

THREE APPROACHES TO ORAL HISTORY: THE JOURNALISTIC,  
THE ACADEMIC, AND THE ARCHIVAL

Oral history as a new field has primarily been concerned with questions of legitimacy and technique. Little has been written from an analytical perspective on the field itself. But now its legitimacy is accepted as witnessed by the increasing number of oral history associations and books using oral history that have come into existence in recent years.<sup>1</sup> In turn, several of these associations have produced manuals that have outlined the basic techniques needed for a successful oral history project. Thus the time has come for oral history to be discussed analytically on its own merits. This paper then will attempt to explain oral history by examining its development in three areas: the journalistic, the academic, and the archival. Drawing on this format, it will conclude by assessing the future role of archivists in the oral history field. For reasons of clarity, oral history will be defined here in accordance with its most modern and popular meaning, that is, "as a method for the gathering and preserving of historical information in oral form by means of a tape recorded interview".<sup>2</sup>

It was Professor Allan Nevins of Columbia University who first recognized the encompassing value of oral history. As a young journalist in New York City he had been dismayed to learn that for many famous personages the only available summary of their contributions to society was in their obituaries. The fact that none of their own insights and recollections of the past remained after death seemed, to Nevins, a great loss to the historical record. Therefore, with the advent of the tape recorder, Nevins saw a chance to rectify this loss and in 1948 he founded the first Oral History Research Office at Columbia University in New York.<sup>3</sup> He then encouraged his colleagues in academe and journalism to join him in this new field.

However, journalists earned their living by reporting the present and could not perceive how their reading public would be interested in a journalistic chronicling of yesterday's headlines. These attitudes towards things historical persisted until 1960 when fellow journalist Theodore White startled his colleagues by writing the highly successful The Making of the President 1960, a book which remained on the best seller lists for an entire year after its publication.

What White did was not that difficult. Due to the influential nature of their profession, journalists are often given information from politicians that is beyond the scope of both the public and the historian. What White did was realize that this privileged information could be translated into a popular narrative account of recent political history. "It was like walking through a field playing a brass tuba the day it rained gold", said White. "Everything was sitting around waiting to be reported".<sup>4</sup> White's discovery of the marketability of the journalist's own backyard inspired other efforts. Peter C. Newman soon became his Canadian counterpart with the books Renegade in Power - The Diefenbaker Years in 1963 and The Distemper of Our Times in 1968.

But although White and Newman used oral interviews to obtain information, their books can not be considered oral history since they did not provide tapes or transcripts of these interviews. Newman summarized the reason for this policy when he admitted that often the price of information was anonymity and therefore he could not reveal the identity of all of his sources.<sup>5</sup> Although such an admission did not prevent Newman's books from becoming best sellers, it did attract

considerable comment from the academic community. Many critics questioned the validity of statements whose accuracy was reduced to the author's word of honour - especially when the author was a controversial one writing on a controversial subject. Others attacked his method, stating that since journalists were more interested in sensationalism than historical accuracy, Newman's books merely reflected the inherent weaknesses of a journalistic approach.

These comments served not only to harden existing prejudices between academics and journalists, but also to cause serious proponents of historical journalism to re-evaluate their method. It was true that much valuable information used by White and Newman came from their own recollections of private conversations. But it was also true that the credibility of this information - confidential and otherwise, was severely weakened by the fact that little, if any, existed on tape which could have been used to substantiate its accuracy.<sup>6</sup> As a result, many present-day journalistic authors insure their credibility by recording their interviews on tape; and some even follow this up by having transcripts made. One such convert is U.S. political journalist, Haynes Johnson. Johnson gained prominence by crisscrossing the United States interviewing scores of people in an attempt to gauge the mood of the American electorate over a period of years. He relied on the tape recorder because, as he states:

"the suspicion of the printed word today is so immense. If you do a lengthy series on some controversial topic, you find an enormous outpouring from people who don't agree with what you're saying and simply don't believe that you've been there. So we use these transcripts to give a reader a sense of 'By God, whether or not I like it, that's what the man said'".<sup>7</sup>

With the reliance on the tape recorder journalistic interviews now gained credibility to the extent that they could be used for historical research purposes. The situation could be simply put as follows. When a journalist interviews someone on an historical subject with a tape recorder, he is committing an act of oral history.

