*Viewpoint*

# The Regional Ethnology of Scotland Project: Archive and Research in Partnership

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In 2011 the European Ethnological Research Centre (EERC), a research centre based within Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, embarked upon the first of a series of regional ethnological studies seeking to better understand life and society across Scotland, the Regional Ethnology of Scotland Project (RESP). There are two strands to this project: the Spoken Word and the Written Word (https://www.regionalethnologyscotland.llc.ed.ac.uk). This Viewpoint focuses on the Spoken Word strand and considers the increasing centrality of archiving as the Project has progressed.

The approach taken in the conduct of the Spoken Word strand has been to undertake new recorded audio fieldwork (as well as incorporating donated existing recorded audio) on life and society in the region being covered. The first region selected was Dumfries & Galloway. It is important to make clear that – central to the ethos of the RESP which seeks meaningful community participation – it is members of the community who, trained by the EERC, undertake this new fieldwork. In addition, the EERC does not instruct the volunteer interviewers who to speak to nor what they should discuss. This is to allow space for conversations to be held which are of interest to those participating, with the EERC taking the view that matters that are of interest to the individuals are likely to be important and therefore revealing. Using this approach, it was hoped that an unmediated impression of local experience would emerge.

Public events were held to encourage participation by as many local people as possible, as both collectors and contributors. It has been found that many of those who came to those events were older, often retired members of the community. The reason for this often being simply that retired people have more free time and a tendency to be more reflective: they have witnessed change over several decades and readily appreciate the importance of recording their experiences of that change. While the RESP Collection consists largely of interviewees who are over fifty, many recordings of children and young people have also been made and these form an important part of the resource.

As part of ongoing outreach work, in November 2013, Alison Burgess, the local history officer at the Ewart Library, Dumfries and the EERC local co-ordinator, arranged for the Project to use an empty shop space in Midsteeple, Dumfries. A simple exhibition made up of display boards of photographs was installed by the EERC to encourage passers-by to come in, meet the RESP team and hear about the work of the Project.

This event led to increased engagement and participation in Dumfries with a number of additional volunteer fieldworkers becoming involved and others coming forward to be interviewed. By training local volunteers, the RESP provided opportunities for individuals within the community to learn new skills. Retired nurse, Margaret Smith came along to one of the early open sessions held in Dumfries & Galloway. She was keen to be involved, but initially not confident about becoming a fieldworker. Despite this initial reticence, between 2014 and 2017 Margaret made forty-two recordings with forty-four interviewees, mainly with people who had been involved in nursing or local industries. She subsequently went on to speak about her experience at a local Fieldworker Gathering and presented her research at a conference held in Stornoway in 2019. The part that volunteer fieldworkers play in the RESP is central and evidenced on the Project website, which contains an account of each fieldworker and of their involvement with the Project:

> When I read the details of the Study, I jumped at the chance to be involved. This would, I hoped, give me an opportunity to [record] people who had worked in the hospitals in the area [which were] now closed, to have their stories recorded. It was such a pleasure and privilege to be involved in the Project; to seek out willing participants to have their stories recorded. For me, having lived all my life in the area, it was a big surprise, to learn something new at each interview.
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> Margaret Smith, 2019[1]

While Margaret's interviews had focused on individuals reflecting back on their working life, other interviewers concentrated on the experiences of younger contributors. In 2014–15, retired teacher Flora Burns, who was involved with the campaign to save Moat Brae from demolition, made a series of eight recordings with thirteen interviewees, aged between eight and eighty-six. Three of the interviews were with pairs of schoolchildren, focusing on the school day and family connections to Moat Brae.[2] In March 2014 she interviewed Sophie Smith and Derry Broadfoot, both aged eight at the time. This recording captures a moment in time for the children and allows us to explore how language and dialect is expressed as well as consider the day-to-day experiences of their cultural and social lives, such as the games they played during school break-times. Sophie

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[1]   https://edin.ac/3f80EvO.

