard lines, you just have got to live with it.

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: If there are ticking clocks, chiming clocks, cuckoo clocks, it's tough!

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: [laugh] They're going to be there on the recording, and I actually don't think that that's such a big problem.

Ellen: No.

Linda: But in this case I went into a home where there was an awful lot of glass, a huge wall of it in fact, big French windows. Glass is a problem, I've noticed, for recording.

Ellen: Oh right.

Linda: And glass tables, glass tables, watch out for glass tables. If you put your recording equipment on a glass table, it's likely to move over time and you'll hear it.

Ellen: Oh right?

Linda: You'll also hear people who tap on tables, again you get that, but if it's a glass table you get a vibration. Yeah, so I hate glass!

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: [laugh] I went into this house that was full of glass, so I very carefully tried to put the recorder on top of a surface, I had a folder with me and I put it on top of that, did all of these things, I plugged the new microphone in...

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: ...thought it was all going well, but because it was a very shiny surface, the recorder was moving slightly, and the connection between the recorder and the microphone wasn't quite closed.

Ellen: Oh!

Linda: It worked its way out. So I got about ten minutes of recording...

Ellen: Oh no!

Linda: ...and then it had worked its way out the mini-disc recorder, and of course, because it was only partly outside of it, the internal microphone didn't kick in.

Ellen: Oh!

Linda: So there was no external microphone, no internal microphone, no sound. [laugh]

Ellen: So basically work with equipment that you like and you know and you're happy with [laugh] I think is probably the lesson there! Oh no. Yeah.

Linda: A very difficult-, a really upsetting experience but one that you've just got to put behind you.

Ellen: And now that's done, that'll never happen again, I'm sure!

Linda: [laugh] And that didn't happen at the beginning, I mean, that happened kind of a way in to this project. You would think I'd be past-, and there I am doing it too, I'm banging the table. [laugh]

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: Don't try to stop people making these gesticulations, it usually just makes them uneasy and nervous.

Ellen: Mmhm. Yeah. But yeah, certainly the digital, the kind of DAT recorders and things, that's what I've been using recently and I find that really really good, really useful, just to be able to plug it straight into the computer, put it straight over, so... ,

Linda: The difficulty with them of course is that they don't give the best sound.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: But I think there's a balance to be struck here, you know, between, I think the sort of anxiety that used to exist, you know, when oral history was a sort of branch of sociological enquiry, the anxiety that used to exist over getting very clear, crystal clear sound...

Ellen: Right.

Linda: ...isn't really there any more, there are so many other things to worry about, about the preservation, for example, of the archive, and in the digital age really we can afford to be a bit more relaxed about the quality of the sound. Digital recordings do compress.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: I think again we just have to live with that...

Ellen: Yeah.

Linda: ...and hope that in the future, people working in sound engineering will be able to do something about it.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: They already can, of course, but preservation's the big issue at the moment, because of changes in recording media. Mini-discs, for example, I mean they're a good example of just how ephemeral these can be, because they are obsolete.

Ellen: Mm.

Linda: A great many archives are on mini-disc. [laugh]

Ellen: Mm. Okay, and I have one last question, which is really quite relevant to the project and the website that this is going to be on, but what kind of skills do students develop through making these kind of recordings, would you say?

Linda: Students?

Ellen: Er, students who are going to be doing this kind of thing in the future.

Linda: Right. Well I think that this is a really good area to work in if you want to demonstrate both your knowledge and your ingenuity. [laugh]

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: And your ability to relate all that to a specific area of where theory meets practice, if you like, so as a piece of qualitative research, there's probably no better example to use, because you can engage with theory, you can engage with methodology, there's a very great amount of material out there on oral history methodology and changes to it. You can actually bring your own ideas to the table.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: And you can, as I said, demonstrate your own ingenuity in putting all of that together and writing it up as a unique piece of research. And every oral history will be a unique piece of research, and that's the beauty of it.

Ellen: [laugh] Fantastic. And I mean, at an even more basic level, well obviously I don't do oral history as such, but through onomastic research, I go through people's lives and that kind of thing, what I find it has taught me is how to interact with a massive, a really wide variety of people, and how to kind of interview people, how to kind of present myself which I've found really useful in kind of everyday life, and maybe in the workplace this might also be...

Linda: Oh yes, in terms of transferable skills also, I should have mentioned that, there's no better area to be working in either, because, well, you know, the archetypal notion of people in a university is that they do live in cloud-cuckoo land, you know, they're in that ivory tower, they don't actually have to engage with normal life, or the community out there, that university is a community of itself, and of course this is one of the areas where you're absolutely dependent on your ability to engage forth of the university and outwith areas of interest that are only of interest to people in universities.

Ellen: [laugh]

Linda: [laugh] So, yeah, it's a great place to be.

Ellen: Mmhm.

Linda: It's the best of both worlds, I think.

Ellen: Well absolutely, sounding incredibly valuable. And well I think we should probably end it there, but, Linda, thank you so much for your time.

Linda: No, thank you, I've enjoyed it very much.