

Book Reviews

The Voice of the Past: Oral History. PAUL THOMSON. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978. xi, 257 p. ISBN 0 19 215833 3 bd. \$14.75, ISBN 0 19 289201 2 pa. \$7.95.

Folklore and Oral History: Papers from the Second Annual Meeting of the Canadian Aural/Oral History Association at St. John's Newfoundland, October 3-5, 1975. Edited, with an introduction by NEIL V. ROSENBERG St. John's, Newfoundland, 1978. xx, 101 p. (Memorial University Newfoundland folklore and language publications series; v. 5) (Bibliographical and special series; no. 3) \$4.00

The Great War and Canadian Society: An Oral History. Edited by DAPHNE READ with an introduction by RUSSELL HANN. Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1978. 223 p. ill. ISBN 0 919940 01 3 bd. \$10.95. ISBN 6 919940 02 1 pa. \$4.95.

L'histoire Orale. Edited by NICOLE GAGNON and JEAN HAMELIN. St. Hyacinthe, Que.: Edisem, 1978. 95 p. \$5.00.

Oral history is now in style. Popular practitioners such as Barry Broadfoot and Peter Stursberg and, in the United States, Studs Terkel, have made considerable reputations and no doubt considerable sums of money by publishing oral histories with wide appeal to the book-buying public. In such works as *Lester Pearson and the Dream of Unity* and in earlier accounts focussing on John Diefenbaker, Mr. Stursberg has offered the tape-recorded comments of Cabinet colleagues and political opponents on the careers of the great men. Apparently even more successful have been books put together from conversations with "ordinary people" about some of the quite extraordinary events in which they have participated. From such accounts we are given varying perspectives on what it was like to be a pioneer in the Canadian West, to slog it out in the trenches during the Great War or to live through the Depression Era. At least some of these books have sold in quantities which make academic historians green with envy and it seems certain that the market is not yet saturated.

Yet the field has not been left by default to popular writers and journalists. For literally centuries, as the books being reviewed make abundantly clear, scholars have used the oral record in their work. From Herodotus through the medieval chroniclers and including such famous nineteenth century accounts as Henry Mayhew's survey of social conditions and poverty in Mid-Victorian England, the recorded conversation has yielded indispensable data. Mayhew, Paul Thompson tells us, even brought a stenographer to his interviews "and in his reports he gave very substantial space to direct

quotation.” And the list of academic books based to a considerable extent on interviews is a long one and includes such outstanding works as T. Harry Williams’ biography of Huey Long and Paul Thompson’s own much-admired study *The Edwardians, The Remaking of British Society* (1977).

Inevitably, and quite properly, this outpouring of works of all types and varying quality raises questions, and poses problems, for the historian and others. The four books under review all address themselves to these questions and they arrive at remarkably similar conclusions. Not surprisingly, since they are written in a spirit of advocacy by those who use and favour the oral method, they argue that oral history will have an increasing, and an increasingly beneficial, impact on how we write about and interpret the past. They suggest that professional historians have been too cautious and too critical in their attitude to the oral record; that more imaginative and analytic approaches to this record can yield knowledge often not available from more traditional documentary sources; that oral sources in terms of their reliability as evidence are no more suspect than most kinds of more traditional sources; and, perhaps most interesting of all, that oral history is serving to “democratize” our view of the past both by making possible a new kind of social history and by making history real and alive to new groups and classes of people by involving them in its compilation and interesting them in its newly-broadened subject matter.