[2]   Moat Brae House is an Edwardian building on George Street, Dumfries that was at times a private dwelling and at other times a hospital. In 2009 a group formed to rescue the building from dilapidation. It now serves as a museum and the National Centre for Children's Literature and Storytelling. See https://www.moatbrae.org.

shared this lovely anecdote from her granny, who had worked in Moat Brae when it was a hospital:

S:      I would not like to go down in the basement when it was a hospital not with all the dead bodies.
D:      No way. Oh!
FB:     Who told you there was dead bodies down there?
S:      Well since my nana worked at Moat Brae, when it was a hospital my mum, my nana told her stories about her working in Moat Brae an the basement, the whole basement was used for all the dead bodies. A wouldn't like to go down any more down there.
FB:     So which room did she say they would keep the dead bodies?
S:      The basement. I think it was in the butler room.
FB:     In the butler's pantry?
S:      Yea. I think that's where they keep all of them.

Since 2018, the main focus of activity for RESP work has been in East Lothian where the EERC works in partnership with the John Gray Centre, Haddington with Ruth Fyffe and Fran Woodward, Archivists. As well as original fieldwork, the RESP has undertaken the digitisation and cataloguing of 102 recordings held by Musselburgh Museum. This collection, which dates from the mid-1980s extends the time span of consultable first person, spoken word material and provides access to recordings which might otherwise have remained out of reach.

The oral history interview and making of fieldwork recordings have continually developed to meet the changes in the technology and media used. Recording devices have become increasingly affordable and portable. At the same time, the value of the recorded first-person account has also undergone something of a transformation. Often dismissed as 'unreliable' or 'anecdotal' and, in some way, not real history, oral testimonies are now fully appreciated as valuable sources which provide direct accounts of individual experience from a wide range of contributors, adding authenticity and detail to broader constructs of time or place.

For social scientist Verusca Calabria, the oral history interview is a way of democratising the research methodology, enabling researchers to 'lower our gaze and widen our horizons to gain not so much *the truth* but an understanding of the meanings of what is said'.[3] Calabria's work on place attachment to institutional environments seeks to have a direct impact on policy decisions being made about future mental healthcare provision. More widely, oral history recordings can play a valuable role in supporting and illuminating aspects of health and well-being. A RESP interview with Peter Aitchison illustrates this point.[4] Peter was himself in the preliminary stages of Alzheimer's disease when this interview was recorded, in Dunbar in July 2019. He had also nursed his wife, Elma, through the disease. His interview, a little over an hour long, is conducted by

[3]     From a talk given at the 2022 Oral History Society conference, Home. https://www.mentalhealthcarememories.co.uk.
[4]     https://edin.ac/3NJKioW.

a volunteer fieldworker with the assistance of a friend who supported Peter during the interview by gently prompting and reassuring him. As well as sharing unique details about the local area, Peter speaks about living with dementia, as both a carer and a patient. The interview is informative and could be said to be empowering. In the interview Peter can share his unique knowledge with us and live outside his diagnosis, for a while at least. Perhaps the interview can share valuable information in other ways too – to help carers or professionals understand the experience of living with dementia better; or for linguists or clinicians exploring how language and brain function are changed by dementia.

Ethnology can be described as a win–win endeavour for everyone involved. The interviewer gets to find out about their research interest in detail and from someone with first-hand experience, while the interviewee has a platform for sharing what they know to be important with a willing listener. At a very basic level, we all love to talk, and we all love to be listened to. As the interview with Peter demonstrates, giving people a voice in an oral history archive like the RESP has many benefits: from the moment of creation and the coming together to share information, to passing on knowledge that might otherwise be lost from the consultable record and informing our understanding of our shared cultural lives in an engaging and direct way.

Although the RESP aims to gather information at a local level, it does not mean that it is only collecting local information. One of the oldest RESP archive recordings was donated by Ian Blacklock, who, in 1975, interviewed his then hundred-year-old granny who told him about standing close to Queen Victoria at the opening of the Manchester ship canal in 1894.[5] In a much more recent interview, Grace Brown spoke about her involvement with the audacious plan to bring Neil Armstrong to Langholm shortly after he became the first person to walk on the moon.[6]

As highlighted above, the role of the volunteer fieldworkers in the successful implementation of the RESP is vital. They bring not only knowledge, enthusiasm and commitment, but they are also often the means by which we first make contact with many of our contributors. We also know from feedback that being part of the RESP has been of benefit to both fieldworkers and interviewees. As fieldworker Robert McQuistan[7] said about the experience of participation in the RESP:

> RM: Oh, well, Ah've learnt how intensely people feel about their own history, they, once they get into it and, one person says 'Oh ye know, it's taken me back and it's made me rethink and relive my past and stuff that Ah'd forgotten about has come back.'
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> MM: Yes.

