

Shorter Articles

Oral History in Canada: An Archivist's Commentary

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Oral history has reached a hiatus in its development in Canadian archives. No longer does anyone insist very emphatically that archives ought not to acquire and preserve oral recollections of the past. The statement by Hugh Taylor, Director of the Archives Branch at the Public Archives of Canada, that "oral history does not 'create' records, but rather it records responses available in no other form,"¹ is typical of the justification usually offered by archivists to explain their interest in oral history. Other justifications, emphasizing the potential value of oral history, that is, to fill the gaps in traditional documentation, to capture the flavour of a personality, to replace the traditional function of a diary and personal correspondence, and so forth, have become almost a litany. Yet beyond this lip-service, oral history has not attained a secure place within Canadian archives. A fledgling oral history programme at the Provincial Archives of Alberta was recently terminated despite an accumulation of revenue in the Alberta Heritage Fund. Most of the provincial archives, with the exception of the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, uncritically accession the taped interviews which enthusiasts dump on their doorstep. The Public Archives of Canada provides technical advice, the occasional loan of equipment and tape, and preserves tape-recorded interviews on an *ad hoc* basis, but plays little part in initiating interviews. Local archives continue to have some important though random projects which interested individuals have pursued. Although current austerity measures by governments may jeopardize the continuance of some of these programmes, the fault if oral history fares badly will lie with the archivist and not with financial stringency.

1 Hugh A. Taylor, "Canadian Archives: Patterns from a Federal Perspective," *Archivaria* 2 (Summer 1976): 17. This justification is further elaborated by Taylor in a paper, "Oral History and Archives," presented to the Canadian Oral History Association Conference in Ottawa, September 1976, and to be published in the *Canadian Oral History Association Journal*, Spring 1977.

Archivists in Canada have been aware of the oral history movement for almost a decade. The first organized discussion of oral history in Canada took place at the session of the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association in June 1968,² when a committee of the Archives Section was formed to examine oral history in Canada, resulting in a symposium being convened in June 1969.³ Out of this committee grew the Canadian Aural/Oral History Association, founded at Simon Fraser University in 1974.⁴ Archivists have been very much involved in this Association, although the membership, now approaching 200, reflects a much broader academic and popular sphere. Archivists have also made a significant contribution to most oral history workshops of recent years, keeping abreast of the developments in oral history and encouraging adequate preservation of oral history interviews.⁵

This contrasts with the American experience where the initiatives in oral history originally derived from universities, most notably Columbia, and where oral history transcripts are now being marketed successfully. Archival involvement has been limited primarily to the ambitious and successful oral history projects of the presidential libraries. Recently historical societies and community organizations have become excited by oral history, although university programmes continue to provide the leadership in the development of the field. Canadian academics have admitted to taking up oral history in recent years in the course of their research projects, but unfortunately have not given much attention to the general development of oral history in Canada.

The self-designated term *oral historian* has provided one of the fundamental problems of the enterprise from the beginning, damaging its credibility in both the academic and archival spheres. The procedure of asking participants to recall what happened at a particular moment is as old as the study of history itself and is accepted journalistic and academic

2 *Canadian Archivist* 1, no. 7 (1969): 50-55.

3 See report of this symposium together with first preliminary survey of oral history collections in Canada in *Canadian Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1971): 49-70.

4 Proceedings published in *Sound Heritage* 4, no. 1 (1974). The name of the association was changed to the Canadian Oral History Association at the annual meeting in St. John's in 1975.

5 The Public Archives of Canada and the Public Archives of British Columbia are two archival institutions with a substantial involvement in oral history. The Aural History Programme in British Columbia began as the Reynoldston Research and Studies Institute in historical geography and oral tradition but has now moved under the aegis of the Provincial Archives and has an active programme of initiating interviews on British Columbia's past. The Public Archives of Canada, though having no resources for the creation or systematic acquisition of oral history, has acted as a clearing house for oral history projects across Canada. It has supported the formation and growth of the Canadian Oral History Association, giving the Association its first president in Léo La Clare, head of that institution's Sound Archives.

practice. The current inclination to fashion a new discipline because of the portable tape recorder generates a well-deserved scepticism. Furthermore, new disciplines often encourage a self-conscious and self-serving jargon—all regrettable characteristics of too many oral historians.

