

ORDINARY PEOPLE, EXTRAORDINARY HISTORY

by David Millar

D'éminents spécialistes de l'histoire sociale ont indiqué qu'il était capital d'utiliser d'autres documents que ceux de l'élite et de l'administration pour rédiger l'histoire d'une nation. L'histoire orale constitue donc une ressource indispensable pour l'histoire et a ouvert des champs de recherche nouveaux et riches dans quatre domaines particuliers de l'histoire sociale du Canada. Il s'agit de l'histoire des travailleurs, du mouvement syndical, des femmes et de la famille. Dans cet article, l'auteur évalue les points forts et les faiblesses de la recherche actuelle en histoire orale; il suggère d'autres champs de recherche et donne en modèle aux chercheurs canadiens des projets précis d'histoire orale effectués à l'étranger. En conclusion l'auteur insiste sur la nécessité d'entreprendre des projets plus rigoureux afin d'élever ces recherches au dessus de la simple anecdote; pour cela, il faudra maintenir les échanges entre les historiens amateurs et professionnels.

"Memory is the thread of personal identity; history, of public." Thus the eminent American historian Richard Hofstadter contrasts the merely private and anecdotal with the wider fabric of social history. His legitimate professional concern with the interweaving of many threads of identity into the larger patterns that we call historical analysis should not blind us to the importance of the individual life story. The history of a war, to take one example, is not merely the sum of combatant experiences; but if these are excluded, crucial elements of the human experience have been lost. The distinction between individual memoir and social history is real, but should not be pushed to extremes. The "new social history" in Britain and America (and increasingly in Canada) has convincingly demonstrated the need to go beyond official documents and the written memoirs of the national elite. E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Raphael Samuel, Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, Paul Thompson, Herbert Gutman, Staughton and Mary Lynd -- to name only a few -- have shown what exciting narratives, analysis, and perspectives in popular culture, can emerge by giving a voice to the previously voiceless "rank and file" of society. In Canada too, it is now over a decade since historians like Stan Mealing called for closer attention to the unconscious class bias of documentary evidence; while Maurice Careless urged the exploration of a multitude of rich, deeply rooted "local identities". A few national politicians and businessmen, they warned, are insufficient materials with which to make a history, let alone a culture.

Ethnic historians have emphasized that we must listen to the many voices, the polyphony, of Canada's "vertical mosaic". Historians of women and the family have begun to show that history must undergo a sort of Copernican revolution; the whole shape of history may change if the central viewpoint is shifted away from that of the masculine elite. In all of these enterprises

the oral historian -- including the amateur who takes some care in noting the provenance and circumstances of the oral interview -- can make a significant contribution.

There are four areas of Canadian social history in which oral history has opened up exciting possibilities. These are the history of organized and unorganized workers, of women and of the family. These are broad historical undertakings. Yet oral history, however humble, can greatly aid the professional in his/her three essential tasks: to find what is significant, to contrast it with what is typical, and to collate what evidence is relevant to these two lines of analysis. Indeed, some part of each task may be accomplished in the oral interview itself.

The most promising model for union history is being done in England by the History Workshop network, linking small groups of local lay researchers (many of them retired workers) with professional historians at Ruskin College. This system is extension teaching, a means of stimulating lay people to write their own history and the history of their work group as well as a series of scholarly articles and books based on such local or regional materials. Traditional documentary research is not ignored, but interviews and the personal life experiences of the writer are used to describe the social context, local customs and cultural traditions, and often to raise entirely new historical questions. These new interpretations then force a re-evaluation or renewed search for relevant material in government or local records. The point of view has been changed from that of the ruling class to that of the ruled and consequently a new history emerges.

The classic of this genre is E.P. Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class; while other such works include John Collyer's The Collier's Rant, the History Workshop series edited by Raphael Samuel and many articles in History Workshop Journal.

In these studies of village life, city slum neighbourhoods, local unions and occupational groups, the extraordinary thing is that the author or the group (and often both) are voices from the social context being analyzed. The events and descriptions are not merely anecdotal, but wedded to what is significant or representative in the social class, occupation, region, and popular cultures. In a similar vein, one of Staughton and Mary Lynd's Rank and File interviewees observes that the lifeblood of good labour history must be what happens in the "primary work group", not at union headquarters.

Not yet at this level of sophistication, some Canadian projects nonetheless show the possibilities of a worker's history done by workers. Man Along the Shore is an illustrated (but somewhat anecdotal) reminiscence by a group of retired Vancouver longshoremen. Highly praiseworthy is its attempt to go back over three generations to show changes in work practices, technology, traditional customs and the longshoremen feelings towards each other, their gang bosses and their families. The Canadian Labour Congress Labour Studies Education Centre's videotapes of former leaders and organizers are a promising beginning of badly-needed research on World War Two and postwar unionism.

Evelyn Dumas' Dans le sommeil de nos os (The Bitter Thirties in Quebec in its English version), the Provincial Archives of British Columbia's Sound Heritage magazine (especially in its cassette tape Four Decades accompanying the superbly illustrated issue Fighting for Labour), the Saskatchewan Archives' Estevan 1931, the McMaster University pamphlets by Wayne Roberts combining labour biography and photographs of industrial-union organizing in Hamilton; and the excellent oral history program undertaken by Gil Levine of the Canadian Union of Public Employees indicate a higher level at which oral historians should aim. The history of local unions is still largely untold; let alone the story of their founders' feelings, fears, hopes and daily lives.