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5  https://edin.ac/3NavMXC.
6  See https://edin.ac/3tNHxL4 for a blog post about this recording with Grace Brown and https://edin.ac/3KwBBNi for the interview itself.
7  DG2, see https://edin.ac/3eXg7OZ.

RM:  So, in that personal sense, it's quite powerful for them but from my point of view just the flow of a person's life, just how it developed and evolved over the years. And the changes, just the remarkable changes from five to ten years, to twenty years, just how it all piles up. And riveting, because it's personal and factual and historical, sociological, cultural, linguistic. I loved the language, the language was great, it's quite fascinating just to even, even to talk about the language with some of them, they were really quite exercised by the Scot's tongue.

MM:  Yes.

RM:  All of that, it's like a rich tapestry, it's like a tartan rather than a plain cloth.

MM:  Yes.

RM:  And you just allow that to wash over you. That's my feelings.[8]

In Dumfries and Galloway alone, approximately five hundred recordings have been created, with a similar level of participation anticipated for East Lothian. This level of engagement represents a validation of the RESP's open approach to fieldwork but also posed a challenge: how best to meaningfully make the growing number of recordings widely available in order to achieve a central objective of the RESP.

It was decided that to meet this challenge the EERC would have to seek guidance from information professionals, specifically colleagues within the University of Edinburgh Archives at the Centre for Research Collections (CRC). After initial discussion, the EERC and CRC agreed that there was great potential for using the CRC's archival expertise to help meet the EERC objective of making the RESP Collection accessible in an open and rational manner. After securing initial funding for a pilot study, work began on what would go on to become the RESP Archive Project, supporting the employment of an Archivist and an Archives Assistant. This pilot study demonstrated the viability and utility of archival input to the RESP by developing archival cataloguing using the information management application ArchivesSpace. In addition, it became apparent through the involvement of colleagues beyond the immediate RESP Archive Project team that, while the collection would be an integral part of the overall archival holdings of the University of Edinburgh, there was also scope for the development of a discreet user interface for the collection, enabling it to be explored within the collecting context. That interface is a website which now provides free access to full audio recordings as well as full transcriptions of those recordings, thereby enabling free text searching of the content (https://collections.ed.ac.uk/eerc/).

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[8]  DG14/3/1/1, Interview with Robert McQuistan by Mark Mulhern. As well as providing the fieldworkers with a formal opportunity to reflect on their experience with the Study, this was one of a series of interviews which sought to gather evidence for evaluation of the Study and collect fieldworker comments which could inform future Study practice. See also https://edin.ac/3eXg7OZ for more information about Robert McQuistan's recordings within the RESP. Between 2012 and 2014, Robert conducted seventeen interviews with fourteen interviewees.

The Cataloguing Project began in 2018, initially as a twelve-month project to convert pre-existing metadata held on an Excel spreadsheet into an ISAD(G) compliant online catalogue and to incorporate this into the University of Edinburgh's Archive Catalogue. The Centre for Research Collections at the University of Edinburgh uses ArchivesSpace and the initial task of mapping the metadata from one system to the other was relatively straightforward, and easily achievable within the initial timescale. The RESP Collection, however, is largely a digital archive and one of the guiding principles of the Project is to ensure that the collections are discoverable, open and accessible, both now and into the future. Further consideration therefore had to be given to storage, access of digital files and digital preservation needs. It became apparent early in the project that the management and access needs of the Collection would require a more complex solution than initially surmised.

ArchivesSpace, while supporting collection management requirements of the Project, did not provide a user-friendly access point to interact with and interrogate digital files. What was required was a space that would allow users to listen to WAV files containing the oral history interviews, view JPEGs of interviewer and interviewee photographs, and read PDF files of interview transcripts. All of this functionality was required to sit in one place alongside relevant catalogue metadata, while still maintaining the search ability of an online catalogue. Following consultation with the CRC Digital Library team it was agreed that this would require a separate website and a collections portal dedicated to the RESP Archive but still linked through to the ArchivesSpace catalogue. This would provide the interactive needs of a digital collection while preserving the functionality of an online catalogue. Working with the Digital Library team the Project team created a website that provides static pages for contextual information and also a fully searchable catalogue. The catalogue metadata pulls through directly from ArchivesSpace, so maintains the original hierarchy of the catalogue.

