

ORAL HISTORY AND THE BIOGRAPHY OF PUBLIC FIGURES

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"Oral History and the Biography of  
Public Figures"

by David Mitchell

The genesis of the W.A.C. Bennett biography was in the spring of 1976 when I first met the ex-Premier. Half expecting to meet a tall ogre of a man I was greeted by a rather short, rotund, smiling grandfatherly figure. That was just the beginning of a long series of collapsing assumptions on my part. W.A.C. Bennett was in fact a very charming man who in person belied his stern public image. It's funny how often we expect our giants to be tall and mean. The interview had been initiated by myself with the intention of writing a retrospective article on his political career, but I soon realized a greater opportunity.

He answered all my questions as well as setting off on tangents of his own choosing. He was in control of the interview. At the end of the two hour interview, I embarrassingly ran out of tape over tea. He said, "Well my friend, perhaps we should do this again." And I agreed. During the course of almost three years, at irregular intervals, I met with him to discuss aspects of his personal history. These interviews took place in Vancouver, Victoria and Kelowna. And they covered

the gamut of his public career and often verged on monologues directed towards himself. They were lectures on the art and philosophy of "getting things done."

I conducted a total of more than 30 hours of detailed reminiscences and it was in those interviews the biography which I've written was formed. Oral history provided an invaluable biographical tool and was the literary equivalent of having a subject sit for a portrait. I believe that the long hours spent alone with Mr. Bennett have enriched the book immensely.

His own well-thought out version of the past, however, often masqueraded as a state of total recall. It was necessary to verify material, that I gained in interviews, by research in other sources and other interviews as well. Nonetheless, as is always the case when an interviewer spends enough time with his subject, the subject reveals more of himself than he knows. And it was usually in the hours spent in candid conversation, when the tape recorder was turned off, I learned the most about my subject.

Now a politician who gave no thought at all to how posterity would view him would be a rare animal indeed. Moreover the need to be elusive with his contemporaries need not apply an equal need to elude posterity. W.A.C. Bennett, who possessed an ego at least as large as any other public figure in his generation, was widely misunderstood during

the two decades in which he served as premier of British Columbia. And as a result a great deal of fictionalization grew up around him and that is what is difficult to break through. However, I believe Mr. Bennett was more forthcoming with me during his last years than he had been with journalists in his heyday. Through my interviews with him, for example, I was able to gain access to his papers in Kelowna. However, if he opened doors for me that would otherwise have remained closed, perhaps forever, he also attempted to steer me away in other directions. And it is precisely those areas that the biographer or historian has a responsibility to explore.

In order to transcend the relative limit of imagination and move into the hard country of fact, it was necessary to resort to research in all available sources. And in a way, I feel as all biographers must, I trespassed into private prohibitive areas--the private domain of a public man's life. But I also feel that the product of this research represents a more complete understanding of his life, offering more than a fugitive glimpse of his personality and placing it into a clearer historical context.

Now in addition to my interviews with Bennett, I conducted hundreds of hours of interviews with his family, friends, colleagues and political opponents. I also made great use of oral history collected by other interviewers. Most of these are available in the Sound and Moving Image Division of the P.A.B.C.

The use of oral history has resulted in a net gain for my studies. Not only did it add colour and life to the book by allowing me to use the actual words of the many leading participants in the story and by encouraging me to experiment with the literary device known as point of view, but it has been a uniquely invaluable source in itself and I think that is a very important point. Oral history became a very valuable method and probably the only one available to document W.A.C. Bennett's perso-

nal history and the secretive nature of his practice of power. Politics being a verbal environment, the former premier was not well known for writing letters or distributing memos or placing his thoughts on paper. He did much of his work on the telephone, thus, leaving gaps in the record that were hard to transcend. But by interviewing many of his colleagues I could rise above this problem of documentation.

