Articles

ORAL HISTORY: A PUBLISHER'S PERSPECTIVE

by Douglas M. Gibson

La communication de M. Gibson se divise en deux volets. Un premier volet traite du processus de sélection adopté par l'éditeur de témoignages oraux. Les facteurs clé en sont la capacité des récits de rejoindre un "marché" national mais aussi la géographique du terme; la valeur historique des récits; la variété mais aussi la constance logique du contenu; l'attrait de l'ouvrage pour un bouquineur occasionnel et l'importance du "marché spécialisé". Certains autres facteurs entrent en ligne de compte: la fiabilité et l'ardeur au travail de l'auteur; son talent d'écrivain et sa volonté de "vendre" le livre; l'addition de photographies de qualité et surtout, l'intérêt suscité par l'histoire en elle-même. Dans un second volet, M. Gibson aborde la complexité du processus par lequel l'éditeur converti 4000 pages de transcriptions en un livre de 400 pages. En plus de toucher aux difficiles questions de procédure et d'éthique qu'implique ce processus, M. Gibson dresse également, en terminant, la synthèse des problèmes particuliers et des avantages qu'offre la publication de témoignages oraux.

My discussion will fall into two parts. The first will address the question: why does a publisher decide to publish _this_ oral history book and reject _that_ one as unsuitable? The second part will deal in a very personal way with the practical procedures that I as an editor have adopted for turning an oral history manuscript into a book.

To start, let us assume that an oral history manuscript, or a part manuscript, comes into a publishing house for consideration. What yardsticks will be applied to it, what factors will loom large in the editor's mind as he decides yes or no? Looming largest of all will be the simple question: Who will want to buy this book? This simple, obvious question rarely has simple, obvious answers. Usually, life being what it is, non-fiction manuscripts of any sort fall into either the frying pan or the fire. Type A, frying pan books, are titles like _The History of Fredericton_, or _A Guide to Snowmobile Racers of Canada_. They will appeal greatly to a small, easily discernible market; the books will be in great demand in Fredericton or among snowmobile racing buffs and will be snapped up in those circles. But unfortunately those circles are very small, too small to support publication by a sane publisher. A Type B book is one that has great appeal to almost nobody but is of mild interest to a great many people. A book on sleep for example, that breaks no new ground and produces no exciting new revelations is a good example of Type B. An oral history example might be, say, a book of people reminiscing about the most memorable weather conditions they've ever encountered. The problems afforded by such a project are very obvious. It's a book that you might leaf through with some interest in a doctor's waiting room but your mild interest is unlikely to be translated into such enthusiasm that you actually buy the book. And that, I'm afraid, is the fate of Type B books if the publisher is rash enough to accept them--they attract only mild general interest and achieve few sales.

By now the independent thinkers among you will have grasped that the recipe for a successful non-fiction book of any sort is to combine the best of Type A with Type B, that is, to produce a book that will _appeal greatly_ to a _great number_ of people. And in Canada that means assimilating a basic political lesson very fast, that in terms of our reading habits we are not one country (not even two), but roughly half

a dozen, all fiercely independent and resentful of Canadian books from other regions. If that sounds extreme, let me give just one example: Some years ago Harold Horwood and Cassie Brown wrote a wonderful book about the 1914 Newfoundland sealing tragedy entitled Death On The Ice. It received rave reviews in places like the Washington Post and The New York Times, it was published as a great sea story in places like Britain and Australia, but you would have to be extremely persistent to find a copy of a "Newfoundland book" like that in any British Columbia bookstore. And B.C. is not by any means alone in this attitude; all of our regions treat books set in other regions with unified suspicion.

The solution to this problem facing any Canadian book is for the oral historian to make sure, if it is possible, that his or her book is truly national in scope. I have instructed authors to make sure that their research covers literally every province (and don't forget the Yukon or the Northwest Territories) so that from the outset the book can be catalogued as a national one, dealing with the subject from coast to coast. Suspicious Calgary booksellers can be reassured that, yes, there are 36 interviews set in the Calgary area, so the book is bound to be of strong local interest, while the Halifax Chronicle-Herald will be persuaded to run a review with the news that the author spent two weeks in Nova Scotia and has devoted 40 pages to the area.