These arguments appear at least in part in each of these books but they are developed most fully and effectively in Paul Thompson’s splendid study, *The Voice of the Past*. This is about as nearly definitive a study of the theory and practice of oral history as we are likely to have or to want for many years. It is broadly conceived, written in an often sparkling prose, learned and thoughtful and always fair to both sides of the argument. The other three books are less ambitious in concept but each serves a purpose of its own. *Folklore and Oral History* contains the papers presented at the second annual meeting of the Canadian Aural/Oral History Association which met in 1975 at St. John’s Newfoundland, and appears as one of the volumes of the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language series. The selections, mostly very brief, serve to familiarize the reader with the fascinating work being done, largely through the oral method, by Memorial University folklorists and their colleagues. In Newfoundland and Labrador, we are told, written records are relatively scanty and the development at Memorial of a rich and growing store of oral documents is of vital importance. The attached Archive is used as a depository by many fieldworkers in addition to folklorists and Neil Rosenberg, who edits this collection and contributes an interesting paper on the use of oral testimony by folklorists, is the Archivist. The value of oral testimony to anthropological and folklorist studies, surely never in dispute, is amply documented. For example, John Scott, a doctoral candidate in folklore interested in the traditions of the Newfoundland seal fishery, has used tape-recorded materials to show that earlier studies of a famous disaster in which 78 men from the crew of a sealing vessel froze to death on the ice have been seriously in error because of a lack of understanding of the traditions of the seal fishery.

This kind of work clearly involves much more than a casual encounter between interviewer and interviewee mediated by a tape-recorder. Thus Memorial University anthropologist Thomas F. Nemeč, whose subject is the fishery in a Newfoundland outport, draws in his work upon several disciplines, including anthropology, history, cultural geography and folklore and attempts to cooperate with workers in other fields “in studying the southeastern Avalon in order to integrate their findings with my own.” Most interesting, perhaps, Nemeč found that his first two and one-half months in the field was relatively unprofitable “and in some instances yielded only fabrications, half-truths, laughter, ridicule, or some other evasion.” It was only after thirteen months in the field, including a summer “on the water” and “initiation into the private world of

inshore cod fishermen” that Nemec gained acceptance and was finally “in a position to elicit a comprehensive portrait of the fishery. . . .”

Although folklorist studies dominate this book, several historians present their views, including David Alexander of the Maritime History Group which, with its own archive, is based at Memorial. The difference in attitude between Alexander and the folklorists is striking. While welcoming the introduction of oral evidence, David Alexander closely compared some traditional documentary materials drawn from the records of the Newfoundland Associated Fish Exporters Limited with a collection of taped reminiscences of many of the same people. In doing so, he,

developed some unease about history written mainly from oral sources. . . .an analysis of company records reveals that, as with all of us, memories were fallible and interpretations of the past were strongly affected by the more recent business crisis which these traders had confronted.

What the records show to have been fundamental business problems appear thirty years later to the major participants as rather insignificant. . . .

On the basis of his experience, therefore, David Alexander concluded that oral sources would constitute an “additional rather than a fundamental source to the writing of modern and contemporary history”. Such a judgment finds little support from the other contributors to *Folklore and Oral History* and probably it errs on the side of caution, but it does point to fundamental differences of purpose between anthropology and folklore, on the one hand, and history on the other. Clearly for the folklorist just about anything which is said during an interview is grist for his mill while the historian is left to critically assess the accuracy and reliability of the oral record in a fundamentally different way. Historians, because of the nature of their discipline, approach all sources critically and rightly tend to be particularly circumspect when it comes to oral evidence. Nonetheless *Folklore and Oral History* because it demonstrates how valuable the oral method has been to other disciplines should be salutary reading for many historians.

The Great War and Canadian Society: An Oral History, takes a very different approach. It is a collection of edited interviews compiled by twelve workers with survivors, both veterans and civilians, of the World War One era. In some ways it is rather exciting that this project was financed by an Opportunities For Youth grant because this recalls the outstanding oral history work done in the United States during the Roosevelt years by the Works Projects Administration. The material included is of varying interest although taken as a whole it probably falls short of the quality of Barry Broadfoot’s work. For one thing, the lengthy introduction and a second chapter dealing with all sorts of impressions of pre-war society throw off the pace by taking up almost half the book before the war years are reached. It is unfortunate too that all the interviews were with people living in the Toronto area: Toronto is hardly representative of Canadian society, despite what the editors of the aptly named New Hogtown Press may think. Nor do the generalizations introducing each section—for example that the war destroyed a whole way of life “and the new order that replaced it bore little resemblance to what had gone before” serve to create much confidence in the historical expertise of the project compilers. Many of the anecdotes and stories included are of great human interest, and some of them are exceedingly dull, but if the intent was to use these scattered stories to point to some general interpretation of the period, the effort has not succeeded.