It was through techniques of oral history I was able to explore and uncover many unknown facts about his youth--the desperate poverty of his youth and his sadly broken family that he was part of in New Brunswick. Using the same method I was able to reconstruct his young adulthood in Edmonton when many of his ideals and ambitions seemed to form.

Oral history was also valuable in documenting many previously unknown facets of the coalition government in B.C. during the 1940's, and was absolutely indispensable in chronicling the early formative years of the Social Credit movement on the West coast. I don't believe I could have gained as intimate understanding of the operation of the provincial government under Bennett's direction as Premier if I had not resorted to oral history. And this included detailed accounts of past meetings of Treasury Board, Caucus and the Legislature. I was also able to determine a much more detailed chronology than has previously been available into the infamous Sommer's affair when a Minister of the Crown went to jail. I have been able to establish that money did in fact change hands in that sordid episode. Oral history has enabled me to explore the calling of elections in B.C. and to describe in detail the running of election campaigns under the elder Bennett. I've also been able to uncover new facts about the reorganization of the Social Credit Party after the NDP victory in 1972. And also was told the real story of Bill Bennett entering politics and his rise to power. Oral history has helped me to arrive at what both biogra-

phers and historians regard to be the first qualification--knowledge of the truth.

What then are the hazards of this enterprise? One of the difficult questions revolves around the problem of verification. Is the nature of historical truth somehow altered by the circumstances in which it is come by? If we were to apply the same rigorous standards to oral history that we do to other historical sources how can we ever be certain that we have determined the final word on any subject? Unlike paper documents, "living documents" are seemingly inexhaustible. If we have interviewed one or two participants in a particular episode, do we not have an obligation to interview all the others who were involved? And even if that were possible would that lead us any closer to the truth? I believe one must at all costs avoid blind faith in oral testimony. The point I'm attempting to make here is that corroboration by oral testimony can be problematic. However, I still feel that it is worth the effort to employ the techniques of oral history, so long as the reminiscences are used in conjunction with other available sources.

The other problem I'd like to mention is one which is potentially more serious, especially for a biographer. Does personal contact with the subject of a biography help or hinder the biographer in his pursuit of the truth? Initial reaction to that might probably be in favour of contact with the subject. But is it possible that such contact might cloud the biographer's objectivity? I raise this question as a result of my own personal experience with W.A.C. Bennett. I raise it, because the end product of my work was far more sympathetic to him than I imagined it could have been when I first embarked on the project. Perhaps it was an inevitable consequence of spending many hours of conversation with a man of his redoubtable character and great charm. When pondering this question I am forced to

return to what I earlier referred to as a distinction between history and biography. If I decided to show simply what Bennett did in a context of time and place, I believe I could have done that without having had any personal contact with the man. In fact, it probably would have been a liability to have known him since it would have gotten in the way of an objective historical assessment. However, as a biographer, I wanted to do more than that--I wanted to show what Bennett was and how that led him to do what he did. Because I wanted to take that significant extra step, I feel that my personal contact with Bennett is crucial to the study. Indeed, any biographer must wish they'd had a chance to meet his subject, to have conversed with him, or to have dined with him. I'm reminded of what Boswell wrote, years after his biography of Dr. Johnson was published: "Nobody can write of the life of man but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with them." Self-evaluation tells me that my biography of W.A.C. Bennett portrays him in a more favourable light than it would have had I not used the technique of oral history. But is it not possible that a sympathetic understanding may illumine as well as distort? Surely it can produce no less an objective viewpoint than a purely negative one.

After several years of work on the book and some reflection on the methodology, I am confident that the biography has benefited from the use of oral history and portrays as real, accurate and complete a portrait of Bennett as is possible at this time. But this leads me to a quote from Vladimir Nabokov, the novelist, that, "The real story of anyone's life is a three-fold process: shaped by the teller, re-shaped by the listener, and sealed from both by the dead man's tale." Is it possible to tell the real story of a person's life? If the purpose of history is to find out how it really was, we can extend this to biography--to find out who a person

really was. A biographer must know the mask the subject wears and he must see beyond that mask. But can he be sure that his biography will represent the final word on the subject? In short, he cannot. This is especially so when one is dealing with contemporary history. For instance, I am sure that the final word on W.A.C. Bennett's era of B.C.'s history will never be written simply because we know too much about it.

