

ORAL HISTORY: ONE HISTORIAN'S VIEW

When W.A.B. Douglas of the Ontario Historical Society asked me to speak on the subject of oral history to a Local History Workshop the Society was holding in Ottawa, May 2-3, 1975, I greeted his invitation with mixed feelings. Of course I was flattered to be asked and I knew too that my own experience in oral history would at least provide a convenient subject for my remarks. Because my specialization is modern Ontario history, particularly the period from about the turn of this century, I have frequently had occasion to tape-record the reminiscences of historical actors for my own research purposes. I was also involved with two of my colleagues in the York University Department of History with a project, which began almost a decade ago, to tape-record the experiences of leading federal political figures from the Diefenbaker period. This work, I believe, was the first time the Humanities and Social Science section of the Canada Council offered funding for an oral history program. Most recently, as Associate Editor of the Ontario Historical Studies Series, a body established by the Province of Ontario in 1971 to encourage work and develop publications in the field of Ontario history, I have been responsible for supervising a fairly large number of interviews in an on-going oral history program.

If this was the background on which I knew I could draw, I also had reservations about talking at such a workshop about oral history. I have always believed that oral history is largely a matter of common sense and I have never been very impressed by lengthy disquisitions about what purports to be the theory and technique of the subject. Of course there are technical matters relating to the selection, use and storage of equipment that must be mastered but there are also some readily available publications that deal with this aspect of oral history usefully and briefly. There are also other sources of such information readily available, I am sure, in almost every community. So I certainly wasn't going to talk about that side of oral history.

Secondly, my observation has been that there is little value in the discussion of interviewing techniques. Again, interviewing is largely a matter of common sense. Almost any bibliography dealing with oral history will list publications which offer friendly household hints to the neophyte. Although these are useful, my own feeling is that they are no substitute for a little experience. Some of the advice they offer runs counter to my own experience. Willa K. Baum, in her valuable pamphlet Oral History for the Local Historical Society (second edition, 1974) suggests, for example, that an hour and a half is probably the maximum length for a good interview and states that even if the interviewee wants to continue, the interviewer should beg off by pleading "fatigue, another appointment, or no more tape". As in so much oral history work, this advice must be tempered by circumstances. We have had excellent interviews which have lasted up to twelve hours and anyone who knows of the practical problems involved in getting busy interviewers, often scholars with a multiplicity of other demands on their time, together with even busier interviewees, often at out-of-town locations, will not be inclined to break off the interview after a maximum of an hour and a half.

Similarly, most of the how-to-do-it manuals suggest that a one-to-one relationship, interviewer to interviewee, is probably best and that under no circumstances should the interviewer 'cross-examine' or 'badger' the subject. I'm sure this is good advice, particularly when the person being interviewed

is someone reminiscing about events in the local community. Many of our subjects, however, are experienced politicians accustomed to being interviewed. Such persons in the course of long careers in public life will have developed a protective shell by which they ward off troublesome questions and while seeming to say something worthwhile in fact give away as little as possible. Of course the interviewer will have emphasized the difference in purpose between his interview and that done for immediate publication by the journalist or television commentator. Often this will be to no avail for after decades of parrying off troublesome questions, the subject, even if trying to be frank and open, almost without thinking may reply with the clichéd responses which served so well on other occasions. It is this defensive veil that the interviewer must penetrate, and without allowing himself to get into an adversary posture which would destroy all rapport which may have been established, he should not hesitate to challenge the answers he receives and to probe to a deeper level of response. "Come on now, Senator, surely there was more to it than that", the interviewer might say, "Mr. so-and-so claims that..." Most politicians are pretty worldly and hard-skinned types; few will resent being pushed to re-examine their initial responses if it is done with some tact and skill, and often it is only by doing so that the interviewer will uncover truly significant material. Otherwise those who make use of the oral document may discover that the interview yielded no information which could not have been uncovered by a bit of cursory research in old newspapers. This technique can be pursued more effectively by two and even, in some circumstances, by three rather than by a single interviewer.