The history of the unorganized in Canada would seem to present even greater difficulties. Such workers do not have a union from which old records, minutebooks or even lists of retired members can be obtained. As the Multi-cultural History Society of Ontario has proven, alternate sources such as family, church and ethnic records may be useful. However, except for a scattering of semi-autobiographical literature and memoirs in Quebec and the Maritimes, there is little that can compare to the exploration of rural tradition by Raphael Samuel or George Ewart Evans. Some hints of what is possible may be seen in fiction and autobiography by regional authors; Normand Lafleur's oral history La Vie quotidienne des colons en Abitibi-Témiscamingue, (one of several publications in a 12 year regional history project by Benoit-Beaudry Gourd and others), Pierre Perrault's participatory "cinéma vérité" film series with the fishing families of Saint Lawrence North Shore and Ile d'Orléans, Gérald Fortin's sociological study of the disappearing "bûcheron" La fin d'une règne, and Donald MacKay's vivid Lumberjacks.

To date, nothing comparable exists for the primary sector workers in the old Ontario and Quebec heartlands: some minor novels and autobiographies, a handful of too-anecdotal oral histories such as Remembering the Farm. Perhaps the level of social analysis which could be reached without losing the specificity and vividness of local tradition is best indicated by Tom Philbrook's Fisherman, Miner, Merchant, Logger which details the impact of industrial production on pre-industrial traditions in Newfoundland communities. Like others in the superb Memorial University publications series, the Philbrook study manages to reveal the impact of broad social and economic forces on traditional ways of life without losing sight of living people whose voices and feelings we hear. At Laval University in Quebec, the ISSH (Institut Supérieur des Sciences Humaines) analyses of "histoires de vie" have shown how close textual study of oral interviews can recreate not only the individual life but social structure and political attitudes. Bruno Jean's "Un ouvrier de textile" goes far in explaining the submissiveness of workers in the early Duplessis era. To combine such insights with explorations in popular culture like Denyse Ostiguy's Fin d'une religion? and the little known Dossiers: "Vie Ouvrière" published by the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne might help to correct many of the biases now evident in Quebec working class history.

Local, ethnic and occupational historians could also learn much from Canadian literature. In the stories of Maritime and prairie writers, for instance, there is evident a richness of human experience matched by an appropriate sophistication of narrative style. A few Canadian oral historians have reached this level of story-telling. Daphne Marlatt's stories of the Japanese fishing community in Steveston and of Vancouver's East End, Rolf

Knight's moving account of his own mother in A Very Ordinary Life and his other life-histories, special issues on the Finns and other ethnic groups in Polyphony magazine from the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, present strong examples for others to follow.

In women's history, the problems confronted by the historian in chronicling workers who move in and out of various jobs at different periods of their lives become particularly acute. Women's labour has never been restricted to paid work, and because a large part is often unpaid and/or traditional it becomes "invisible". Yet their reasons for performing it are often clear, imperative and visible - to them. The danger is that we seldom ask them why they do it, taking traditional roles (or worse still, academic theories) as sufficient explanation. We frequently fail to ask why they are consistently underpaid when they do earn wages, why they are not defined as "skilled", or why so few are found in "Men's jobs". And they can tell us: Pat Bird's recent research among World War Two women workers in Hamilton shows us that they are often quite aware of the political and social forces at work; and that many of these women were excellent in skilled "men's jobs", would have stayed in them if they could have, and found their new economic status (receiving equal pay with men during the war) to have profound effects on their lives.

There are striking parallels of ethnic workers and women workers. A good many of the characteristics of "ethnicity" and "femininity", (argue Barbara Roberts and Danielle Juteau-Lee in the January 1981 issue of Canadian Ethnic Studies), are due to subordinate status within a dominant society. The "culture" of either group, its real identity or real work, needs to be disentangled from traditional roles and the expectations of others. The real accomplishments of ethnic women, for instance, are likely to be doubly hidden. As Roberts demonstrates in her article on Franco-Ontarian women in La Parole aux Ontarios(es), oral history can uncover evidence which traditional male-oriented documentary historians, even of the appropriate ethnic group, have failed to note. New historical insights may come from the women's view of their own lives; or the interviewing process itself may become a catalyst for change, as in the case of Algonquin College's videotape about the self-organization low income mothers of Hawkesbury, Ontario.

In Alberta, Elaine Silverman has found a hitherto untold side of the pioneer story by interviewing mothers and their adult daughters together. What was never revealed to children, or to male historians, finally emerged from the dialogue between women. These "private" experiences of pioneer motherhood were often intensely moving. "Why didn't you tell me," asks the daughter. "Because I didn't want you to know -- I never wanted you to have to go through such an experience yourself", replies the older woman, while admitting that now her daughter is older she can "understand" the lot of women. Yet as Silverman shows, these untold traumas and secret sacrifices were often essential to the family's survival on the frontier.