Plates 1, 2 and 3 illustrate three pages from the RESP Archive Project website (https://collections.ed.ac.uk/eerc/). Plate 1 shows a full catalogue landing page where the interview can be listened to, the images viewed and the full transcript accessed. There is also a full interview summary and relevant collections metadata. Plate 2 shows one of the static pages which provide information on how to browse and use the collection. Finally, Plate 3 is a Browse the Collections page where a drop-down list showing the Collection hierarchy can be studied.

An additional part of our duty of care to the RESP Archive is protecting the digital objects and ensuring the long-term preservation of the Collection which has been another essential part of the Project. Therefore, in addition to the development of a website for access and an online catalogue for collections management, an additional layer of functionality had to be applied. The formats used to store audio, images, video and digital documents change over time, so it was necessary to develop a strategy to mitigate these risks. As part of wider activity to develop a digital preservation programme within the CRC, the RESP Archive Project opted for an open-source system called Archivematica. A bespoke
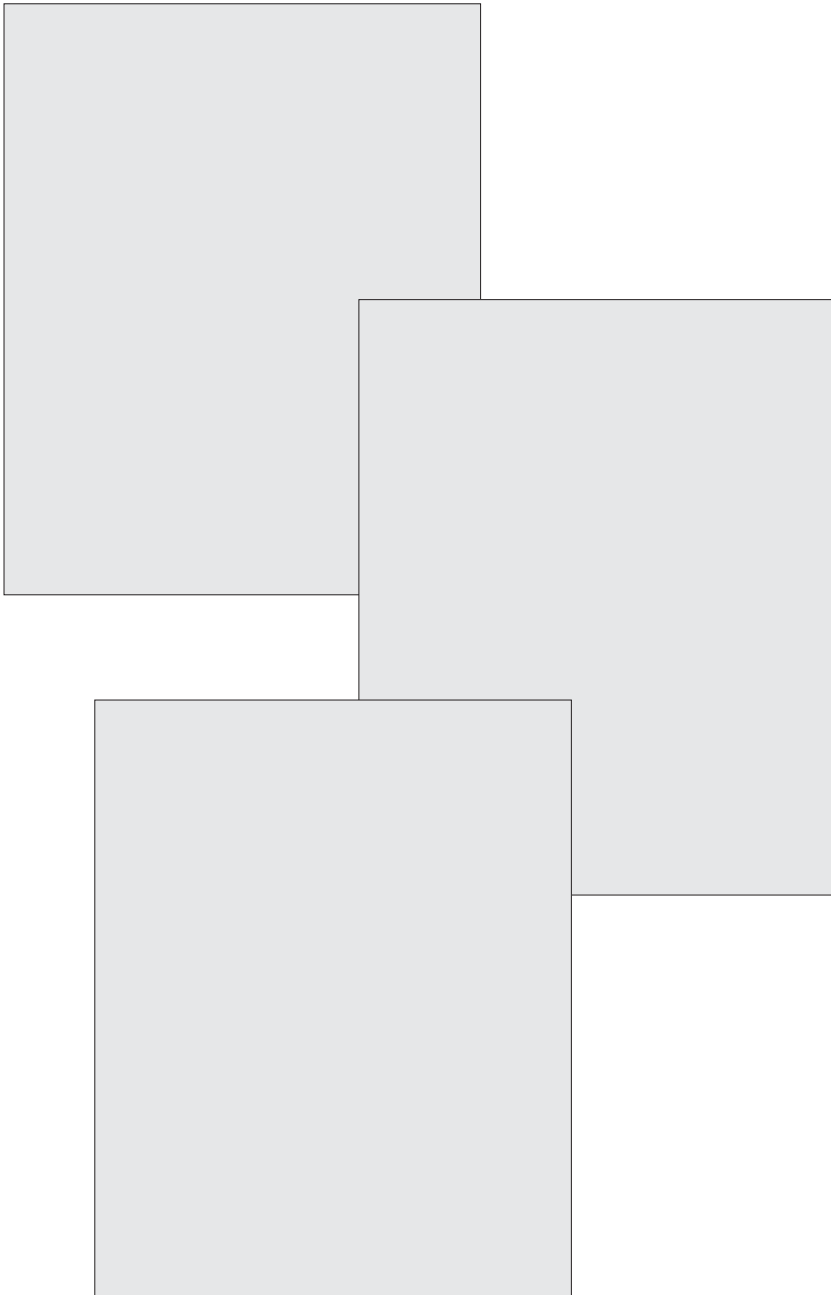
Plates 1, 2 and 3      Images taken from the RESP Archive Project website.

