

Oral Historian Named to the Order of Canada

Alexander Freund, University of Winnipeg

Dr. James Morrison, one of Canada's foremost oral historians, has been named a Member of the Order of Canada by the Governor General of Canada, Michaëlle Jean. He sees this honour for his lifetime achievement in oral history and his work with multicultural groups as a tribute to oral history in Canada: "Needless to say, I am very honoured by the award, but I also interpret it as recognition of the validity and value of what we do as oral historians." Morrison, a history professor at Saint Mary's University, will be presented with the award at a ceremony in 2009.



James H. Morrison, C.M.

Professor Morrison is past president of the Canadian Oral History Association and past editor of its journal. Next to his teaching, research and publications on oral history he has also been instrumental in the oral history program of Pier 21 - Canada's Immigration Museum in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The Order of Canada, whose motto is "Desiderantes Meliorem Patriam" (They desire a better country), is "the centrepiece of Canada's honours system and recognizes a lifetime of outstanding achievement, dedication to the community and service to the nation. The Order," as described by the Governor General, "recognizes people in all sectors of Canadian society. Their contributions are varied, yet they have all enriched the lives of others and made a

difference to this country."¹

In proud celebration and recognition of our esteemed colleague's achievement, we are publishing an interview with Jim Morrison that we conducted via email.²

Interview with James Morrison

When, where, and how did you come to oral history?

Initially, I was greatly influenced by the stories I heard growing up in the village of Economy, Nova Scotia. Genealogy, tall tales and humorous stories were all part of my rural environment. At Acadia University in the 1960s I became interested in African history and travelled to Ghana, West Africa to teach English. While there, I met many African scholars who were using oral tradition to collect and preserve African history in the absence of the written record. I received a Commonwealth Scholarship in 1969 to further my studies in African history at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria which was a major centre of oral tradition and oral history techniques with such fine scholars as Jacob Ade Ajayi, Remi Adeleye, and J. Bertin Webster -- all leaders in the field of oral studies. I completed my Ph.D., much of which was based on oral research, from the University of Ibadan in 1976 and returned to Canada.

What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of oral history?

Oral history primarily gives voice to the voiceless; it allows those who are undocumented to have a presence in the written record. It may also serve to challenge the archival record; to provide the emotion and personal feelings about an event that the record does not express. The weakness is of course in the possibility of a faulty memory by the informant and the fact that the written record cannot change itself with time whereas the oral record often does. These are methodological issues that the researcher must consider when assessing the value of the oral record.

What role did your international experience play in your understanding and practice of oral history?

My international experience assisted me in realizing the universality of the value and validity of the oral record in every society, whether it was the oral traditions that traced back some 300 years in Nigerian history, the suppressed experiences of the Chinese Singaporeans during the Japanese occupation of World War II, or the lack of an historical record everywhere in the world for minorities, women and children.

How has the practice of oral history in Canada changed since you first entered the field?

When I first entered the oral history field in Canada, the Canadian Oral History Association was just getting off the ground, oral history was for the most part dismissed as rumor and hearsay by historians, and social history -- that is, "history from the bottom up" as it was expressed then -- was just getting started. Today

oral history has considerably more legitimacy among historians and it is also being used more extensively by other history practitioners in museums, heritage organizations, and cultural societies.

What advice would you give to a graduate student considering using oral history interviews as a source for an M.A. thesis or dissertation?

A graduate student should first ask “Is the historical record for my research area complete without oral history?” “Does oral history provide information or perceptions that the written records do not contain?” “Does the written record adequately explain the motivations of the person(s) being studied and if not, will oral history do that?” The utilization of oral history should begin after the written record has been researched and like the written record may have to be consulted more than once. It is time consuming, labour intensive and at times frustrating so do not leave it till the end. Oral history is not an “add on” but an integral part of the research and must be done professionally by the researcher. The historian is expected to have consulted all sources, otherwise the research is incomplete. Ensure that the oral history is preserved in an appropriate archive. Ensure that the people interviewed are cited for their contributions in the text, footnotes and bibliography. To add to the urgency there is the unspoken understanding that unlike the written record these untapped oral sources will disappear in the natural course of events and be lost to all researchers.

What are you most proud of when you look at your many achievements in oral history?

The many community and cultural group workshops that I have taught over the years that have made members of the public aware of the value of oral history; the first university oral history course in Canada which I initiated at Saint Mary’s University in the 1980s and my international oral history work in Africa and Southeast Asia are things that I am proud to have done.

Bibliography of James H. Morrison’s publications relating to oral history:

We Have Held Our Own: The Western Interior of Nova Scotia 1800-1940
(National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, Parks Canada, Environment Canada 1981).

Work, Ethnicity, and Oral History, ed. with Dorothy Moore (International Education Centre, 1988)

Camps and Classrooms (A Pictorial History of Frontier College) (Frontier College Press, 1989)

Oral History in Southeast Asia: Theory and Method, with Lim Pui Huen and Kwa Chong Guan (National Archives of Singapore and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998)

¹ Governor General of Canada, Honours, Order of Canada, at: http://www.gg.ca/honours/nat-ord/oc/index_e.asp (accessed 1 March 2009).

² Alexander Freund and James H. Morrison, Email exchange, 8, 9, 25 Feb., 17 Mar., 26 April 2009.