

ORAL HISTORY: THEN AND NOW

The rise of oral history has been associated by many with the popularity of the portable tape recorder. Its detractors claim that the tape recorder creates trivia not history, ridicule the validity of taped interviews due to the fallibility of human memory, and cringe at the title of oral historian. Its defenders reply that oral history is essential to preserve the undocumented experiences of non-elites, that it provides a means of filling crucial gaps in the historical record, and that it 'democratizes' both history and historians and is therefore here to stay. But amidst the smoke and fire of this debate a major point is often overlooked. The tape recorder did not 'discover' oral history, but rather re-discovered it. Oral history is the oldest form of historical documentation and dates back to the civilization of the Greeks when Herodotus gathered testimonials from soldiers after a battle as source material for his historical accounts. With the advent of improved writing and printing processes as well as the rise of literacy and libraries, the written record gradually became accepted by historians as the most legitimate form of documentation. However, oral history was not totally forgotten by those interested in the historical narrative, rather it was de-emphasized and often unacknowledged. Several times its value would be re-discovered in a manner reminiscent of many oral history projects today which utilize the tape recorder. The following preface, written by Robert Sellars for his History of Huntingdon County, Quebec, is one such example. No doubt many of the problems and arguments detailed by the author with respect to oral history will seem familiar to many. But it should be remembered that his book was written in 1888.



The following work was undertaken with reluctance and solely from a sense of duty. Soon after coming to Huntingdon I perceived that the first-settlers were fast passing away and I considered it would be deeply deplored by future generations that no narrative of when and how they redeemed the wilderness, no sketch of the kind of men and women they were, should have been preserved. Feeling thus I repeatedly suggested to different friends, qualified by education and long-residence in the district, that they ought to prepare a local history. Not one would listen to my representations. As time passed on I perceived that soon the preparation of such a work would be impossible, and if it was to be done at all I must needs do it myself. My occupation was a serious hindrance to its prosecution. The publisher of a country newspaper so indifferently supported that its punctual appearance weekly depended as much on my labor as a printer as its editor, I could not leave my office to gather information except at rare intervals and for short periods, and this circumstance has materially affected the completeness of the work.

As the value of a history, however humble, depends upon its authenticity, the reader has a right to know the sources from which I drew my information. When I began to prepare for the work, I counted on finding much documentary material. My hopes were quenched in a very short time. Not a letter, diary, or memorandum could I obtain. Repeatedly have I gone with confidence to the families of clergymen and other educated men to ask to be permitted to examine the papers they had left, only to be disappointed. Documents which, to me would have been of consequence I could not obtain. Speaking from my experience, I would say the idea entertained by Mr. Brymner, the keeper of the archives at Ottawa, and others, that there is much documentary material lying hid in families similar to that of the muniment-chests of Great Britain, is a delusion. The destruction of the papers of the seignior-

office was an irreparable loss to me, which would have been avoided had I assumed the task ten years sooner. Mr. Browning did his best to assist me, and his kindness I here acknowledge.

Failing to secure documentary sources of information, I had to depend almost entirely upon what I could glean in conversations with early settlers, and if there ever was a history written as taken from the lips of actors in or eye-witnesses of the scenes depicted, it is that now submitted. I visited every old settler I could learn of, and thus listened to what over 300 had to say. There is such a difference among men and women in accuracy of observation and power of memory, that information of this nature has to be carefully dealt with, and the narratives I obtained I compared and sifted, and when I found serious discrepancies or had doubts as to the correctness of what had been told me, I paid more than one visit to the same person, in a few instances, as many as four or five. The work of interviewing was not only laborious, but too often disagreeable, for my reception was not always gracious. That a sane man should neglect his business and spend his substance on horse-hire to collect old-world stories, and, above all, do so from disinterested motives, was beyond the comprehension of many, and curt answers, suspicious questions, and downright refusals were sometimes my reward for a cold and fatiguing drive over bad roads. In the majority of instances, however, I was kindly received and all the information desired readily conveyed to me.

I believe that the book will be of more than local value, and found my belief on these reasons:

1. That it is the first to give a full account, prepared from original sources, of the events of the war of 1812 in this province, for the operations in the first county of Huntingdon comprise all that happened in Quebec during these three eventful years, excepting Wilkinson's repulse at Lacolle mill.
2. That it is original in giving a minute yet comprehensive picture of how Canada was made: of how its pioneers subdued the wilderness and left the country what we find it. There are numberless narratives of life in the bush, there are many county histories; but this is the first attempt to give the experience not of one or two settlers, but of scores, not colored to make a fascinating book, or told by persons of a romantic disposition, but the unvarnished narratives of men and women whose hands were stiffened and backs bent by the toils and sufferings they relate, and not one of whom would have reduced their stories to writing. How Huntingdon and its sister counties were made is a sample of how Ontario and Canada were made, and the making of Canada must form at the base of all true histories of our country.
3. It gives an almost complete history of the rebellion of 1838, for the head and front of the rising of that year was in the district that falls within its scope, while it takes up a subject which other histories have ignored, the relations of the two races.

That the book will be of permanent value I am somewhat doubtful, and while engaged in its preparation I often asked myself, Is the play worth the candle? and considered whether I should not abandon it. After debating the matter the conclusion I always reached was, that though the present generation might possibly regard a record of the settlement of the district of Beauharnois as trite and commonplace and dismiss it with disdain, a time would come when some future Buckle or Macaulay would turn to its pages for information on subjects preserved nowhere else, and the thought (possibly a foolish one) that I was working for future generations, encouraged me to persevere and complete my task, when I had naught else to cheer me.