

PREPARATION FOR AN ORAL BIOGRAPHY OF GWENETH LLOYD, TEACHER OF DANCE

by Esmé Crampton

It is a fair statement that a biography can be expected to take from three to five years of work from the start of research to the completion of writing. Ideally, it will progress from listing all sources of research, pinpointing people to be interviewed who can supply first-hand oral accounts of the events, and who will perform an essential service in areas where little written material is available. Whatever the size of the list at the start, however, expansion is inevitable since people will suggest more people and further resources. Depending on the proportion available, it may be best that any written material be carefully studied, filed and indexed, and all major events pegged into chronological order. Then as the work develops, book time, or the events covered in each chapter, can be checked against real time.

Taped interviews, along with any travel involved, would be completed as one segment of research. Most likely conducted by the author, time would be saved if a duplicate were made of each tape for possible reference during travel, and if a copy could be sent back to a central office. A typed transcript would then await the author on return. The interview material would next be selected and organized under different categories, and cross-referenced with other sources ready for insertion in a major working draft. The interviews would provide not only background information, both directly and indirectly used, but also the invaluable and lively addition of actual quotes. Once this whole body of material was down, and where possible double-checked for accuracy, further drafts for consistency and style would arise and the more finished process of writing begin.

Having known Gweneth Lloyd when she was teaching in Toronto in the 1950's, the idea of a biography came while spending a Christmas with mutual friends when it was announced that she was to be made a member of the Order of Canada. It was put to her during a phone call to her home in Kelowna, B.C., and having thought it over, she mailed a large parcel of scrap books to the author in January, 1969. The material was typical of more that was to come, the early books going back to her arrival in Canada in 1938 being in fair order, later ones containing undated contents that could, it turned out eventually, be traced as being four years apart on a page, and many loose clippings.

Unlike most books on people mainly known for work in the performing arts, the focus of Next Class, Please! as implied in the title, was to be on the life of a teacher. Albeit an unusual one, who after a strict Edwardian upbringing in England was first a physical education teacher. 'It was never considered any girl would take up dancing as a career. It simply wasn't done.' Great interest however, led to a second teacher training in Greek, or interpretative, dance, which in turn led to ballet, but which meanwhile laid the groundwork for an eventually vital contribution as a choreographer. Gweneth Lloyd immigrated to Canada in her late thirties in 1938 with her partner, Betty Farrally, as a result of an earlier visit to friends in Winnipeg who had said, 'Why don't you come out here? All this has endless opportunity.'

They came simply to teach. Gweneth had never wanted to be a performer or to be connected with the production of ballet, but because they were in a situation where it was little known and to 'show people what ballet is all about', started

a Sunday-afternoon ballet club. Choreography was needed and much on the basis of her second training, Gweneth contributed what eventually amounted to over thirty ballets to a fledgling company. Thus inadvertently, but because of first-class teaching of totally inexperienced dancers, she helped found a small but now world-famous company. As a present official says, 'There was absolutely no logic behind the beginning of The Royal Winnipeg Ballet.'

Briefly there was then a split with the company, and having also helped to establish ballet festivals, which later led to the beginnings of the now vast regional ballet movement in the States, Gweneth came to Toronto to teach. Meanwhile she continued with one foot in the West, setting up during nineteen summers the important Ballet Division at the Banff Centre, and continuing to choreograph and attend major events of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. In 1958 after a final split with the company she re-joined Betty Farrally in B.C. where they have since, as Globe and Mail critic John Fraser noted, 'taught everything that moves' in the Okanagan Valley.

This, then is the background for the foreword by Margot Fonteyn who once described teaching as a 'separate talent' and who writes, 'It is fitting that for once a book should be devoted to the king-maker rather than the kings.' And this was the outline that gradually began to emerge from the primary source of 33 tapes, made with 41 people between April 1969 and April 1974. These were invaluable, because while whenever possible the author made a quick, long-hand transcript within a couple of days of each interview, there was rarely time to cross-refer, check and intersperse the material for some months. The demands of a fascinating but often pressured teaching job meant that just as enough energy and retention of facts were built up, they had, as one of the hazards of much writing, to be let drop. It is perhaps worth mentioning, however, that in the author's present involvement in speech communication lay part of the interest in the whole process of the interviews. For where work in the theatre was earlier concerned with helping people lift the written word off the page to become the spoken word, now the challenge was reversed into selecting the spoken word for the record of print.

