

Adventures in the Oral History Archive

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The value of oral history to a broadcaster working outside the confines of the public corporation is ostensibly negligible. Private broadcasters are not encouraged to interpret the world with other than a sense of the present tense. It is simply inconvenient to the private corporate agenda that a sense of history be either fostered or maintained.

Nevertheless, oral history is vital as a resource. For those who interpret history as the interplay of class conflicts, oral history, especially in its study of labour, is important for the preservation of an alternative cultural vision, one which is community-oriented and unifying, which extols cooperation and emphasizes actions in the here-and-now for the benefit of one's fellows. This vision is, in short, subversive.

Yet in an age where myth of "objective" journalism is more and more being challenged or seen as restrictively liberal-democratic in its focus, oral history is a valuable record. Since individuals are the centres of the universe they create, oral history contributes to the not-so-new "subjective" journalism by challenging Samuel T. Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." Perhaps individuals then go away with another perspective from which to consider unfolding events.

Knowing the lessons of history could minimize the odds of repeating past mistakes. There are many parallels between the experiences of first-time New Democratic Party governments in British Columbia and Ontario. For example, the University of Victoria's *B.C. Project* documented reaction to the 1973-75 Barrett administration. Yet, who at Queen's Park in 1990 had listened to this collection, and what would have been the lessons learned by Labour, dealing with alienation from its political arm?

Indeed, the rank and file of the Canadian Labour movement are not blessed with a rich sense of their own history. Certainly the formal education system does not assist matters in this regard. Textbooks at the secondary school level deal only superficially with important events. One such text, *Two Democracies* can dismiss the Winnipeg General Strike in less than a paragraph. Another, *In Search of Canada*, which encourages the development of analytical skills at the Ontario Academic Credit level, takes three pages.

A sense of pride in history not having been imparted at the secondary school level, students, once in the workplace, will tend to see successes or failures on an individuated basis, and not as part of the economic structure of the existing system.

Oral history is the history of common experience spoken on a one-to-one basis, and as such it is a potential tool for addressing today's fragmented audience. Too often in the past, however, researchers have neglected the broadcasting possibilities of oral history. What follows will be a discussion of difficulties encountered in the oral history medium based upon the author's experiences with collections he has listened to.

In order to review audio holdings, one must have access. New Canadian legislation dealing with freedom of information/protection of personal privacy is a two-edged sword. The public's right to know is unequally balanced against an individual's right to privacy. In addition, existing collections at institutional archives have become vulnerable to new restrictions which neither researcher nor informant may have intended. It is thus incumbent upon host institutions to seek the fullest legal clarification of copyright. Each institution should strive to ascertain that release forms for new acquisitions are as complete as possible and should solicit unrestricted access wherever this can be obtained.

Even under existing conditions of access, the researcher often ends up being his or her own detective agency. A case in point is the quest to listen to the David Millar collection at the National Archives of Canada. Millar recorded a series of splendid labour history interviews in 1969-70. He talked to many informants who were active in the Socialist Party of Canada and the Winnipeg General Strike. Millar's own wealth of knowledge was able to elicit recollections in considerable detail.

While releases accompany most of the collection, it was unclear what restrictions may have applied to others. It thus became the author's responsibility to locate Mr. Millar, whose last address on file at the National Archives was merely "Toronto 5."

What followed was a journey into a series of dead-ends and blind alleys, including making enquiries at former places of employment where Millar hadn't been heard of in a decade, asking at universities with which he'd been associated, and even a random mailing to Millars in the Toronto phonebook!

The story has a happy ending. David Millar was finally located in Edmonton. He subsequently wrote to the National Archives requesting that all restrictions upon his collection be dropped. He had not thought, after almost twenty years, that any would still apply.

Unfortunately, not every situation is so happily resolved. The author tried for six months, repeatedly, to obtain an interview with J.B. Salsberg. Not only is this octogenarian still very busy, but this former labour organizer has little interest in talking about his life for the microphone yet again. Not when 90 hours of taped conversation with Paul Kligman are on file with the National Archives. Unfortunately, the Kligman collection is closed into the next century. What is lost is not only access, but the opportunity to seek any

clarification from Salsberg which may be necessary. Also lost is the opportunity for any of his surviving contemporaries to comment on the collection's contents.

Related to access is the time factor a researcher must allow for the duplication process, if copies are being ordered for research off-site. In an extreme case, a researcher can wait up to two years for completion of a work order. Archival staffs have been among the first to feel the pains of government cutbacks and have had to persevere with dedication as the ranks of their colleagues decrease in spite of escalating demands on their services. Still, for one attempting serious research from an isolated location, the policy of allowing tape duplication is a boon.

Accessing for research purposes is one requirement, permission to quote or reproduce excerpts quite another, and permission to broadcast a still greater need. Most subjects are willing to allow all of the above, provided the parameters are clearly explained, and documented in a proper release form. Most, not all. Many subjects have been "burned" by previous researchers who may have used their remarks out of context, or presented their work in a manner which discredits the subject's endeavours. This is not an infrequent occurrence.