All of this may sound very cold-blooded, but Canadian publishers have had to develop a certain rat-like cunning to survive in our harsh publishing climate. Their cunning tells them that books that are national in scope are likely to sell far more than those that are not, so a study of Nova Scotia fishermen is likely to be rejected as a publishable idea, while Salt Water, Fresh Water, a study of people across Canada who make their living on the water (and of course the title itself is a careful attempt to demonstrate range) will be snapped up, so to speak, by a publisher. So the author engaged in developing a complementary rat-like cunning will know that publishers want to be able to answer the question, "who will buy this book?", with the words "people across the country".

It's vitally important, too, that the book's theme sound appealing to that hydra headed figment of the publisher's imagination, the general public. Here we are in a purely subjective area, studded with all of the pitfalls that go with subjectivity. But I am willing to stake my publisher's sense--and that of course is precisely what publishers must do every day in the crazed gambling game by which they make their living--that people find, for example, farmers more appealing and interesting, more romantic in fact, than accountants. (Admirers of Monty Python's Flying Circus who ascribe to Wilde's theory that life imitates art will be delighted to learn that the Python sketch, "Why Accountancy Is Not Boring", has been followed, after a decent interval, by a straight-faced series of magazine ads run by the Ontario Institute of Accountants showing what excitingly full lives typical accountants lead.) So that is why we publish books like Remembering the Farm rather than My Most Astounding Audits. Romantic allure clearly envelops figures like fishermen, ranchers, professional sportsmen, loggers, pilots, policemen, journalists and many more, in the same unjust way that it conspicuously avoids assembly line workers, office workers and the people we used to innocently call housewives. In other words, the publisher weighing a manuscript is looking for a hint of romance in the subject that will cause the listener's eyes to light up when he hears that the book is about Canada's cowboys, and cause him to look furtively at his watch when he hears that the book is about Canada's most fascinating accountants.

All of this is not to say that the existence of a small, very specifically interested market, in addition to the general wide interest, is unwelcome. Nothing

could be further from the truth. The shrewd publisher will be selling his book on loggers to the general public saying that you don't need to know anything about logging to enjoy this book, while out of the next quadrant of his mouth he will be trying to sell it as the logger's book to the loggers' union or Macmillan Bloedel. In other words, the size of the specialist or professional market (for example, of farmers for Remembering the Farm) is a far from negligible factor for the publisher.

But when the publisher and his editors agree that a healthy market exists for a good book on this subject, the next question is clear. Is this, or will this become, a good book? Here the publisher is looking for one thing above all--an over-abundance of excellent material. There must be an over-abundance because oral history books live or die by the selectivity that has been applied to them; excellent oral histories usually leave enough material for three or four pretty good books on the same subject discarded in the waste paper basket. And in passing I might mention that 10 to 1 seems to be the very smallest possible ratio that will produce a good selection. If there is not an over-abundance the author must demonstrate willingness to keep plugging away to provide that over-abundance, from which rigorous selection can be made.

The character of the author should be discussed here. I know nothing of the personalities of those assembled here, but from my knowledge of oral history I can hazard a guess that you are all imbued with the Calvinist work ethic to an alarming degree. For with oral history books, more than any other type of book that I have published, the relationship between sheer grinding persistent lonely work and success is clear, direct, and proportional. More than literary talent, more than luck (which plays a distressingly large part in any book's success), it is sheer dogged persistence that makes a successful author of oral histories. As any marathon runner will tell you, you've got to put in the miles, week after week, if you're going to succeed.

And, speaking personally, if I receive the merest hint from correspondence or an interview that an author intends to do the bare minimum, and will go out and get one more story instead of ten when he's told that the book is one story short, then I leave him to be published elsewhere. I want obsessives who are willing to go many extra miles and to lose a lot of sleep to make their book as good as it can be, and not merely good enough.

And on this rock, I might add, most oral history project proposals founder. The author, usually not an experienced oral historian, believes that he has hit on an easy, lazy way to produce a book. He plans to visit an old people's home in Toronto, talk to 15 old people there, devote a 4000 word chapter to the words spoken by each one and there, straight out of the tape recorder, you have a 60,000 word book, ready in a month. And there you have an author exiting from the 70 Bond Street offices of the Macmillan Company wondering what went wrong.