But it should be remembered that the overriding aim of a journalist is to see his copy in print. Since few people converse in sentences and paragraphs, literal transcripts of interviews are often impossible to read and need to be edited. At this point, it is difficult for a journalist to avoid injecting his own style into the editing process, especially if he hopes to produce a book that is entertaining to read. It is also difficult to know at what point this editing process crosses the line of historical credibility into journalistic license. Ultimately this question must be decided by the journalist himself and submitted to the critics for judgement. The critics must then assess whether the final polished product has succeeded in providing valid historical insights in a readable fashion. But the original tapes and transcripts are still important since they provide the essential contribution that the journalist makes to future historical research.

The distinguishing features of the journalistic approach to oral history can be stated as an emphasis on people as source material and on the free-flowing interview as the method for eliciting this information. These emphases stem from the nature of the journalistic profession itself with its demands for direct information and immediate reader interest. Thus the criteria for a good oral history project from a journalistic approach is similar to that for good journalism. These criteria are the calibre of the sources and the skill of the journalist

in spontaneously drawing out these sources. Unfortunately, the journalistic approach has been abused by many who have simply taken a tape recorder and gone out without any prior training, interviewed their grandfather about the Depression, and hoped for the best. Their results have damaged the reputation of oral history in the eyes of prospective users and reinforced its doubtful value in the eyes of skeptics. However, the entry of skilled journalists such as Studs Terkel<sup>8</sup> and Barry Broadfoot<sup>9</sup> into the field of oral history has demonstrated the potential for historical insight that can be realized by this approach. For it is the journalistic approach, when done well, which can go beyond a straightforward interpretation of facts and convey the true feelings and atmosphere that surrounded a particular epoch in history. Indeed, it is this ability that some historians view as the ultimate goal of history. French psycho-historian Lucien Febvre aptly summed up the necessity of this approach when he stated:

"It is true that to presume to reconstitute the emotive life of a given epoch is a task at once extraordinarily seductive and difficult. But what of it? The historian does not have the right to desert".<sup>10</sup>

As opposed to the journalistic approach, the academic approach to oral history is characterized by its emphasis on preliminary research in some library or archive and on planned interviews which seek answers to questions developed from a preconceived analytical base. The information gleaned from the interviews serves as supportive evidence for the theses that the academic has chosen to advance.

The spread of oral history techniques in academic circles was initiated by the social sciences. With the rise of behaviouralism, social scientists employed research methods that sought data that existed beyond the walls of libraries and archives in the depths of society itself. Armed with carefully prepared questionnaires and using random sampling techniques the behaviouralists pursued knowledge by studying the political, psychological and socio-economic behaviour of practically everybody. The aim of these social scientists was to study society from a scientific perspective and obtain knowledge that was purged of human values and bias. Any discipline which did not examine the value premises of its methodological assumptions was limiting the scope of its explanatory power. The net result of the behaviouralist challenge was to expand frontiers of knowledge and to bring about in other disciplines a critical examination of their approaches to knowledge.

In the discipline of history this examination was carried out by social historians who claimed that traditional intellectual and political interpretations of history had displayed a bias in favour of the study of elites, - their ideas, their institutions, and their culture. The social historians set about to adjust this imbalance by concentrating their studies on the ideas, institutions, and culture of non-elites in society. However, since they were embarking on relatively untouched academic territory, they found source material difficult to locate in libraries and archives. This was largely because acquisitions policies at these institutions reflected the traditional needs of historians and because non-elites tended not to write memoirs or collect correspondence. Therefore, social historians in search of the recent past, turned to oral history techniques as a means of gathering evidence for their own particular interpretation of history.