There are other places in which our experience tends to contradict the advice of the manuals. The point I am making is not that the manuals are wrong and we are right but simply that interviewing techniques vary enormously according to the interests of the interviewer, the experience of the interviewee, and the time period between the date of the interview and the time of the events being discussed. Doubtless, many other variables also exist. Once again my experience leads me to place little faith in generalizations on this subject and to doubt that there is much point in attempting to lay down structured guidelines. There is no such thing as an accepted orthodoxy in this area. Only common sense and experience are of much value. I could see little point, therefore, in talking about interviewing techniques.

Nor did I want to base my remarks on anecdotes about the interviews we have done to this point. The two journals devoted to oral history with which I have some familiarity, the Oral History Review, published by the Oral History Association of the United States, and Sound Heritage, an oral history quarterly published at the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, sometimes publish transcripts or simply accounts of actual interviews. Frankly I fail to see the point of this. In some cases, perhaps, the methodology of a particular interview may be of special value but, apart from this, the content surely is of interest principally to those who are specialists in the subject area of the interview.

Finally I decided I might touch briefly on all these points but that the thrust of my remarks would be directed towards what we are trying to accomplish in the Ontario Historical Studies Series oral history program and what we may have learned in the course of that work. The OHSS to date has commissioned about a score of volumes in the political, economic and social history of Ontario. These include full-scale biographies of nine of the major Premiers of Ontario,

a three-volume economic history of the province, a two-volume study of educational history, volumes on federal-provincial relations, political culture up to 1867, the development of the bureaucracy, a study of the Franco-Ontarians, and a one-volume general history of the province. A number of other works are at the planning stage.

From the beginning the Board of Trustees of the OHSS decided, wisely I think, that the work of the Series should include an oral history program which would be as extensive as funds would allow. The persons to be interviewed would be chosen with a view to assisting the preparation of the volumes commissioned by the Series. In the first instance, the tapes and transcripts prepared by the oral history program are for the use of authors in the Series. The interviewees are asked to sign a document making the material available to authors commissioned by the Series and to other scholars at the discretion of the Series. The tapes and transcripts are housed in the Public Archives of Ontario. Ultimately, they will be available to all scholarly researchers but at present the policy of making them available only to authors in the Series is generally adhered to, although all requests by others for access will be considered, subject of course to any closed period set by the interviewee. The interviewees have the option of closing any or all of the material to all users, including authors in the Series, at their discretion. To date few of those interviewed have placed this kind of limitation on use.

We began our work in 1972 with interviews of figures prominent in the public life of Ontario and have talked to thirty-seven persons in that category, including two former Premiers, several opposition leaders and a number of former cabinet ministers and private members of all parties. In the next year or so, we hope to continue in this area and also to include civil service figures. In our first year we hired an interviewer for the summer period but we quickly learned that the nature of the work, in particular the problem of setting up interviews at that time of year, rendered that an unsatisfactory method of procedure. Since then we have been using part-time interviewers paid on a per diem basis. To cut down on the need for extensive preparatory research, we have sought out persons with a solid background in recent Ontario political history and as a result have had to do only a day or so of research prior to each interview. We recognize that in some cases fuller preparation would have been preferable but budgetary constraints have required us to proceed in this way. The tapes and transcripts, of course, vary enormously in quality but I am convinced that they make a significant contribution to the historical record. Our principal difficulty has been with interviewing personnel. Because we use highly qualified part-time interviewers whose principal employment is elsewhere, it has sometimes been difficult for our interviewers to find the time and energy to devote to the oral history program. As a result, we have not proceeded as quickly or done as much as we would like to have.

I suspect that this must be a problem for any oral history program with large ambitions and limited funds. There are, of course, alternative approaches. The oral history project on the Diefenbaker years with which I was associated was an entirely voluntary effort. The three interviewers knew that most of the transcripts would be closed for a number of years and they had no immediate expectation of making use of any of the material themselves. The interviewers, all academics, were not paid. This was all very well but there were limits to our disinterested commitment and other demands on our professional time finally determined that we should tend to our own more immediate research and writing

interests.

Ideally, of course, interviews should not be done by some third party hired for the purpose but as part of a larger program of research and writing by the authors themselves. Only someone immersed in the field, someone who has developed an intimate knowledge of a particular period or subject both in detail and in all its nuances, is really equipped to carry out an interview in an entirely satisfactory way. I was delighted, therefore, when one of our authors working on the 1950's and 1960's told us that he intended to carry out an extensive series of interviews and that tapes and transcripts would ultimately be deposited with the rest of our material and be available on the same terms. There is something artificial and contrived about hiring people to carry out interviews of this type and I only wish that more of our interviews could be done by the authors themselves. Although I have not yet seen and assessed this particular body of material, I suspect that this is oral history at its best. On the other hand, I recognize that very often if interviews are left to be done in this fashion, they will not be done at all and a body of material of potentially great historical significance will be lost forever.