implementation of Archivematica specifically for the RESP materials was built by former University of Edinburgh Digital Library software developer Hrafn Malmquist. When ingested into Archivematica, the digital content is processed in a way that supports the ability of future users to open and understand it. Archivematica does this by extracting technical metadata to help archivists and users in the future understand how these files were created and how to open and interact with them. In short, the introduction of Archivematica to the overall workflow provides:

- A system that mitigates risks of obsolescence of digital objects
- Long-term storage of digital material
- Automated tools that detect damage or corruption of digital files
- New workflow to allow greater sustainability for the project in the long term

During the initial development the Project also benefited from additional expertise and input provided by the CRC's Digital Archivist, Sara Thomson. Sara has become an important part of the Project, helping us develop appropriate systems and workflow so that we have a clear workable process for future ingests of material that, in turn, will enable archivists and cataloguers with limited technical expertise to export content directly to Archivematica for processing.

Within the initial phases of the Project, we were successfully testing material via a pilot digital preservation system and had created a test user interface and Project website for this purpose. A further twelve-month funding extension was then secured which allowed the Project to develop beyond the pilot stage. Despite considerable adjustments having to be made during the lockdown of 2020, by November of that year we had successfully processed and digitally preserved a thousand digital files and were nearing the time when we could launch the Project website.

Prior to the launch of the website and release of the Collection for unrestricted use there were many ethical issues to be taken into account. With regards to the audio files in particular it was necessary to establish a robust workflow for screening, cataloguing and processing of the Collection. We have responsibility for making sure that the Collection is managed and stored for the long term, and also a duty of care not only to the interviewee but also to ensure that the resources within the Collection can be legally and ethically shared. Interviewees have entrusted the RESP with their personal stories which, on occasion, included stories they had not divulged to their own family and friends. We therefore needed to implement a robust screening process. All RESP interviews are reviewed and assessed for GDPR concerns, content summaries are created, and key words noted. As part of the screening process, we ensure that no personal details are released inappropriately and assess any content which might be regarded as grounds for potential defamation. Redactions are carried out to audio files where it is deemed appropriate with any sensitive content replaced with 'brown noise' to preserve the integrity of timings within the accompanying transcription. A redacted version of the original files is then made available on the website. The full, unredacted file is kept closed and a preservation copy is securely stored.

In any project of this kind, it is important to implement an appropriate and achievable timescale for providing access to the collection. Even with the best intentions, collections can sit uncatalogued and unavailable for years if the correct resources, processes and workflow are not part of the original project outline. The RESP Archive project workflow now allows us to be able to release an interview for online access within three months of receipt of the files.[9] A central ethos of the RESP model is that the entire Collection should be made as freely available in an easily accessible way as possible. In order to closely align with this aim all audio files and digital resources on the website are available to download under creative commons licence (Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial 4.0 International Licence).

Place and *a sense of place* is a recurring theme across the RESP Collection, and it was an ambition from the beginning of the Project to create a geographic information system to enhance the discoverability of the Collection via an interactive map. To that end, in November 2021 two Project interns, Denise Hicks and Rowan Rush-Morgan, were appointed to work on the development of a system to enhance the searchability of the RESP Archive website. The main objective of these internships was to create an interactive map to highlight and pin place names and locations which would link back to the relevant catalogue records on the website. Due to the complexities of lining up the relevant metadata between ArchivesSpace and the Project website, the task proved to be rather intricate. Despite this, the interns successfully delivered – within the six-month time frame – an interactive map which went live on the Project website in May 2022 (Plate 4). This additional function allows users to explore pinned locations on the map which link to key place names mentioned in RESP interviews. Clicking on each pin takes the user through to a list of related interviews.