Of course, there does not exist a method that will entirely illuminate and encapsulate a person's life in words. And in that sense there can be no definitive biography. However, I do think that the techniques of oral history do allow the biographer to edge closer to a deserving of that ultimate accolade. If the dead man of the tale is to conceal his real story from a prospective biographer, then he must necessarily also conceal it from all who knew him. For "living documents" have been known to talk.

### "Concluding Remarks"

by Robin Fisher

Now David said he does not want to further delve into the "long contentious and ultimately wearisome controversy" over the validity of oral history. Yet, it seems to me that historians must always be critical of their sources. So there are a couple of points that I want to make, that arise from the fact that "what is said to be so ain't necessarily so." It is certainly true, as David suggests in his paper, that I would rather like to be able to converse over dinner with Thomas Dufferin Pattullo in the course of writing my biography--although in my case to be truthful I would certainly have to avoid the temptation to keep up with [his] ability to consume scotch. But in my case as is perhaps the case for any biographer of a

politician, it would have been particularly valuable to talk to his subject about his early life. There tends perhaps, particularly in the case of politicians or prominent public individuals, to be a lack of documentation, paper documentation, on these individuals before they become prominent.

In the case of Pattullo because he achieved some prominence about the age of 24 in 1897 as a secretary to the Commissioner to the Yukon one starts to get documentary evidence when he is in his mid-twenties. But I think it is true of many public figures that we don't get much documentary evidence on their early years. Yet, of course, psychologists and psycho-historians tell us that it is these very early years that are so critical in the formation of character. And this is certainly an area in which oral history can help. Yet, at the same time, of course I know that oral historians are always aware of the question of function of human memory. But in this particular instance it seems to me it is particularly important to ask what perceptions an old person has of his early years.

In the case of Pattullo, for example, if I had been able to talk to him in his later life as a successful politician, what kind of perceptions would he have about his youthful failures? Which in Pattullo's case there were many. What kind of interpretation of the individual's young life was being presented by the subject interviewed?

Well, as David says in his paper, the advantage of oral history is that the interviewee can correct the interviewer. It seems to me, equally true, that he can mislead the oral historian and may do this without even knowing that he is doing it. This, it seems to me, is a particularly important point in the case of politicians, who perhaps have spent much of their careers concealing things or at least disseminating selective information.

It seems to me that there is another issue relating to the use of oral his-

tory that needs to be considered a little more than it has. And that is the fact that with oral history the historian is now creating the documents that are the basis of his research. With traditional documentary research the historian is acting as a kind of a conduit between the documents created by others at the time the historian is writing about, and the reader who reads whatever the historian writes. But it seems to me that with oral history the historian is playing another kind of role in addition to that that occurs in documentary research. He is playing a major role in the creation of documents upon which his writing is based, and it seems the potential for manipulating the past there, either consciously or unconsciously, is greater. Also the potential for others to check up on the process is lessened, once the subject has passed away, in the case of W.A.C. Bennett or perhaps in the case of other politicians [who] simply got fed up with being interviewed. The best that anyone can do in checking the writing of the historians who use this technique is to

check the source that the oral historian and also the historian writing the book (since he is the same person) has created. It seems to me again you need to be aware of the problems of that kind of process. So while I do not doubt the value of oral history in biography, and certainly I would have liked to employ it and use it more in mine, I think there are important questions to be asked about it.

I think that obviously David's biography is going to be a very important one. He is using both oral history and written documents. Of course the final proof of the pudding will be in the eating. We will look forward to David Mitchell's biography of W.A.C. Bennett for what it will say about a very important political figure in British Columbian history, but also we will look forward to it as an example of what can be done by a biographer using the techniques of oral history.