A publisher is not only looking for diligence when he weighs a potential author of an oral history, he's looking for a number of other qualities, the most important of which is honesty. Honesty, I think, speaks for itself. A publisher must feel utterly confident that he can trust this author to handle what may be very sensitive personal material in an honest and entirely responsible way. You have to be able to believe that all of the stories he reports to you are indeed true, and honestly and accurately reported, with no confidences betrayed. Obviously, this is vital.

Much less important, but a factor nevertheless, is the author's willingness and ability to promote his book. I'm grieved by having to play the role of crass publisher here, but the truth is that many people buy hardback non-fiction books not as a result

of reading book reviews but because they heard about the book on Don Harron's Morningside, or they heard the author being interviewed by Betty Kennedy on her show, or heard Jack Webster shouting at him on his show. If the author is unwilling to promote the book in this way, that unwillingness will adversely affect sales. If, on the other hand, the author is willing and able to talk interestingly about the book, the prospects of good sales will be greatly enhanced. I am the author of a grim article that deals at length with the horrors of book promotion (those safely outside the book world chose to regard it as a humorous piece when it ran in Saturday Night, and it was even nominated for an award in that ludicrously inappropriate category), but even so, like some stout, red-faced general far behind the lines, I continue to send my authors up to the front because promoting books, for all of its horrors, does indeed help to sell them.

Other obvious qualities needed by an oral history author are the ability to write clean, straightforward prose (a requirement that mows down applicants by the score), a displayed talent for organization, an eye (or perhaps it should be an ear) for a really good story, and have all the energy and desire to keep working, to keep gathering extra material until the book is overflowing with excellence.

But let me return briefly to the book itself for other factors bearing on the decision to publish or not. A vital one is the question of timeliness. I would imagine for example, that in 1950, Quebec: The People Speak would have been as interesting to Canadians as a 1980 publication of Manitoba: The People Speak. But times change and subjects become timely.

Logical unity is another vital factor. There must be a logical unity to all of the stories and all of the speakers--they must all belong to the same book. Conversely, within that unified context, there must also be a wide variety of available stories that will build up an accurate picture of the range of opinions and experiences without becoming repetitious.

In closing this half of my address, let me mention that there are exceptions to all of the rules that I have promulgated. For example, a factor that I have not mentioned could easily outweigh all of my dire warnings about the need for national scope. If for example a Canadian version of Akenfield came along, I hope that we would have enough sense--and I hope, though with less confidence, that Canadian booksellers would have enough sense--to realize that although the setting is, say, an old Ontario small town, the book is a classic about Canada. There is always room for a classic.

Similarly, we would weight the "perishability" of stories of historic value, and that "perishability" is one of the reasons why we are excited about the prospects for an oral history entitled My Grandfather's War about Canadians in the First World War that we shall be publishing next year. I think you will see why we would be much less interested in a similar collection of stories dealing with the Korean War.

But above all, in judging a manuscript, what we are looking at most keenly is the sheer narrative interest inherent in the available stories. Books that are made up of good well-told stories that will be re-told over office coffee or at the dinner table by readers are books that will succeed and will last.

Now let me change my stride and tell you what happens when I edit an oral history manuscript. Usually before the final manuscript arrives I will have been engaged with the author in plotting his research. We will be concerned to try to make it reasonably representative. For example, I may have suggested that we need some interviews with professional divers, or with ranchers. Or bearing in mind the

book's likely audience, I may have stressed that we need a great many childhood recollections from the Thirties because a large proportion of likely readers will remember the Thirties through childhood recollections. I will probably have discussed with the author the sort of questions that are likely to elicit dramatic stories, such as: "What was the saddest thing you ever saw in those days", or "Do you remember seeing your father cry?", or "What was the funniest thing that ever happened to you at work?". I'm sure I don't have to give this audience further examples of the use of properly emotive, superlative questions or to explain the dramatic results they can obtain in a suitably open-ended interview.

In any case, unless the finished manuscript has come completely out of the blue, I will be familiar with the general area that the author plans to cover. Also, in an ideal world I will have had time to familiarize myself with the subject area, not in any scholarly way, but more as a general reader. Then, when the author's manuscript arrives, the hard part begins.

