Oral History and the Canadian Labour Movement

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To the historian, oral history is a useful tool; to the labour historian it is an essential one. Unlike his colleagues in political, diplomatic and business history, the historian of the labour movement has few written documents on which to rely. Few of the important decisions and events in the history of the trade union movement in Canada were ever recorded in print, and those that were, soon were discarded: memories of those decisions and events remain the private preserve of the men and women who were integrally involved. Only the oral historian can unearth many of these recollections; only oral history can fill many of the gaps in the history of the Canadian labour movement.

The paucity of written material is easy to comprehend. In the labour movement and the Canadian left in general, there is a widespread, deep-seated and, it might be added, completely legitimate sense of paranoia—a feeling that whatever is in print might be dangerous. Too often in the past Canadian governments have ordered raids on the offices of unions, left-wing organizations and newspapers, during the course of which truckloads of files, correspondence and documents of all sorts were seized. In some cases these materials were then used as the basis of criminal charges against members of these groups. Consequently, and understandably, there has been a long-standing reluctance on the part of most unions to put too much on paper, and what was written was often not kept for very long. The written word might prove to be not only embarrassing, but subversive as well.

To some extent this government activity has been a boon to the historian. Some of the most important sources on the history of Canadian radicalism can be found in various government archives, which are made up of the material appropriated by zealous police in an earlier period. Nevertheless, for the most part very little has survived from previous eras.

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1 This paper has been developed from notes of a talk delivered to the Canadian Oral History Association Annual Conference, 8 September 1976, in Ottawa.

Archivaria, Number 4, 1977
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For example, almost nothing remains of the records of the Canadian Trades and Labor Congress (TLC). For years the TLC dominated the labour movement in Canada, being involved in most of the crucial developments affecting Canadian workers from the 1890s to 1956. The TLC's correspondence with affiliates in Canada and its parent body, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the United States was voluminous. Yet this invaluable collection has entirely disappeared; hardly even a letter remains in existence. When the TLC merged with the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL) in 1956 to form the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), a high-ranking TLC official ordered all the files destroyed. The TLC's closet stored too many skeletons. Thus, overnight, one of the most important storehouses for Canadian labour historians vanished leaving us to speculate what succulent and critical material went up in smoke that night.

In another notorious incident, one of Canada's oldest and most respected unions, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees and General Workers (CBRE), hired in the early 1960s what can charitably be described as a "publicist" to churn out a history of the union. After spending some time delving through what was undoubtedly the best single collection of labour material in the country, he produced an egregious book. Upon its publication, the president of the CBRE ordered the vast majority of letters, reports, briefs, journals and other documents which made up this archives burned. When he was reproached later for issuing such a strange order, the president responded that the files were only taking up badly needed space, but in any case the files were no longer needed now that the history of the union had been written.

My personal experience with the files of the Canadian Congress of Labour was somewhat similar, though the ending, much happier. When I first began research on the CCL and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in Canada, I was informed by officials of the Canadian Labour Congress that all of these records had been destroyed. Just as I was about to change my thesis topic, a tip from Senator Eugene Forsey sent me looking for the long-time executive vice-president of the CCL, Norman Dowd. I finally traced him to a local hospital where he was gravely ill. Burning with a typical graduate student's zeal—and frantic desperation—I appeared unannounced in Mr. Dowd's room, introduced myself, and passed a delightful afternoon. During our conversation, Dowd intimated that the CCL files had been placed in storage somewhere in Ottawa. From there it was easy. I simply visited all the storage companies in Ottawa. A week after my talk with Dowd and with the aid of a bemused security guard, I found the CCL files in a dark, long-neglected corner of a warehouse in the west end of Ottawa. These files now form a large part of the vast CLC collection in the Public Archives of Canada. As a sad sidelight to this affair, when I phoned Mr. Dowd to tell him the news, I was informed by the hospital that he had passed away the day before.

Stories of this sort are legion to students of the Canadian labour movement. Much of our recorded past has been destroyed through malevolence, fear, carelessness, or more usually, disinterest. To the men and women organizing unions, setting up picket-lines, and bringing organization to the unorganized, the fact that they were making history was the furthest thing from their minds. Their concern was immediate, with the present and not with the future or, for that matter, with the past. Similarly, union work was usually so frenetic and pressing that little thought was given to preserving records.

Despite this dearth of documentation, it has been only in the past few years that serious attempts to preserve the past through oral history were begun. Unfortunately, these initiatives were already much too late to capture on tape the really important recollections. The Drapers, Russells, Moshers, Jodoins, Simpsons and countless other union activists had long since died taking their stories with them. Without their record, the real history of the trade union movement in Canada will never be written.

During the past five or six years, however, there has been a veritable boom in the oral history business. The tape recorder has replaced the microfilm reader as the essential tool for many historians, professional and amateur alike. Instant history has become respectable or at least, it has sold well, certainly better than the history which nurtured most of us. Many of the tried and tested historical techniques have been put aside. Some researchers were suddenly gripped by the belief that the tape recorder alone could now write history. To these historians it seemed no longer necessary to spend countless dreary days and nights in archives and libraries poring over deadening government documents or trying to decipher some prime minister's crabbed handwritting. Scores, perhaps hundreds, of students set out to do their research with no skill other than the ability to change cassettes on a portable tape recorder. There was no direction or discipline to the activity.