But however illegible these long-hand transcripts to anyone else, one factor remained constant: each page, and in some cases major sections and paragraphs, carries note of the footage on the tape recorder. This later provided quick-reference for clarification and mood during re-play; and in many cases paragraphs were given rough marginal headings: "Trouble with Board - Leaving Winnipeg" or "Arriving T'o" or "Banff" or "Festivals". Gradually these were interconnected within many of the interviews, and so the detailed progression of events evolved.

The progression required the dovetailing of different influences on a life spent in six major locations: Cambridge, London and Leeds in England; Winnipeg, Toronto and the Okanagan in Canada. And for two reasons there were further requirements which seem conditional to much writing, particularly on the performing arts in Canada.

First their origins are often somewhat improbable so that a contribution can only be fully appreciated against the almost happenstance of their beginnings. For example, it is now easy to take for granted the prestige of the Stratford Festival, and so valuable to remember that it grew out of the aspirations of a young newspaperman struck with productions of Shakespeare in wartime England; and out of an initial committee idea that performances could be given in a bandshell in the park. So it is noted about the beginnings of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, 'There was an audacity

about the enterprise.....Whoever in their right minds would have set out to create a ballet company in a city over a thousand miles from anywhere, without previously trained dancers, albeit with local goodwill, or any official plan or funds of any kind?'

Second, apart from the background to such improbabilities, there is a long-time invisible hole in the life of the arts in Canada: no national press, and so no national coverage and public understanding and appreciation of developments across the country; and so until recently no emergence of consistent standards in the balancing but informing act of criticism. While journals and newsletters of various organizations carry specific news and comment, the general public has little chance of interest in this mirror of cultural development. Were the same coverage given to the arts, proportionate to the budget, as to sports, it would be interesting to see how a new sense of pride and involvement might arise.

Which brings us back to the fact that primarily regional coverage in the media requires some filling-in of an otherwise other-planet background for appreciation of a final picture. So the beginnings of the Shaw Festival arose out of one set of circumstances, and of the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton out of another; and so the beginnings of the National Ballet of Canada, which required tracing in the text, out of one set, and those of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet out of another.

So these interviews and fourteen untaped conversations were made across Canada, and fortunately more than half the people involved were already known to the author, which made for ease of contact. In many other cases the head office of the Royal Academy of Dancing in Canada, a world-wide organization devoted to maintaining standards of teaching and performing, was helpful in lining up interviews with visiting examiners and with teachers who were in town for special courses. Meanwhile the author's life continued with a round of conferences and committee work, different kinds of writing, a sad case of illness in the home, and a later personal need for leave-of-absence.

Gradually, as drafts of two or three chapters were completed they were mailed to Gweneth Lloyd for comment, and later there was again help from the Royal Academy of Dancing. Checking details and approach was essential, for the author, though a teacher versed in theatre, is not a dancer. But the text contains a myriad of facts on dance history, the evolution of some forms of dance, and the development of a choreographer, all set within the life of a teacher who cheerfully sees her middle years happening to co-found a company as 'a bump on a log'. Yet such background must be accurate and phrased to the needs of both the knowledgeable and the general reader.

One instance will illustrate the need for such feedback. There is, for example, a note at the beginning of the text which explains why lack of previous research, the destruction of all of some records in a disastrous fire, and the untimely deaths of some people who could have given invaluable material, led to the use of recorded collections of those involved. 'But when two or more people recollect events that occurred thirty and more years ago they can, through the vagaries of memory, the part they played, and their very personalities, filter through slightly different versions of the same event. As far as possible those versions which are in agreement have been joined, and the people concerned left to tell the story from within their own experience.'

Gweneth felt that one section, which had taken months of preparation and

required the careful cutting and pasting of quotes from five people, plus the use of program notes and microfilm material, was not totally accurate. To find out where all this stood it had been essential to go ahead with the draft, and she then suggested it be sent to someone whose interview had been unavoidably delayed. The response was invaluable, but meant a complete re-write involving a whole new cut and paste, now including a sixth person, which took four months of slow undoing and redoing to complete before being checked again.