First of all, I read the entire manuscript right through. As an example that we can follow through step by step, I suggest we use Allan Anderson's Salt Water, Fresh Water, both because it's the most recent oral history book I've worked on (almost precisely a year ago, in fact) and because it represents the editorial role at its fullest extension.

When the manuscript arrived it numbered 4000 8½X11 pages of typescript. From these, by previous agreement between the author and me, the author's questions had been removed by the transcribing service, but the removal had been predictably inexpert and incomplete.

Time for a parenthesis. As early as possible in the process, author and editor should decide what type of oral history book they are producing. It seems to me that the book can be what we might call "author centred", that is, with the author writing the linking narrative that makes up a large proportion of the text, and with the quotes being used merely to punctuate or illustrate the author's discourse. I'm sure that you can all think of numerous examples of this type of book.

Or a book can by "character centred". In other words, like Voice of the Pioneer, the book's organizational thrust will be by character. This chapter will introduce such and such a character briefly, tell us who he is and what he does, and then the bulk of the chapter consists simply of the character's own words right through till the end of the chapter. Then it's time for a new character and a new chapter. Such books require (a) interesting characters (b) sustained interviews, and (c) excellent documentation about the characters.

Or again a book can be what I'll call "story centred". I'd suggest that all of the books on which I've worked--Ten Lost Years, Six War Years, Remembering the Farm and Salt Water, Fresh Water--fall into this category. I know that in all of these cases the organizing factor was the search for good stories. Once the selection of good stories had been made we set about shaping the selection into a book. (In passing I might note that this type of oral history downplays the role of both the author and the individual speaker, who may be left completely unidentified - Broadfoot - or is identified only in the index at the back of the book - Anderson.) But this leads me into Salt Water, Fresh Water.

We knew from the outset that this would be what I've chosen to call a "story centred" book. Thus after my first read-through, I stopped and thought, at length, about the themes that had emerged from the stories. There were lots of exciting

stories about rescues, so perhaps that deserved a special chapter. Jot it down on the list of potential chapters. A lot of accidents at sea and a lot of fires--and a lot of trouble with ice. Should that be three chapters, or two combining the fires with the accidents, or just one? Jot them down as possibilities. A lot of good children's stories, which should make a separate chapter, and the same for a chapter on women. In the end I have a list of forty to fifty potential chapter themes that have come out of the book.

Then back through the material to discover the good stories, whittle them down (roughly, at this stage) and discard the rest. At this stage over 3000 pages of the 4000 are discarded. (I might mention that this work is so intense that, Proust-like, I shut myself up in our guest room and work from the bed--rejected pages to the floor on the right, successful pages, with the stories paper-clipped together into units, to the left. I might add that my wife usually begins by solicitously bringing my meals to me on a tray but after the second day this practice ceases, for reasons I've never quite understood.) The selected pages are marked at the top in pencil with (a) a potential title (thinking up a title to a story fixes it wonderfully in the memory) and (b) in pencil a note on the tentative chapters into which it might fit ("It deals with a kid's memory of a rescue, so it could go in either the Rescue chapter or the Kids chapter. I'll see where it fits best in due course.").

The next step is to go through the chapter titles again and refine that list in the light of greater familiarity with the manuscript. Then comes the acid test--the Gibson Guest Room Floor Test. I literally pave over the floor with legal size sheets with individual chapter titles on them. And then padding about in my socks like a dealer in some mad casino I begin to deal out the manuscript, story by story, to the appropriate part of the floor. As the piles on the yellow sheets begin to rise it soon becomes clear that "we've got too much material on the North--I'll have to whittle that down, and we're going to need two separate chapters on the Psychology of Fishermen". When all of the manuscript has been dealt out in this way it's time for a major re-appraisal of the chapters--there's simply not enough material for a chapter on Women At Work, we'll blend it into the chapter on Women, but have to take some other stories out of there to fill out one of the Psychology of Fishermen chapters. And so on.

When the chapter titles seem to be sensibly established, it's back to the manuscript for the most important part of the refining process. Here the material will be cut by almost 50% as stories are dropped altogether, as too repetitive or simply not interesting enough in context, or as they are trimmed by <u>internal editing</u>.