The late Bob Carlin, whose life history the author is in the process of researching, was extremely reluctant to authorize the use of any of his oral history material after two separate experiences in print. Perhaps when society evolves to a functional realization of mutual self-respect, the cautions of the access restriction will cease to apply. In the meantime, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's ethics guidelines are valid criteria: "... the welfare and integrity of the individual or particular collective must prevail over the advancement of knowledge and the researcher's use of human subjects for that purpose." (86). Fortunately, instances of inappropriateness are few and far between. The major difficulties with oral history lie in the application of the methodology itself. Is it to be the sole source of information? Is it to be the primary source of information? Is it to be just one of the principal sources of information? Is it to be a corroborative source of reference purposes? These are among the questions to be asked. Further, is its treatment to be unique or novel, lending itself to a "creative" interpretation or distinctive writing style? Oral history has been used in all of these forms. Some are worthy of greater comment.

An outstanding example of misuse of oral history in the labour field is the series of 1965 interviews with former Communist Party of Canada leader Tim Buck. These interviews formed the basis for the autobiographical *Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck* (1977). The book has been roundly criticized for its historical inaccuracies. The editors, Phyllis Clarke and William Beeching, provided but one footnote throughout the entire text. This lack of corroboration is the subject of a review article by Ian

Angus. He writes: "Buck's falsifications alone would not condemn this book. Even the most mendacious of memories can provide useful insights into the thoughts and character of their authors. Properly edited and annotated, they can make fine historical works. Such editing was not done in this case ... [when] historians come to write the history of the Canadian Communist Movement, Tim Buck's reminiscences will provide some of the raw material: it should not be mistaken for history itself." (236).

As indicated earlier, this author is in a position to compare the contents of the biographical tapes with the published book. The actual text as published has 405 pages. The transcribed tapes, forty-seven hours in length, would give double this amount. Clearly, the editors have edited the material for some purpose, if not for accuracy. Gerry Van Houten, who subsequently worked on the Communist Party of Canada's official 1977 history, in a talk with the author in 1990, ventures this explanation for the rival Buck account:

It has to be said that there was a tendency to see the leader as the axle if you will, the starting point for the party's organization. That tendency has existed almost up to the present time. This gave the General Secretary a great deal more prestige and influence than we would now see as usual ... what the General Secretary said was considered the most developed position to take. It wasn't very good logic, but that in a sense was how it was viewed.

Such distortions in the context of ideological interpretation unfortunately reflect on the methodology of oral history as a whole, but we cannot discredit the genre as a primary, or even a major secondary source of information when compiling the historical record. At least, not if we are to believe Ian McLeod, co-author of *Tommy Douglas: The Road to Jerusalem*, (1987), in a 1989 conversation with the author:

In terms of archival material, it seems to me with respect to the NDP that most of the important stuff is contained either in its policy documents ... or through interviews. I don't think that close examination of the NDP archives will produce very much, because we've entered a period in history where the NDP has tended to launder its own records in a kind of Stalinist fashion. Most references to disagreement, discord, controversy, changes in direction have been expunged from the NDP record.

Both Ian McLeod and Father Thomas, principal author of the Douglas book, believe the politician's most important contribution to Canadian history is his tenure as Premier of Saskatchewan. If oral history is of

sufficient importance, it can lead to more than one publication. As McLeod said, in the same conversation:

The Higginbotham tapes have been preserved, with transcripts, in the archives of Regina. A shortcut to understanding them is contained in the book: *The Making of a Socialist* by Lewis Thomas. He took the Higginbotham transcripts and basically shaved them down into readable book length. You get most of the interesting material in that book. Higginbotham himself wrote a book called: *Off the Record. The CCF in Saskatchewan*, which is also based on the same tapes. So they've had plenty of use.

Although Jim Green's name appears as author of *Against the Tide: The Story of the Canadian Seamen's Union* (1986), this book presents a balance between oral history sources, archival references, the narrative, and is the work of a collective as a corroborative instrument. As Stan Wingfield remarked, in 1989:

Our book was thoroughly researched. Jim Green can argue it point by point, because he's the one that did the research on it. We had a committee of around ten to twelve people in Montreal, one in Toronto, the same thing in Vancouver, with contacts in Halifax and Saint John. The committees would point the way for the writer. We were able to talk to Green and point things out because he wasn't there. He said, "You guys have to tell me, but I want it backed up with facts." He would not put anything in writing unless it was backed up with a fact

Oral history is a resource that is suffering from reduced funding at the very moment its importance is being realized. It is more than a research tool, it is a discipline. With print literacy in decline, its value is heightened. Oral history enjoys the possibility of overcoming compartmentalization, as it is of scholarly use to labour, academia, and the broadcast community. Currently, however, there are a variety of methods by which transcriptions of oral history text have been provided and wide differences exist in the ways in which authors attempt to balance sources.

As broadcast documentaries make frequent use of oral history and actuality sources, the electronic media can perhaps show the way toward a proper balance of narrative, actuality, and print sources. The researcher, when recording subjects, should take extra care to produce a valuable audio document by demonstrating technical proficiency. In addition, working with a sense of community to overcome constraints will also benefit both the discipline and the individual.

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