The reaction of traditional historians to oral history techniques was a

predictably negative one. Oral history was viewed by many as a lazy student's substitute for long hours of investigative research in libraries and archives. Those who were not predisposed to social history saw it as creating 'an artificial survival of trivia of appalling proportions' which belonged more to journalism than to history. Following this line of criticism, others questioned the ethics of oral history since it purported to add something to the historical record that otherwise would not have been there. Still others, taking a page from the sociologist's notebook, argued that the interviewer's own preconceived ideas might condition the interviewee's responses and thus fall into the trap of the self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>11</sup> But the key question facing oral history was simply one of validity as historical evidence. Could an oral interview supply acceptable historical evidence about events in the past?

Perhaps the best answer to this question was offered by Prof. Victor Hoar whose book, The MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion, relied extensively on oral history interviews collected by the CBC Program Archives in 1964-65. In his preface, Hoar states:

"This use of tape recorded interviews made long after the event described requires some explanation...Since the respondents are expected to rely upon memory in their account of this or that episode, the scholar may well ask just how valid are such interviews. The memory is not the most reliable of instruments. But in the case of mass interviews conducted on a common subject, a common experience emerges from individual descriptions which can be authenticated by reference to the handful of pertinent books and articles available and which can be further authenticated simply by the fact that isolated men having little or no contact with one another over the years come up with essentially the same story again and again".<sup>12</sup>

While the question of oral history as valid historical evidence is paramount, some historians saw the advantages of oral history from other perspectives. James W. Wilkie, a noted professor of Latin American history, claims that "the oral historian can move between groups to discuss issues where the participant in history, caught up in the passion of the past, is limited as to whom he can or will speak".<sup>13</sup> He also adds that an important byproduct of the oral history method is that "a sociology of knowledge emerges as the historian asks similar questions of people who represent ideologies composing the whole political spectrum... We must remember what men think is often as important as what actually happens".<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of the above arguments, acceptance of oral history by the academic community is far from being universal. Many historians in social history fields seem to regard oral history as a research method of the last resort - to be used only when all other archival sources are exhausted. Even when oral history is employed, it often receives secondary status in footnotes and acknowledgements. This last point is demonstrated in two recent books on Canadian labour history: Gad Horowitz's Canadian Labour in Politics and Irving Abella's Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour. Both authors conducted interviews with major figures in Canadian labour and quoted from their interviews regularly throughout their books. But no mention was made in either bibliography of the length of these interviews, whether the transcripts were available for researchers, and where and if they were preserved.

However, some of the reticence to fully acknowledge oral history sources

may originate in confusion over standard academic practices for oral history, rather than a low assessment of its historical validity. Standard practices as yet do not exist and thus an academic is left to his own intuition in formulating an approach to oral history. One historian who set down an established format is Prof. Jack Granatstein of York University. Granatstein outlined three basic requirements for an oral history project. First, the interviewers should be extremely knowledgeable in the field in question. Second, interviews should be in teams rather than by single persons. Third, terms of confidentiality should be spelled out before making the tape in order to guarantee a full and free discussion. Granatstein then goes on to state that:

"surely it has to be accepted that without critical questioning, nothing of value is likely to surface. With it, truth sometimes emerges... There also has to be enough time to exhaust a subject, to get every scrap of information that can be secured. A travelogue type chronology is sometimes useful, but not in a tape that is expected to be an historical record".<sup>15</sup>

But it may even be that Prof. Granatstein's format may be too demanding for many of his colleagues to follow. Most academics view oral history as a methodological means of gathering further evidence to reinforce the particular position they are advancing in a book or article. Hence, the primary aim in their oral history exercise is not to add to the historical record, but rather to add to their interpretation of that record. In addition, many academics consider their oral history interviews to be their own private intellectual property - to which all others are to be denied access. It is these attitudes that help explain why oral history interviews by academics are singularly difficult to find for reference purposes. Therefore, it can be said that while journalists and academics differ in their approach to oral history, they have one vital similarity in that they both use oral history to serve their enlightening but essentially individual ends. Thus, the profession to which the Granatstein format is most applicable is the archival profession since it is the responsibility of the archivist to ensure that the historical record is as complete as possible for other persons to research. By reasons of definition therefore one might advance that archivists should be involved in oral history. But the reasons for their commitment to oral history can be seen even more convincingly by a brief examination of the changing nature of historical source material.