It is hoped that the above points will indicate the type of use, to which what is now becoming regarded as oral history, can be put in research. In fact the opportunity that this report gives to do a first overview of progress gives focus to the vital contribution of the tapes. Eliminate them, and even substitute regular interviews with notes, and there could never have been the recall of detail and atmosphere so necessary to having to write over a long period of time. The final draft was re-worked for over a year, this being the first time that help was used in the typing, and the manuscript, complete with acknowledgements, reading list, and the dates, composer and designer of all Gweneth Lloyd's ballets, is now being read by publishers.

The useful length of each major interview tends to be from one to two hours. The recorded section may take up only part of the total; there will be need of some before and after discussion; and there is often a lull around the middle. The compression of thought and concentration of memory required, however generously given, is a demanding process. The sharing and listening involved, including the establishing of a rapport between sometimes comparative strangers also needs the occasional relaxation of chat.

It is preferable that the interviewer is, if not knowledgeable, at least well-read and briefed in the subject to be discussed. Upon such background, casting the right questions has a fair chance of reaping useful answers. There is also occasional need to probe, if thought necessary, without giving offence; and being an encouraging listener can aid the chemistry of the situation. When the appointment is made it is useful to indicate the parameters of the material to be covered. This gives the contributor a chance to bring to mind some of the main facts, and sometimes to have diaries and scrapbooks available. Even more important, there is time to think over what happened, and what to say about it.

For such reasons the recorded interview tends to begin with what, not unkindly, might be called a party piece. This is the non-memorized, but perhaps mulled-over reminiscence that the contributor particularly wants to express. Even if the interviewer has a carefully-ordered series of questions, which are fine as an eventual aid to memory in covering various angles, it can be as well to let these go and open the ears to this core material. While valuable within the total context, the initial expression is sometimes not as free-flowing as later material; and usually nearer the end impressions become freer and more spontaneous. During these moments additional and occasionally unexpected material surfaces, often expressed in the idiom typical of the uniqueness of the particular person. This factor is perhaps one of the most stimulating factors in gathering oral history, for in using what has been called the vernacular of speech, a pathway of expression may be opened that is especially illuminating.

During one interview, for example, an apt phrase was used about one of Boris Volkoff's dancers, who as a budding mathematician (everybody did something else in those days) kept a whole company to a difficult rhythm because, "he kept everything

in little patterns in his mind". And the same person contributed, "Opening night was unforgettable. You felt the empathy before the applause came. You know how you sense it without words. Just a message that goes back and forth."

Selection of the spoken word for quotes which can enliven final writing requires an ear for use, and relevance, of dialogue. What speaks well does not always read well, for sometimes without the flavour of the voice and a certain relish of the words, anecdotes do not sit as happily under the pen as they can on the tongue. Lighter moments and touches of humour, especially when emanating from different cultures, can be specially challenging to transcribe. Final selection, directly or indirectly used, must be geared to the needs of the text. Because speaking takes so much less time than writing there tends to be a considerable overflow; and it is often necessary to listen to a lot to garner a few pearls. But contents that are indexed and filed may provide useful cross-reference for subsequent areas of research.

For example, the average rate of speaking is estimated at 125 w.p.m. Most of the tapes used were C90s (45 minutes per side) and one was a C120 (60 a side, not recommended because of thinness of material, and actually damaged but resuscitated by a helpful technician). So one side of an average tape can give 5,625 words, and in most cases two sides were fully used, which over the total 33 tapes meant a gathering of some 371,250 words. Add in those heard during 14 untaped conversations, and discussion generally, and the total listening would amount to near half a million words. Which, apart from other sources of general reading, some microfilm, and program notes (sometimes found inaccurate) were synthesized into a text of approximately 148,000 words.

Why do it? No one ever knows at the start of a project where the adventure will lead; and, as can be imagined, some areas were particularly challenging in fitting together otherwise little known material. There is also the factor that when you teach, especially in connection with the arts, it is important to remember what it is like to face the needs of a discipline. And, as the man replied when asked why he murdered his wife, "It seemed like the thing to do at the time".