Almost overnight oral history had become an industry. Funded by the Federal Government through the Canada Council or through Opportunities for Youth and Local Initiatives Programme grants, oral history projects sprang up all across the nation. University funds as well as local government and private sources were tapped to hasten the pace. Soon various archives and libraries were flooded with reels of tapes, cassettes and transcripts they knew nothing about and were not prepared to accept.

For the labour historian the results of this activity have been mixed. Certainly the frantic pace was necessary; years of neglect had to be overcome quickly. Too much of our history had already been buried. Here was a god-given opportunity to record the memories of the men and women who built our unions, and whose recollections were never before thought worthy of preservation. The "forgotten" people of Canada—the

workers, union organizers, immigrants—who really built this country would finally be remembered; their stories would at last be told and become part of our historical record. To a large extent this has happened. A new Canadian social history is beginning to emerge in which the contribution of these men and women is being given some recognition. Thanks to the oral historian we are starting to find out things about our country and its development which we never knew before.

Yet, because of the disarray and haste common to some of the projects, the efforts of the oral historian have been counterproductive. Interviewers were badly prepared, if at all. They were unaware of the importance of their subject, had little if any background information, were unsure in their questioning, and allowed their interviewees to ramble. People with significant stories to tell were not given the opportunity or worse, were so appalled by the ignorance and confusion of the interviewer that they refused to submit to any further sessions. Other interviewers, though more knowledgeable, were also more politically conscious and ideologically committed. At times they tended to be dissatisfied with the responses being elicited and tried to rephrase answers. When this failed, they occasionally engaged in long polemical discussions with the interviewee, or even advanced nasty criticisms of his attitude and behaviour. Such interviews were rarely enlightening.

Thus one of the major drawbacks of oral history is the role of the interviewers. He becomes part of the historical process. His attitude, biases, behaviour, nature, composure, background preparation, and sex[2] all play key roles in the extraction of information. Clearly the Heisenberg principle operates in oral history as well. Though it is patently foolish for interviewers to know too little about the subject, sometimes it is as bad if they know too much. Occasionally researchers spend so much time delving into arcane matters which are of importance to them but to no one else that nothing of substance emerges from the interview.

Obviously oral history cannot be an end in itself. It must serve only as a historical technique; it can never be the final word. It must be used as another historical source, as a character sketch of the person being interviewed, or as a means of capturing mood and feelings. Yet for the labour historian, because of the lack of documentation, oral history has tended to become the final word. With few other sources on which to rely, the labour historian has been forced to put his trust in the tape recorder. How else can he find out what it was like to organize a union during the

2 I might add that I have noticed in the several oral history projects in which I have been involved, how much more successful female interviewers are in extracting information from some male subjects, and how much longer these interviews last. In at least ten instances, I have asked women researchers to retape men whose previous interviews, all recorded by males, had been fiascos. Invariably, the second interview was far superior and a great deal longer.

depression, or to march on a picket-line, or to be unemployed and on relief, or to bash heads during strikes, or to undermine Communists, or alternatively, social democrats? How else can history from the bottom up be written?

To depend so thoroughly on oral history would be bad enough for most fields of history, but for such a politically-charged topic as labour history it is extremely hazardous. The problem for the student of unionism or of other such emotionally-charged movements and institutions is that battles are never over no matter how long ago they were fought and how decisive was the result. The old wars have simply entered a new phase with new tactics: they have now become the battle of the tape recorder. Men and women are today trying to win with cassettes and tapes the battles they lost thirty years ago. Conflicts in the labour movement or on the left never die, nor do they fade away; they are simply carried on by other means. Today oral history and, to a lesser extent, the memoir, are the vehicles for the continuation of hostilities.

Most of these observations concerning the validity of oral history as a research technique are based on recent personal experience as project director of the York University Oral History of the Labour Movement. During the course of the project, approximately 120 labour leaders, rank and file and immigrant workers, and left-wing activists were interviewed about their lives in the period from World War I through the 1940s. The questions solicited impressions of working conditions, union organization, ideological conflict, political differences, and the social life of the time. While most of the tapes are fascinating and informative, others are less so; nevertheless, taken together they constitute an extraordinary document detailing life of the working class and the left during a critical forty-year period.

The interpreting of some of the tapes by researchers must take account of such factors as faulty memories, conflicting stories, and the distortions inherent in undiminished hatreds. It was disheartening to interview men and women who were lying, who knew that they were lying, and who even knew that the interviewers knew that they were lying. Some subjects wished to know what other interviewees had said about specific matters so that they could rebut. Still others tended to forget details, or to remember them in entirely different contexts. Usually clear-cut memories suddenly became rather fuzzy when dealing with some embarrassing matters. Incidents were forgotten conveniently or were created in various ways. One key member of the Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s spent hour after hour rewriting the history of the party without once letting on that much of what he related was pure fabrication. He especially maligned those unionists and left-wing leaders who could not defend themselves because they were dead.