The term originated in 1948 with Allan Nevins, history professor at Columbia, and the oral historian soon became firmly established at a number of American universities. The Oral History Association, founded in 1966, now has a membership of more than 1,300 and publishes a quarterly *Newsletter*, an annual *Review*, and periodic bibliographies. Indeed, the vitality of the movement now allows even Louis Starr, the successor to Allan Nevins at Columbia, to admit that the term does not accurately describe the enterprise and is a misnomer:

While it is true that oral history begins with an oral narration, usually in the presence of a tape-recorder run by the interviewer, the end product is a typewritten transcript, edited, indexed, bound and preserved—not as history but in the hope that it may one day prove of value as historical source material.⁶

At the same time it is clear that the misnomer has gained a wide currency. Journalists Studs Terkel and Barry Broadfoot have struck veritable gold mines with their popular publications of oral history, as well as earning grudging acknowledgement from academics, although with some legitimate caveats.⁷ Thus it seems futile to belabour the continued use of the misnomer and pointless to refuse to acknowledge it.

In this context the invention by the Provincial Archives of British Columbia of the new term *aural history* only serves to further obscure and confuse the original misnomer. The justification for the use of the word *aural* is simply that the institution collects recorded sounds other than just oral history interviews:

This difference in terminology emphasizes the importance of the *quality* of sound and the need to create, preserve, and use not only interviews but also the wide range of other historical sound recordings such as music, sound effects, disappearing sounds, folklore, and speeches.⁸

This effort of the Provincial Archives of British Columbia to broaden its perspective ought to be welcomed since few institutions systematically

6 Louis M. Starr, "Oral History: A Term Becomes a Movement," George C. Marshall Research Library *Newsletter* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1969).

7 Though cautiously favourable, academic reviewers have pointed to the dangers of accepting a recollection as a literal account of an event and have lamented the lack of identification of the interviewees. These qualifications have by no means diminished the popularity of published oral history: Barry Broadfoot's *Ten Lost Years* has sold 60,000 and *Six War Years*, 35,000, in their hardcover editions and cheaper paperback copies are now available.

8 W.J. Langlois, ed., *A Guide to Aural History Research* (Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1976), p. 1. Recent issues of *Sound Heritage* are occasionally using the term *oral history*, which may signal an abandonment of the term *aural history*.

collect and preserve a wide range of historical sound recordings.⁹ However, a perfectly adequate, if less exotic description of this activity has come into common usage under the name of *sound archives*, a term accepted internationally with the founding of the International Association of Sound Archives in 1969. Furthermore, the use of the term *history* to describe a programme within an archival context is questionable. Archivists in Canada have attempted in recent years to distinguish their work from that of historians and to demonstrate a readiness to serve wider interests than those of "history". Although the periodical, *Sound Heritage*, published by the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, provides an opportunity to write history, the primary mandate of archives must surely be to acquire material that may one day be of historical research value.

One of the features of oral history projects is the burst of energy and excitement with which new projects are launched. The equipment is inexpensive, readily available, and appears to be simple to operate, and thus tempts many to give it a try. Moreover, that old-timers with unique memories tend to die lends an irrefutable urgency to this enthusiasm. Historical societies have seen oral history as an obvious opportunity to record the remembrances of their older members. Several federal government programmes, notably Opportunities for Youth, New Horizons, and Explorations have further stimulated this enthusiasm by giving grants to oral history projects. The proliferation of oral history manuals and how-to pamphlets reflects this enthusiasm and is an attempt to establish improved and more systematic procedures.¹⁰ Similarly, periodical publications have emerged to meet this interest and although they are evidence of the widely divergent interest in oral history across Canada,

9 Canadian institutions with a long involvement in sound archives are the National Museum of Man, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the Public Archives of Canada. The Anthropology Division of the Museum was established in 1910 and the first recordings were made in 1911 by Marius Barbeau. Its creation and preservation of sound recordings have continued to the present with the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies and the Canadian Ethnology Service now both housing considerable collections of sound recordings. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation began systematically to collect and preserve sound recordings with the establishment of the Programme Archives Department for the English network in 1959 in Toronto and a similar department for the French network in 1963. The Public Archives of Canada established its historical sound recordings unit in 1967 and now has an active sound archives programme.

