

National Life Stories - British Library, United Kingdom

Robert Perks¹

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Figure 1: *Within* (2001) © Glenys Barton [Photographed by Anne Hardy. In [National Life Stories](#) website]

The proposal for [National Life Stories](#) was first developed by Paul Thompson and Asa Briggs in 1985-6. The project for a 'National Life Story Collection' had a number of distinct features; it was to be a 'life story' project intending to collect full autobiographical material including both written autobiographies as well as recorded 'oral history'. And it was intended to 'record first-hand experiences of as wide a cross-section of present-day society as possible' combining recordings with both elites (who at that time had been largely neglected by British oral historians) and a cross-section of ordinary men and women. Initial endowment funding for NLS came from Paul Thompson's gift of a Henry Moore sculpture, which was sold in 1987, as well as donations from the Wingate Foundation and the Nuffield Foundation.

NLS gained the early support of Dr Christopher Roads, Director of the National Sound Archive (1983 - 1992) and in return for archiving interviews, NLS was given a free office in the British Library National Sound Archive (then at Exhibition Road, London), materials and technical support. This close relationship between NLS and the British Library has endured. The appointment of a Curator in Oral History, whose

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role would be to work closely with the National Life Story Collection, was made in late 1988 (Dr Rob Perks, who also took over from Thompson as NLS Director in 1995).

The first NLS projects established (all in 1988) were 'City Lives', 'The Living Memory of the Jewish Community' and 'Leaders of National Life'. 'Artists' Lives', established in 1990 by Cathy Courtney, is the longest running continuous project, with more than 400 interviews. In 2005 National Life Stories was adopted as a trading name, by which time Mary Stewart had also joined the team as NLS Deputy Director. Founding Chair Asa Briggs was succeeded by Martyn Goff, Nicholas Goodison and, most recently, Jenny Abramsky.

All NLS projects have followed the in-depth life story approach, starting with family background and childhood, and moving on to education, work and leisure and the community. NLS interviews normally average between 8 to 15 hours in length. The collection of written autobiographies was abandoned in the early 1990s. Audio has remained the main format but video interviews were carried out as part of a major 'Oral History of British Science'.

From its modest beginnings NLS has grown significantly in ambition and scope. Working as an integral part of the British Library's Oral History Department, it has raised more than £5m of funding and helped to create one of the largest oral history collections in the world, some 70,000 recordings, of which around 3,000 are long in-depth biographical interviews created by NLS. NLS has enriched the huge breadth of subject coverage across the British Library's oral history collections: encompassing the oil and steel industries, the food sector, Royal Mail, the utilities, science and technology, computing, aerospace, the crafts, art and photography, architecture and design, horticulture, charitable activity, banking and finance, Jewish Holocaust experience, publishing and authorship, theatre and fashion design, and the press.

All of these interviews are accessioned and catalogued, and where funding has allowed there are full transcripts. All have detailed content summaries and growing numbers of full interviews are available online via the web (over 2,000 so far). Oral history web page views totalled 1,217,224 in 2019: the 'Voices of the Holocaust' learning resource was the most viewed. NLS has also run an ever-expanding training programme in conjunction with the Oral History Society: in 2019 there were 122 courses with 1200 attendees.

A dedicated team of interviewers, archivists, cataloguers, and other staff have expanded the collections and maintained NLS's high standards, supported by NLS's unpaid trustees and advisors. There have been many challenges along the way, not least fundraising for everything we do, but I believe we have created something of lasting historical value which reflects how Britain has changed within living memory.

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