The historical record has always been dependent on the technology which produced it. Up until the 20th Century the historical record was largely handwritten in the form of correspondence, diaries, and memoirs. Since writing by quill pen was almost as slow a process as the mail service, there was a definable limit to the amount of material available in archives. Research consequently was straightforward and perhaps even relaxing. But with the advent of the 20th century came the inventions of the typewriter and the telephone and the communications process underwent revolutionary change. The effects of this revolution were devastating for the traditional researcher, for as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. explains: "While the typewriter has increased the volume of paper, the telephone has reduced its importance. Far more documents are produced and there is far less in them".<sup>16</sup> Thus, the historical record now seemed to be spread thinly over an ever-expanding surface which the researcher was physically incapable of covering in his lifetime. Research was now complicated and never ending. But with the invention of the tape recorder, technology reversed its field somewhat and provided the archivist and researcher with a tool with which he could reclaim some of the historical record eroded by the widespread use of the telephone and typewriter.

Thus, if the archivist refuses to take up the tape recorder, not only will the historical record be less complete but it might also be of inferior calibre as this function might then be left to less qualified people. For the best possible assessment of gaps to be filled in the historical record must surely come from those who are most familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of existing archival holdings. Indeed, the importance of the archivist in the field of oral history has already been noted and advocated by several scholars. Norman Hoyle, in his excellent article in Library Trends, even makes a case for a strictly archival definition of oral history.

"The purpose of the oral history interview is to create new archival materials for other writers to use. Interviewing alone does not constitute oral history; if it did, virtually all writing on contemporary history, to say nothing of newspaper reporting and much sociological investigation would come under its aegis. Because of its emphasis on meeting the information needs of the scholar of the future, oral history implies further the archival preservation of the document resulting from the interview and its eventual if not immediate availability to the scholarly community." 17

But if the archivist is to be involved in the oral history process, the next stage is to determine the extent of the commitment. To most archivists, there are three basic options that are available for his consideration. The first option would simply have the archivist preserving tapes and transcripts of oral history interviews that have been undertaken by interested persons outside of the archives. The second option would involve the archivist in oral history as part of a process to fill in gaps in existing collections. The third option would have the archivist involved in wide-ranging projects concerned with both the past and the present, and with the overall aim being to use oral history not just as a tool to reclaim past historical ground, but also to guarantee a solid footing to the present.

Most archives at present are involved in one of the first two options. But it is the third option which, although most demanding, may be needed in order to maintain a continuing valuable historical record for future as well as present researchers. Using the model supplied by Prof. Granatstein, this option could be implemented in the following manner. First, an area of study would be defined by the archivist, e.g. Canadian business in the 1960's. Second, in consultation with the leading academics in the area, the key issues or debates would be identified. Third, in consultation with the leading business journalists of the period, key figures would be selected for interviewing. Fourth, with the archivist acting as co-ordinator, the journalist and the academic would draw up a format for questions during the interviewing session. Fifth, with guarantees of confidentiality prearranged with the interviewee, the interview would take place with the academic concentrating on interpretative questions, the journalist on questions of immediate concern and the archivist on questions of historical development. Sixth and last, the tapes and transcripts of the interview would be deposited in the sponsoring archival institution. Although this is an ambitious undertaking, it would serve to unite all three practitioners of oral history under one program and could therefore utilize the advantages of all three approaches to oral history. As such, it might become the final point in the evolution of modern oral history.

Whether or not such a program is implemented depends on the priority given to oral history by each archival institution. Canada has lagged several years

behind the United States in the development of oral history programs up to now. Yet the value of oral history in documenting the Canadian historical experience has been proven in several areas. The time for the archivist to wait for the record to come to him has now ended. The time for comprehensive involvement of Canadian Archivists in oral history is at hand.

