

book review |||||

David Lance, AN ARCHIVE APPROACH TO ORAL HISTORY

Imperial War Museum and International
Association of Sound Archives, London, 1978, 64 pp.

by Ernest J. Dick

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This publication is unequivocally the most reflective and practical addition to the considerable literature on how oral history interview projects should proceed. As with all the other guides and manuals it grew out of a particular project but it succeeds best in achieving some distance from the preoccupations of the Imperial War Museum oral history programme while maintaining the vitality of that experience. It does not simply pontificate from its own well-earned experience but presents and reflects upon other alternatives.

The key to this success lies in the first words of the title, "an archive approach". It views oral history from the perspective of an end product, potentially useful in a variety of unforeseen ways. Also, one suspects that David Lance sees himself primarily as an archivist, and secondly, as an interviewer, and this gives him a useful orientation. This review may well be reflecting the author's archival orientation as it is conceivable that Lance has also on occasion been barely tolerated by the oral history interviewer. Some interviewers, bursting with the specialized information gained through their interviews and excited with their skill in the art of interviewing, take unkindly any suggestions or criticisms from the archivist. They sometimes view the archivist as a servile filing clerk and tolerate him only because he controls the pursestrings. Lance, in this publication, patiently and effectively differentiates the role of the archivist from that of the interviewer and in the

process establishes important guidelines for any oral history project. As an archivist, for example, he insists upon careful and complete documentation of the process and methodology of collecting information. (What are the assumptions of an interview project? What are the limits? How are interviewees chosen? etc.,)

Indeed the emphasis upon proper forethought and preparation before oral history projects are launched is one of the real strengths of this publication. The need for proper research is a usual admonishment of such manuals but Lance is particularly effective in illustrating the research required before the Imperial War Museum launched a project of interviewing sailors who served on the lower deck of the Royal Navy between 1910-22. At the same time he also discusses the point of diminishing returns in oral history interviewing; the point at which interviewees are simply repeating the same general impressions without adding anything new.

The good common sense, both in style and substance, of this publication also distinguishes it. It raises the level of reflection and criticism of oral history without mystifying the enterprise. Oral history interviewing, according to Lance, is not a scientific technique, "though it should be a systematic one". Similarly the vexing question of whether or not to transcribe is illuminated by this unpretentious approach. The utility of transcripts is acknowledged simply because we read faster than we listen but Lance insists that the sound recording must remain the primary source document. He realistically speculates that few institutions will have the resources to transcribe all of their holdings and begins to discuss how one establishes priorities for transcribing. Given this view of the transcript, Lance proposes that transcribing need not attempt to preserve the "flavour" and that the conversational characteristics can be deliberately excluded - if these are desired the researcher should return to the original document in any case.

Cataloguing and indexing are also discussed in some detail with many of the questions raised that collecting institutions implicitly or explicitly will have to resolve. Indeed, more questions are raised than always answered in these chapters. The reader may wish more had been told of how the Imperial War Museum resolved all of these problems.

The chapters on technical procedures are sufficiently precise and detailed so as to be considerably helpful. Indeed, this publication is even brave enough to recommend specific brands of tape, recorders, and microphones. Different technicians in different institutions will all have their own preferences; here at the Public Archives of Canada, for example, the reel-to-reel Tandberg has proven the most reliable; but this publication should be congratulated for making these chapters this explicit. North American technical terms may also differ at times; for example, the terms single and double play tape are not in standard usage on this continent and our recommendation is for tape 1.5 mil. thickness, but the general direction of the recommendations are the same as we would offer.

Given this lavish praise it only remains to wonder about the effective distribution of An Archive Approach to Oral History in North America. It is available from the Imperial War Museum's Sales Section at a price of \$6.50 (air mail) (Lambeth Road, London England SE1 6HZ). It warrants more direct and effective North American distribution than this, however, and it is to be hoped that the Canadian Oral History Association give consideration to the best method for promoting its distribution and sale, if not undertaking the project itself.