I might illustrate this by reference to the second group of interviews the OHSS is preparing. As I stated above, the Series has commissioned a three-volume economic history of Ontario and three of the province's leading economic historians are now at work on this project. Their task is a massive one and if much of their material will be found in manuscript form in archival institutions, they will also be drawing on an enormous body of private and public reports, the work of commissions and statistical material. Thus even though the interviewing process might uncover material of considerable significance, it seemed unlikely that our authors would have time and opportunity to do much along this line. There was another consideration. The OHSS of course hopes to produce volumes based on sound scholarship but expects as well to reach a wider audience and for this reason I felt that the material oral history interviews might provide in this field could counter the tendency of some economic history to be aridly statistical or incomprehensibly theoretical. The two of our authors whose subject falls within the period likely to be affected by oral history seemed to concur and greeted the prospect of the development of an oral record of aspects of the province's economic history with considerable enthusiasm. Because the range of subject material is so vast, we agreed to begin with a trial project on the mining industry. Several interviews have been conducted in this field and more are being arranged. The interviewer, who gives us whatever time he can from a busy schedule, is Dr. Douglas Baldwin, a history Ph.D. who has done substantial research in the field of economic history.

Our third group of interviews is on the development of the theatre in Ontario. We were fortunate that Professor Don Rubin of York University's Faculty of Fine Arts, who is the editor of the Canadian Theatre Review, agreed to supervise this group. With the help of an associate, Professor Rubin looks after the preliminary research, conducts the interview, has the tape transcribed and edits the transcript. Several interviews have already been carried out and I am confident that within a year a very considerable body of material will be developed. In contrast to the political and economic series, the OHSS has not yet commissioned any volumes in this field.

As time passes, our emphasis no doubt will shift and we may be able to devote our limited resources to subjects not yet touched upon. Perhaps the most interesting feature of our program is that the tapes and transcripts are being prepared for a particular purpose and will be used in the first instance primarily by authors preparing volumes for the OHSS. At the same time, we are very conscious of the wider significance of the material which is being gathered and expect that eventually it will be of value to the scholarly community in general.

As transcripts are prepared, I naturally have been attempting to assess their value for historians and other scholars. There is no doubt that the quality of the interviews varies greatly and it is equally true that much of what we have collected is trite and trivial. Nonetheless I am confident that some of the material is a significant contribution to historical knowledge. I am one of those who feels that oral history can yield insights and factual knowledge of real significance and that there must be a conscious effort to see that interviews go well beyond the mere provision of amusing anecdotes and insights into character, however important these may be.

At the same time, however, the material which I have seen causes me to be skeptical about the argument which is heard from time to time that the oral record is no different in character from any other historical record, and that all kinds of evidence must be viewed equally critically. It is true, of course, that the historian can never forget his responsibility to subject all his evidence to careful scrutiny and certainly he can be easily led astray by more traditional kinds of documentation. Nonetheless I would argue that because the oral record is a conscious and in some ways artificial construct prepared some time after the event in question, that it is therefore different in kind from other types of evidence the historian uses. It seems to me that those who prepare and use the oral record have not yet given sufficient weight to the tricks that memory can play, to efforts at rationalization and self-justification that all of us make, even if only subconsciously, or to the terrible telescoping of time which an interview often encourages and which runs counter to the very essence of history.

I am not however very concerned about the professional historian's use of such materials. The historian's training ensures, or should ensure, that the oral record will only be a part, usually a small part, of a much larger research effort and that it will be used with discrimination and be subjected to thorough critical analysis. What is unfortunate, however, is that volumes such as Barry Broadfoot's interviews with people who lived through the Great Depression and World War Two should be presented uncritically as historical studies. Broadfoot's works are fascinating and amusing but history they are not. Broadfoot himself seems to accept the titillating stories his subjects have told him as uncritically as many of his readers probably do and these accounts have had a great and not entirely merited popular success.