The invisible contribution of women to the history of a "man's world" is also made visible in Joanne Drake's videotape A Matter of Doing Something to Live, based on old photographs and interviews from the Thompson-Nicola region of British Columbia. Undertaking historical research after two decades of raising a family and working on ranches and in town, she brings a different view of the pioneer days than the usual male-oriented local history. Instead

of delineating the usual male heroes "Mr. A. and his pioneer store, Mr. B. the first rancher", etc., she talked to the women who worked for them -- to keep their own families alive -- selling, cleaning, cooking, fruitpicking, and continuing their own chores at home. The pioneer world looks very different from this perspective; a picture of a local economy, local culture and regional tradition created and substained by countless unsung heroines. A few historians are now beginning to ask how far this is true of culture and survival among Canada's ethnic groups, where men are usually portrayed as the defenders of the "mother tongue" and the founders of all significant institutions.

A female-centered history not only recreated women's experiences, but presents the social world in previously unsuspected ways. Female support networks maintain families, culture groups, and perhaps more than we know of Canadian society itself. Looking at three generations of women in Flin Flon, where - like many mining towns - women were seldom able to find paid work; Meg Luxton's More Than a Labour of Love raises many questions about the extent to which the economy and the power structure depend upon women's unpaid labour and continued subordination. In company towns, does the wife and mother provide a hidden subsidy to the company? Certainly, the material strains, social tensions, and "isolation" (characteristic of such towns) may have their roots deep in the system that divides management from labour, and men's from women's roles. Luxton is continuing her investigation with projects in Northern Ontario and Hamilton. Studies of women's work in early periods have been undertaken by Anne Woywitka in Alberta, Toni Laidlaw in Nova Scotia, Beth Light and others in the Oxford County project, Ontario. Though still fragmentary, such research shows that women's work, both paid and unpaid; was essential to family success.

Family history, as we have suggested, is the fourth area in which oral history is making significant contributions. How it relates to labour and ethnic history may be indicated by one statistic: at the end of the first World War, a church-sponsored social survey in sixteen industrial areas in Canada found 37% of working-class wives had to keep lodgers in order to maintain family income at living-wage levels. In a well-planned set of interviews with both urban and rural women of that era, Jane Synge has documented this "boarding-house" family strategy in a forthcoming book. She has demonstrated that there were distinctive patterns in Slavic and Anglo-Saxon boarding-houses; and also has chronicled patterns of childhood; friendship, kinship and adoption; work strategies, daily life, and rural-urban differences. Even more interesting, her research links two major quantitative histories of 19th century work-lives (Katz in Hamilton, Gagan in Peel) in which only statistical evidence was used, with a number of studies in working-class culture in Hamilton, by Bryan Palmer, Greg Kealey, Craig Heron and Wayne Roberts. Similarly, close attention to changing work-patterns related to the life-cycle of females (as well as male "bread-winners") and to the influence of kinship networks upon migration and entry into industrial jobs, are depicted to be supremely important in Tamara Hareven's and Randolph Langenbach Amoskeag: Life & Work in an American Factory City. That study of the French-Canadian exodus to New England suggests a rich new field for Quebec historians to explore. The usefulness of this model for internal migration is being explored by Gail Cuthbert Brandt in research on Valleyfield, and in some of the other

oral history projects mentioned. We need more such research across Canada; and we need comparison with other countries and other centuries to show us just what is unique or modern, and what is part of age-old patterns.

I have mentioned four main areas in which oral history is making important contributions to the historical task: union history, the history of the unorganized; the study of tradition, change, and "coping" strategies in women's work; and family history. Canadian interviewers have been doing exciting work. They should not, however, ignore models of excellence in these new fields by historians in other countries. In research on the primary work group, there are Staughton and Mary Lynd, Tamara Hareven, and the History Workshop publications. In rural history: George Ewart Evans, Tom Philbrook, Elaine Silverman, and Jane Synge. In community studies: Daphne Marlatt, Joanne Drake, the Oxford County project.¹ In local unions and worker life-histories: a number of pamphlets from McMaster University Labour Studies. These are only a few of my personal favourites, not an exhaustive list.

Above all, I would emphasize that living memories can help us break down the artificial barriers between public and private history. However, many interviews conducted by astute, patient interviewers are required to lift our work above the level of mere anecdote. I would emphasize the importance of a continuing exchange between amateur or local interviewers and the academic historians, for in the final analysis, your history is only as good as the implicit questions you ask of the historical process. Indeed, one of the joys of oral history is that it allows citizens, out of their own lived experience, to raise some of the questions themselves. As every interviewer has learned, an open-ended approach,² a willingness to listen silently and attentively, may be the best way of uncovering the threads of a personal part, and thereby weaving a richer public story.

¹ I would here cite an extraordinary 1960's study in mental health as a function of community, with many implications for rural and urban projects elsewhere, the Stirling County project (Digby, N.S.): particularly People of Cove and Woodlot and My Name is Legion.

² My own favourite question is to ask the interviewee to recall "What was the sight/sound/smell?" of an earlier period, to get beyond mere anecdote.