The Project is now in phase three of its existence, with approximately 1,300 digital objects (audio files, video, transcriptions and photographs) available to access and investigate via the dedicated Project website. New and legacy material will continue to be added in line with EERC and RESP priorities. We will also continue to adapt our workflow to ensure sustainability of the Project and develop the website to further enhance the user experience.

The partnership work between the EERC and the CRC on the RESP Archive Project continues and now informs the engagement activity undertaken by the EERC when speaking to the communities it serves. By being able to show potential participants what happens to the source material that they may go on to create greatly enhances the ability of the EERC to boost participation. In this way the RESP Archive is now a key part of the early fieldwork process, encouraging participation and enabling participants to readily apprehend the potential value of their contribution. Far from being a process that happens at the end of a project, the RESP Archive Project is a fundamental component

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[9]    The exceptions to this are where outstanding GDPR issues make release impossible within this timescale.
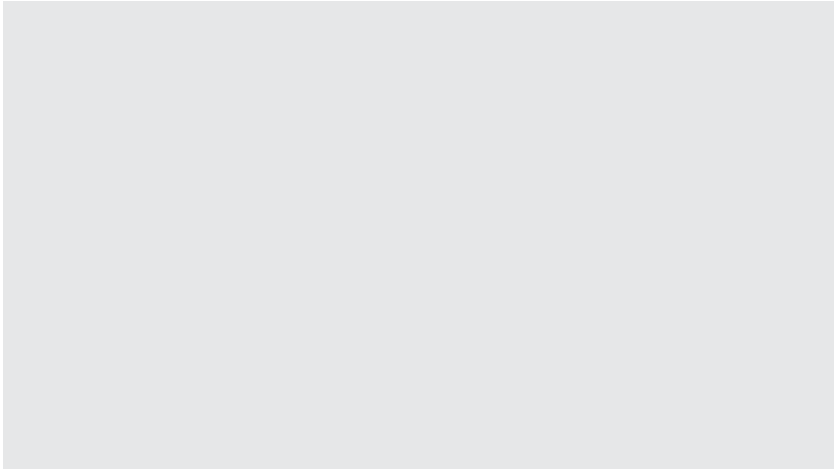
Plate 4    Image created by RESP Geo-mapping Project interns, Denise Hicks and Rowan
            Rush-Morgan.

of the creation of the material which will eventually form the Archive Collection
to the betterment of the RESP as a whole.

The partnership between a research project and a university archive service
which has been discussed here has provided many benefits. Perhaps most
meaningfully, this partnership has enabled a research collection to be open to
users on a global basis. That is, a humanities research project has obtained global
reach in its output by developing and publishing a web-based interface into the
archive of the collection of that research project. This work has been enabled
in part because the material is digital but perhaps more meaningfully because
of the close working and partnership of research and archival professionals,
sharing a view as to how best to make the material available.

The RESP recordings – made freely available through its Archive and
Project websites – provides an opportunity for users to explore life and society
in particular times and places as experienced by the interviewees. In the
ethnological fieldwork interview, it is often in the spaces in-between that you find
the most interesting information: the answers to questions we, as researchers,
would never have thought to ask. An interview with the highly respected oral
historian, Ian MacDougall (1933–2020), provides a perfect illustration of this.[10]
Talking about visiting a potential interviewee during his time with Midlothian
Council, he recalled how one woman mentioned she had been one of 'Hoggie's

[10]    Elizabeth Bryan interviewed Ian MacDougall on 22 February 2018 in the National
        Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. It is anticipated that this interview will be made
        available on the SCRAN website, https://www.scran.ac.uk. Alternatively, contact the
        Scottish Working People's Trust (http://www.swpht.org.uk/index.php).

Angels'. This was a term that Ian had not heard before. That comment sparked a curiosity that led to a full line of enquiry which eventually resulted in a book, *Hoggie's Angels: Tattie Howkers Remember*.[11] Towards the end of the interview with Ian, Elizabeth Bryan asks, 'Who should we be collecting from now?' Ian's reply is emphatic: 'Just keep going, collect everything. Work away: collating, collecting, archiving.' It is hoped that we are meeting that clarion call by bringing together fieldwork and archive in service of the creation and output of material which can enrich and illuminate our understanding of life and society across Scotland.

[11]   I. MacDougall, *Hoggie's Angels: Tattie Howkers Remember* (East Linton, 1995).