A word on that. You all know how rare it is to find someone whose talk into a microphone reads well when produced verbatim. I have no moral qualms about helping people to say what they clearly mean to say. So I will cheerfully remove all of the circumlocutions and parenthetical wild goose chases that appear in almost everyone's natural speech and will cut three pages down to two paragraphs. What I will not do is introduce any new words to the speaker's mouth. But I will re-arrange the order of his sentences, condense them greatly so that the original page is a mass of arrows and scorings and blotches that requires re-typing. But you will, I hope, not be surprised to learn, if this process is done in good faith--with the touchstone that you are engaged in helping the speaker to tell the story as he clearly would best wish to tell it--then the storyteller will be delighted. We make a practice of sending a complimentary copy of our books to all the quoted interviewees and <u>not once</u> have we received any complaint that we have falsified their story. I would go so far as to claim that the reason nobody has said "Hey that's not how I told that story" is because what we have worked to produce is the story he thought he told.

In any case the stories are whittled down and provided with, ideally, a good catchy descriptive title that comes directly from the story itself. Assuming that in due course you reach the point where the whittling has to stop--and we're now down to about 450 manuscript pages out of 4000, and also assuming that you now know which chapter every story belongs to, you are faced with two further major problems.

The first is to decide on the order of chapters. My guiding principle in these matters is to start with a chapter containing a very wide range of short, punchy stories that indicate the range of subjects the reader is likely to encounter in the course of the succeeding chapters. Since browsers tend to start at the first chapter, that opening chapter, especially that opening page, is extremely important. So I will normally try to make the first few stories very startling, very different in tone (some tragic, some very funny) and (bearing in mind our regional problems) clearly varied in their geographic settings. Ideally anyone who reads through that first chapter in the bookstore will be hooked by this trailer for the forthcoming main attraction--and lazy reviewers who can't get around to reading the whole book can still give a good account of its varied attractions.

Variety is the keynote in the succeeding chapters. I try to introduce informative chapters early on so that the reader has assimilated the process of trawling before running into several trawling stories in the Accidents chapter that might puzzle a landlubber coming straight to them unprepared. I try to follow chronological common sense by putting a chapter on the early days in early in the book and the same early position is appropriate for people recalling childhood memories. Similarly, an elegiac chapter by definition deserves a place at the end of the book.

Within these general guidelines I place the other chapters on the basis of variety. I follow a sober chapter about accidents and death with a chapter of funny stories. A chapter on the Arctic will be followed by a chapter on fires and a chapter on women by a piece on ice fishing. After a great deal of shuffling--done incidentally, on file cards--the chapter order emerges and the book's main shape takes place.

But perhaps the hardest job of all remains to be done, that of ordering the 20 or 30 stories inside each chapter so that they work. In my experience the analogy is to the world of fiction: a good chapter, involving perhaps 30 different speakers, should read like a good short story. The opening story should be a strong one, perhaps the one from which the chapter title itself is taken, and should set the tone. Then there should be a strong narrative link throughout the chapter as you move from story to story, ending again on one of the most powerful, chosen last because of its powers of reverberation.

When all of the 30 or so chapters have been ordered internally and externally, you have a final manuscript.

At this point the manuscript goes back to the author for his approval and for the addition of the chapter introductions which will set the stories in context, perhaps add a little necessary technical information, or tell a little about the circumstances in which the stories were gathered. The more general, much lengthier Author's Preface will deal with the aim of the book and the procedures by which the material was gathered; frequently this Preface is written while the editor wrestles away with the manuscript, losing two or three years of his life in the two or three hundred-hour weeks that he devotes to the project.

Obviously, I can innocently remark here that an author who is familiar enough with this editorial process to do much of it himself, is likely to be greeted more

warmly than the one who hands in a pile of raw transcripts taller than the average two year old.

But in the meantime the editor will have been looking after the jacket, the illustrations provided by the author now selected and captioned with care, and all of the other details of book publishing will be looked after. In due course, after the usual stages of re-typing (at the author's expense), copy editing, and galley and page proof checking, a finished book emerges. It may even be so well received that the crazed editor is tempted to get involved in the whole mad business of publishing an oral history book again.