I suppose, however, that private efforts such as Broadfoot's, while they may create misleading impressions in the minds of some, do little permanent harm and they do serve to collect anecdotes and colour which might otherwise be lost. There is another development in oral history which I, at least, find rather more bewildering. Perhaps I can best illustrate this by reference to a paper read by Charles W. Crawford, president, 1973-1974, of the Oral

History Association of the United States and published in the Oral History Review 1974. Mr. Crawford's subject was "Oral History--The State of the Profession" and in his first two paragraphs he referred to "the oral history movement", the formation of "a professional association" through which supporters of oral history "could mutually advance their interests" and described oral history as a "burgeoning new discipline".

I find all this somewhat pompous, somewhat inflated, and more than a little wrong-headed. For decades, indeed for centuries, scholars have been making use of the oral record in their scholarship and I see little that is very new in any of this. I fail to understand why oral history should be referred to as either a new discipline or as a profession. It seems to me that those scholars and others who are best equipped to use oral history regard it as merely another tool and I am certain that every scholar would prefer to have his work based as little as possible on oral history and as much as possible on other, dare I say it, more reliable kinds of evidence. And surely oral history is not a discipline, new or otherwise; it is simply a useful technique, used throughout the ages, and now, because of the invention of the tape-recorder, capable of more sophisticated refinement. It may be that some of the proponents of oral history, in search of professional eminence, feel that by describing what they do as a new discipline, they themselves will attain a more elevated status. Social science for decades has been plagued by those who emphasize the scientific side of their work by resort to obscurities and jargon. Perhaps those who organize national conferences of "oral historians" where technique and methodology can be studied by practitioners of "the burgeoning new profession" are moved by similar concerns. In a small way, perhaps, we see this reflected in the insistence by some of those active in "the movement", on the use of that peculiarly redundant term, oral/aural history. Most of all, I am puzzled and bemused by the phrase, oral historian. Surely there is no such beast as an oral historian. An historian publishes books and essays which draw on a variety of sources and make a contribution to scholarship. Often he will make use of the oral record in his work; sometimes he will have done a good deal of interviewing himself but I find it hard to believe that he would ever describe himself as an oral historian.

I fail, then, to see the value of national conferences and glossy and essentially vapid oral history journals such as Sound Heritage. To return to my earlier comments, interviewing technique is largely a matter of common sense mixed with experience and the technical side of oral history can be picked up in one's home more conveniently than at a national conference. I can see, to be sure, that a local history workshop can be useful for those just beginning or hoping to begin some kind of an oral history program, and I am sure those who participated in the Ontario Historical Society's May, 1975 workshop would agree. But surely the very real need for occasional exchanges of information and for some kind of an inventory of oral history projects underway in Canada will be met inexpensively and expeditiously by the new publications of the Canadian Oral History Association and by related efforts. We are now entering a period of sharply diminished resources and we must work to ensure that the funds available for scholarship are not squandered or mis-spent. I hope that those who are interested in oral history will spend their time and their money talking about it less and doing it more.

Despite the reservations and caveats noted above, my own conviction is that oral history is likely to become an ever more significant tool of

scholarship. Certainly those familiar stock arguments in favour of oral history--the impact of jet travel and the conference telephone, the end of the tradition of chatty letter-writing and diary keeping and so on-- happen to be true. To these I would add an additional note. Most of us are familiar with the impact of quantification on history and the social sciences. Much of the best and most innovative work in these fields today has a quantitative bent. Much of the rationale for this shift has been the unavailability of traditional sources, particularly for scholars who deal with large social groups, the masses instead of the classes. Perhaps the major weakness of the new social history, however, is that there seems to be very little place in it for real people; flesh and blood individuals have lost out to medians, means, and multiple regression analysis. To a very considerable extent, this has always been the case, even with traditional history, and Donald Creighton rightly laments that "the chief defect of many history books is that their characters are not real people at all. They are lay figures, papier-mâché figures, roughly moulded from the pulp of dispatches, pamphlets and parliamentary papers". For those who believe that the principal short-coming of the new social history is that it is not about real people and that in the final analysis good history should be about people, the contribution oral history can make has never seemed more urgent and more necessary. If scholarly history is to remain a humane discipline, to play a role in general education and to be widely read in the community, the work of oral history must go ahead with imagination and vigour.

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