Richard Lohead

FOOTNOTES

1. The legitimacy of oral history to the general public was perhaps officially confirmed when it became the subject of a favourable two-page article in Newsweek entitled "The Pen vs. the Tape Recorder". August 5, 1974. Pp. 74-75.
2. La Clare, Léo Oral History Techniques for the Archivist, Canadian Historical Association Archives Section - Papers Prepared for the 1974 Archives Course. Paper 27, Pg. 2.
3. Hoyle, Norman "Oral History", Library Trends, July 1972. Pg. 61.
4. White, Theodore Quoted in The Boys on the Bus by Timothy Crouse, New York, 1974. Pg. 35.
5. Newman, Peter C. Renegade in Power: The Diefenbaker Years, New York, 1963. Pg. 402.  
  
Newman, Peter C. The Distemper of Our Times, Toronto, 1968. Pg. 479.
6. The author could have pre-arranged access restrictions on the tape itself as a means of guaranteeing confidentiality.
7. Johnson, Haynes Quoted in The Boys on the Bus, Timothy Crouse, New York, 1974. Pg. 134.
8. Studs Terkel wrote Hard Times, an oral history of the Great Depression, which detailed the American experience during the 1930's.
9. Barry Broadfoot wrote Ten Lost Years 1929-1939, which used oral history to describe the Canadian experience of this period.
10. Febvre, Lucien Quoted in "The Use and Abuse of Psychology in History" by Frank E. Manuel. Historical Studies Today, New York, 1972.
11. Menton, Robert K. Social Theory and Social Structure, Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1957.
12. Hoar, Victor The MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion, Toronto, 1969.  
  
It is indeed ironic and sad that not only does an American historian have to discover and write some section of Canadian history for us - using our own resources, but then has to remind us of its value. But this phenomena has occurred before in other areas of Canadian life and perhaps as such forms part of our Canadian identity.
13. Brown, Lyal "Methods and Approaches in Oral History: Interviewing Latin American Elites" The Oral History Review 1973. Pg. 81.

14. Ibid. Pg. 82.
15. Granatstein, Jack Review of "Canadian Public Figures on Tape" in Canadian Forum, January 1974. Pg. 39.
16. Schlesinger Jr., Arthur "The Historian as Participant", Historical Studies Today, New York, 1972. Pg. 398.
17. Hoyle, Norman "Oral History," Library Trends, July 1972. Pg. 62.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

#### I. Books

- Hoar, Victor                    The MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion, Copp Clark Publishing Company, Toronto, 1969.
- Gilbert, Felix and Graubard, Stephen R. editors Historical Studies Today, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 1972.
- Abella, Irving            Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1973.
- Horowitz, Gad            Canadian Labour in Politics, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1968.
- Crouse, Timothy            The Boys on the Bus, Ballantine Books, Inc., New York, 1974.
- White, Theodore            The Making of the President 1960, Atheneum House, New York, 1961.
- Newman, Peter C.            Renegade in Power: The Diefenbaker Years, Bobbs-Merrill Co. Inc., New York, 1963.
- Newman, Peter C.            The Distemper of Our Times, McClelland & Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1968.
- Broadfoot, Barry            Ten Lost Years 1929-1939, Doubleday (Canada) Ltd., Toronto, 1973.
- Terkel, Studs            Hard Times, Pantheon Books, a division of Random House Inc., New York, 1970.

#### II. Articles

- Hoyle, Norman            "Oral History" in Library Trends, Volume 21, No. 1, July 1972. Pp. 60-83.
- Brown, Lyal            "Methods and Approaches in Oral History: Interviewing Latin American Elites", in the Oral History Review, 1973. Pp. 77-87.
- Newsweek            "The Pen vs. the Tape Recorder", Newsweek, August 5, 1974.

#### III. Reviews

- Granatstein, Jack            "Canadian Public Figures on Tape", The Canadian Forum, January 1974. Pp. 39-40.