A somewhat surprising new source for oral histories is the Canadian labour movement itself. Various provincial and municipal labour organiza-

tions as well as individual local unions have finally begun their own programmes. The most successful of these has been the recently completed project of the Vancouver Longshoremen, who published an edited version of the transcripts entitled "*Man Along the Shore*"![3] Also close to completion are undertakings involving miners in Northern Ontario, fishermen in British Columbia and Newfoundland, steelworkers in Hamilton, and industrial workers in Quebec. Finally, provincial federations of labour in Alberta, Ontario and British Columbia have recently begun to interview trade union activists in their provinces.

With the proliferation of women's studies courses, perhaps the most popular subject for interviews during the past few years has been Canada's most neglected and exploited worker, the working woman. Dozens of such projects are now underway or being completed throughout the country. Next in popularity to women's studies, and with much larger financial backing are multicultural studies. Huge government grants have gone to support the study of Canada's ethnic communities. Oral histories of Ukrainian workers in the West and Italian workers in Ontario have already begun. As well, the Multicultural History Society of Ontario is sponsoring a series of histories of Ontario's ethnic groups, which will by the nature of the programme include large numbers of interviews with immigrant workers.

The multiplicity of oral history projects and the thousands of recorded tapes scattered about the country suggest that what is clearly and even desperately required is some sort of central registry including descriptions of these programmes, names of persons interviewed, a general index, and a précis of each project. There is no question that oral history is a vital and even indispensable tool for the historian of the Canadian labour movement; it is also an instrument that must be used with caution. Leaving oral history to the machines of the amateur, the uninitiated, and the untrained, courts calamity. In the hands of the skilled and serious professional, oral history can not only help fill some of the enormous gaps afflicting our documentary archives, but also can add new dimensions to our investigation and representation of the past. Oral history is not so much history in itself as it is the raw material for the study of our past. Treated critically and knowledgeably as any other historical source—which it is, no better and no worse—oral history can provide, as indeed it has already, a much more profound understanding of the lives, feelings, ideas, and activities of the men and women we never read about in our history books.

This is not to say that such interviews are useless. Indeed, on the contrary, they tell us a great deal—more perhaps about the interviewee

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3 "*Man Along the Shore*"*! The Story of the Vancouver Waterfront.* As told by Longshoremen themselves 1860's-1975. (Vancouver: ILWU Local 500 Pensioners, 1975).

than the topic under discussion. Nonetheless, historians of the labour movement or the left should be alert: oral history is useful, perhaps even essential, but must be handled with care. Unless controversial details obtained through interviews can be verified or can be corroborated, it is best to treat them as opinions. To treat them as fact as some authors have recently, is sheer folly and makes it necessary to state what would seem to be obvious.

Yet, to leave the impression that the bulk of interviews necessarily fall into such categories would be misleading and reprehensible. The vast majority of those interviewed proved to be honest, sincere, dedicated men and women who told their stories with no attempt to dissemble. Indeed, many were disarmingly frank, and some were so candid that they put restrictions on the use of their tapes. Restricted access naturally encourages probity and candour; unfortunately it discourages research. Key information, useful insights and significant details might thereby be kept from the public for years through the duration of the restrictions.

There is by now a fairly substantial number of collections of labour tapes in archives and universities throughout the country. The Public Archives of Canada has several, including the Millar and Bercuson Collections, which deal extensively with labour and radicalism in the West. At the University of Toronto, the Woodsworth Memorial Collection includes a valuable series of transcripts of tapes of early Canadian socialists done by Paul Fox. There is an oral history of Cape Breton labour in the Archives at St. Francis Xavier College. Confederation College in Thunder Bay is the depository for some interesting interviews with long-time labour activists in the lumber industry of North-Western Ontario. Laval University's Institut supérieur des sciences humaines is sponsoring a vast social history project which includes important interviews with Quebec workers. In addition, there are excellent oral history collections at the Saskatchewan and Alberta Archives, at the Glenbow-Alberta Institute and at the University of British Columbia, providing invaluable material concerning the working class in Western Canada. Finally, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation archives houses a large number of important tapes originally prepared for various radio and television productions. Though not readily accessible to the average researcher, these archives contain probably the most useful collection for the student of the Canadian labour movement and the Canadian left.

Résumé

Parce que les documents écrits portant sur l'histoire des travailleurs sont relativement rares, l'histoire orale est devenue une alternative indispensable pour l'étude de certaines périodes complètes de cette historiographie. L'auteur décrit les avantages et les difficultés de cette méthode de cueillette des données et conclut qu'elle doit être utilisée avec précaution. Il termine en énumérant un certain nombre d'initiatives et propose l'établissement d'un registre central des projets afin de permettre aux chercheurs de mieux s'orienter.