10 Of the numerous American manuals that have surfaced, Willa K. Baum's *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*, published by the American Association for State and Local History in Nashville is the most popular. For Canadian publications see Jane McCracken, ed., *Oral History: Basic Techniques* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, 1974); Public Archives of Canada, *Manual: Sound Archives* (Ottawa, 1975); and W.J. Langlois, ed., *A Guide to Aural History Research* (Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1976).

much discussion of oral history is found outside of the pages of these journals.¹¹

A curious phenomenon associated with the development of oral history in Canada is that the interest and energy of the creators of the material have often not been matched by research interest. Frequently, oral history material has been created with very specific purposes in mind, the creator being at the same time the researcher, and the material is put to its intended use before much thought is given to archival preservation. However, oral history acquired and preserved by an archives for undefined future use has thus far received very little research attention. Use will undoubtedly increase with the passage of time as more and more interviewees are no longer available to be re-interviewed and when researchers more fully appreciate oral history. Still, this lack of interest needs to be acknowledged frankly and examined thoroughly, since merely eloquent and energetic defences of oral history will become inadequate rationales for continuing oral history acquisition in archives.¹²

The undefined role of the interviewer is a principal problem in oral history. Archivists need to consider this matter, for their perception of the proper role of the interviewer is an important consideration in the selection of oral history interviews for preservation. Interviews conducted for a specific project present no problem. The historian collecting material for a political biography, a broadcaster assembling a documentary on the quality of life in an ethnic community, or a folklorist tracing the embellishment of an historical event into a legend, has specific purposes in mind and conducts interviews to suit those ends. Archives can and should acquire oral history created in this way, being careful also to record the context within which the material was created. However, when interviews are conducted simply for posterity without a specific research project in view, a clearer conception of the role for the interviewer is required. The literature on oral history interviewing promotes the view that the interviewer must remain as neutral and unobtrusive as possible, that he should be well prepared but that his perspective on an issue and his opinions should not become evident.¹³ His perspective is deemed to be

11 See *Sound Heritage*, published by the Provincial Archives of British Columbia and its predecessor, Reynoldston Research and Studies Institute. The *Bulletin* of the Canadian Oral History Association is an important forum for news about the Association, oral history workshops and new projects whereas the *Journal* (first annual issue published in Spring 1976) includes longer and more theoretical articles.

12 It is interesting and perhaps useful to note the success, in terms of research demand, of the oral history projects of Columbia University and the Presidential Libraries. These projects have been unapologetically elitist and primarily biographical. A critical and systematic examination of the research use of oral history might be useful in determining what sort of historical information oral history can most usefully provide.

13 An important but often disregarded exception to this orthodoxy is the York University

largely irrelevant to the research usefulness of the information offered in an interview. Columbia University's oral history programme does not even list the name of the interviewer together with the published descriptions of the interviews in its collection, thereby suggesting that the researcher does not need to know the biases and orientation of the interviewer to evaluate the interview.

The striving for neutrality and objectivity by oral history interviewers is a legitimate attempt to ensure the enduring research value of the interviews and to allow the interviewee's story to emerge. However, this insistence upon the neutrality of the interviewer forgets the necessary subjectivity of most archival documents. Moreover, this view ignores the dynamics of the personal relationship between interviewer and interviewee, which will inevitably affect the quality and nature of the information preserved in an oral history interview. The results of this attempted neutrality are often characterized by bland, uninterested and almost inarticulate questioning, a fact painfully apparent upon auditioning and cataloguing many hours of oral history interviews. All too often such questioning elicits a like response in the interviewee. The interviewer has succeeded in remaining a faceless individual, but has reduced his interviewee to the same anonymity. The interviewer needs to stimulate, sometimes provoke, and at other times quietly acquiesce. He must deal honestly with his interviewee if he hopes to elicit a frank recollection of the past.

Though not articulated, an instinctive recognition of this lack of focus of many oral history projects may be a reason why many potential users—researchers, broadcasters and others—have not made greater use of the oral history resources already in archives. Many researchers have preferred to do the interview again, if possible, with their specific purpose in mind. Archives should consider the systematic acquisition of oral history interviews already being conducted by a wide variety of researchers. Such interviews, conducted for specific projects, may prove to be research documents of greater value than those conducted simply for posterity. In this regard, interviews conducted by professional broadcasters, particularly those commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), can be legitimate oral history and should be preserved in an archives. The CBC uses a wide network of free-lancers, many of

oral history project concerning the Diefenbaker government. Project personnel developed the technique of having two or three interviewers for one session and actively challenging the interviewee. A useful exercise might be to compare the results of these interviews with the more passive interviews conducted by Peter Stursberg for his books *Diefenbaker: Leadership Gained*, and *Diefenbaker: Leadership Lost*, on the same Diefenbaker years. See J.L. Granatstein, "Oral Interviews: York University Oral History Programme," *Canadian Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1971): 32-36.

whom are chosen because of their specific expertise and their proven interviewing abilities, gives them considerable resources to do the necessary research and travel, and encourages a thoughtful and penetrating style of questioning. The qualities that ensure good broadcasting often are akin to good history in that superficialities are avoided and a sincere effort is made to probe and to understand an event or personality. Moreover, such material is in danger of being destroyed since the cost of magnetic tape prompts the free-lancer to erase the tapes and to re-use them on the next project after the most entertaining nuggets have been excerpted for broadcast. Tax credits could be used by public archives to encourage the preservation of such material. The Provincial Archives of British Columbia and the Public Archives of Canada have made important beginnings in recognizing the value of oral history produced by broadcasters but much of this material will continue to be lost if not pursued aggressively by archives. Archives must clearly recognize that subject expertise possessed by an interviewer is fundamental to oral history worthy of preservation. In some circumstances the archivist may be the appropriate person to do the interviewing; he is often a specialist in a particular area and he may know personally the people to be interviewed. The interviewer should not be intimidated by the technology nor by the mystique of interviewing techniques. However, neither the archivist nor the *oral historian* of either the *oral* or *aural* variety has any exclusive claim on the practice of interviewing.¹⁴

Once oral history interviews have been acquired by an archives on a critical and selective basis,¹⁵ they need to be made accessible to

14 "But what is critical to archivists in the oral history process is not archival expertise but, rather, subject expertise. An archivist does not have to know much about the operation of an automobile company to know that the minutes of the company's Executive Board are a valuable source and should be preserved. However, he had better know something about automotive engineering if he wants to do an intelligent interview of an automotive engineer on the development of the internal combustion engine. Let me say this in another way. If a historical building is to be torn down, good archival sense demands a photographic record of the structure before it goes. Now, of course, whoever does the photography will need to know such things as how to operate the camera, what film to use, and the proper exposure. These can easily be learned. But what cannot be learned so easily is whether or not the building is historically or architecturally significant, what details are most important, what views are most useful for future study, and other such matters that only the architectural historian is likely to know. The archivist's job is to know what buildings are coming down and who is qualified to take on the historical assessment. If, of course, the archivist happens to be an architect also, he can do it in good conscience himself. The point is that subject expertise demands the emphasis in oral history." Ronald L. Filippelli, "Oral History and the Archives," *American Archivist* 39, no. 4 (October 1976): 480.

15 Some criteria for evaluating which oral history interviews deserve to be acquired and preserved are developed in "Archival Techniques and Aural History Research,"

researchers. The nature of restrictions anticipated by both the interviewer and the interviewee needs to be clarified. Oral history enthusiasts often do interviewees and prospective researchers a disservice by avoiding the issue of restrictions completely. Legal experts insist on the preparation of a written statement signed by both interviewer and interviewee specifying restrictions and ownership of copyright. Whether copyright is considered to be shared or held by either the interviewer or interviewee, it needs to be clarified. Copyright could be assigned to archives, or at least an expiry date could be determined in order to avoid the nightmare of perpetual copyright protection, as in the case of private correspondence. Unrealistic and unduly severe copyright restrictions tend to result in virtually no copyright protection, since such restrictions are simply ignored unless they are policed effectively.

The physical problems of researching in sound recordings also require more attention. Cataloguing and indexing need to become fairly sophisticated as browsing within a tape recording and referring back and forth is not nearly so simple or effective as it is with printed material.¹⁶ Cataloguing procedures will always tend to differ from one archives to the next, but should not develop in isolation. Reference services to oral history collections should be integrated with the central reference services of an archives to prevent the oral history resources from being neglected simply because their existence is not known.

The transcription of recorded interviews is one common means of making them more accessible. Although this is a lengthy and costly process which fundamentally changes the nature of the medium, it is undeniably of great service to the potential user of the material. Since we read faster than we speak, the traditional format of the printed word is more efficient. For such reasons, the major American oral history projects transcribe virtually all of their interviews, thereafter sometimes not preserving the original tape recordings. Although lip-service is given to the tape recording as the original source document, the transcript remains the overwhelming favourite of researchers.

Transcribing also raises questions other than financial, for it involves some degree of editing, as manuals and writings on oral history (and

Langlois, *A Guide to Aural History Research*, Chapter 3. See also J. Elaine M. Kendal, "Oral Sources and Historical Studies," (Master's thesis, University of Alberta, 1976).

16 "The problems encountered here are similar to those encountered with microfilm, which also requires a 'playback device' and with which it is also difficult to zero in on a given item supposedly contained in the film. . . . Anyone who can suffer microfilm readers can probably suffer equipment like this, so there is every reason to believe it will eventually be widely used by researchers into sound documents. The notion of using gadgetry to get at historical data is becoming less and less alien." Kendal, "Oral Sources and Historical Studies," pp. 52-53.

readers of the Mackenzie King diaries¹⁷) have pointed out. The personal discretion and judgement exercised in going from the spoken to the written word will be greater than in producing a typescript from a written copy; archivists who transcribe will risk being attacked as harshly as have been the transcribers of the King diaries. How ever great the gratitude of the researcher may be for a neatly typed version of King's almost illegible handwritten diaries, such copying is not the first priority of an archives. Similarly, the transcribing of oral history interviews by an archives ought to be considered a luxury, albeit a desirable one.

Whether or not archives consciously and intelligently resolve the host of issues presented in this paper, oral history activity will continue to accelerate. Many people believe that archives are systematically acquiring and preserving much more oral history than is the case. It can be a high-visibility programme since a wide spectrum of the population can appreciate the rationale for oral history and it is thereby more populist than many archival programmes.

The advantages of the acquisition and preservation of oral history interviews by archives are much the same as for other documents. Non-archival institutions, by their very nature, often tend to identify with the interests of their immediate and initial researcher and cannot make commitments to long-term preservation, to the protection of donors, and to equitable access for all researchers. And oral history interviews pose special preservation problems because of the medium (magnetic tape) and because of their invasion of the privacy of the individual. Nonetheless, oral history collections will accumulate in non-archival institutions and archives need not be narrowly protective about their exclusive claims to expertise. Archives ought to be aware of the existence of such collections and when opportunity presents itself offer technical and procedural advice.

Oral history programmes within archives therefore need consistent and ongoing funding. It need not be lavish but should be clearly identified and well justified. An oral history programme must be well integrated within the over-all acquisition activity of an archives rather than be an independent project going its own way.¹⁸ Given an honest and critical facing of these questions, oral history interviews in archives undoubtedly hold an exciting potential for bringing the personalities and perceptions of our time alive for succeeding generations.

17 "This was more than a task of deciphering the handwriting—though it was certainly that, and arduous. It was a task of expurgation. In the typescript pages from which Dawson worked there would occasionally appear a row of four dots within brackets to indicate excision." James Eayrs, "Oedipus Rex," *Canadian Forum* 56 (June-July 1976): 31.

18 An opposite view is explained by Filippelli in "Oral History and the Archives," pp. 479-483. He suggests that administrative efficiency is gained by separating oral history from other functions of an archives.