Unfortunately, Russell Hann’s spirited introduction makes relatively little effort to explain the context of the oral documents or assess their significance. Instead he provides an interesting and often argumentative account of his own views of the value of oral history written with such gusto that it seems to outweigh most of what follows. Making a distinction between high culture, which he seems to equate with a servile

upper class intent on emulating the English style, and folk traits, which evidently represent "the true voice of the people", Hann offers again the familiar but not unconvincing argument that through the techniques of oral history we are able to listen to the inarticulate and presumably to democratize in some way the writing of history. Clearly Hann's opinions about the great value of oral history derive from the ideological position taken by the very able group of young scholars who are interested in working class culture. This school has made no secret of its hostility to some recent quantitative history and Hann and his colleagues apparently view the oral method as an attractive alternative technique for writing social history. Undoubtedly, the possibilities in this direction are great but Hann is inclined to ignore or brush off some very real problems. For example he criticizes my own earlier claim that some politicians after long careers in public life build up a kind of defensive veil that the interviewer must penetrate by insisting that this view suggests "an unreconstructed Hobbesian notion of social psychology" based on the notion that the interview subject has a natural penchant for mendacity. Apart from the fact that my remarks suggested no such thing and Hann himself refers to "reticent politicians" and argues that the experience of the Nixon tapes proves that politicians are far more candid in the absence of historians, his own assertion that every piece of oral evidence collected for this project "contributed in some way to a deeper understanding of popular experience" suggests an approach which is too uncritical by far. Paul Thompson, who comes to oral history from an ideological position similar to Hann's, has concluded on the basis of far greater experience that "the most recurrent problem is presented by the public personality as informant".

Another far more important area where Russell Hann might rethink his position is his astounding assertion that oral data,

should not be subject to any special doubt simply because it is generated by memory. The best modern research on memory suggests that memory is one of the most unshakeable features of the human mind, preserving the experience of the individual with remarkable accuracy to advanced age. . . .

This is just wishful thinking and again it is Paul Thompson in his chapter on "Evidence" who offers a superb discussion of the problems posed by this issue. It is a complicated matter indeed but generally Thompson concludes that memory is least reliable in recalling past attitudes and best about repetitive practical matters such as feeding practices, and that loss of memory is greatest during the first nine months after an event takes place.

L'histoire Orale, the first volume in a Laval University series on methods in the social sciences, is a slim but sensible study composed of four sections: a chapter which covers some familiar ground in tracing the history and prospects of the oral history "movement"; a useful interview with David Millar who has done many interviews with people in the labour movement; a discussion of the form of presentation of oral documents and other technical matters; and an example of an interview done as a "life history" in Quebec in 1972. Oral history here is seen as "une opération de sauvetage", a method by which historians, with the active assistance of archivists, can save important artifacts of a way of life which is rapidly disappearing. Vaguely disappointing, this volume adds less than it should to the discussion of oral techniques and historical methodology.

The prize of the collection is Paul Thompson's, *The Voice of the Past*. Thompson, who is Reader in Social History at the University of Essex, did systematic interviewing based on carefully selected samples for his own book, *The Edwardians* but instead of publishing the interviews entire he combined them with other materials to provide an integrated piece of mature scholarship. Many historians regard his work almost as a model of how members of their profession can best exploit the oral method. The inter-

views represent a part, and only a part, of his research, and I am sure Paul Thompson would prefer to be known as an historian and not as an oral historian.

The Voice of the Past is effective because it draws on Professor Thompson's vast experience and recognizes that the problems in applying the oral method are very real indeed. Thompson's argument that documentary sources themselves must be used with such caution that they are really not very different in kind from the interview is developed with grace and skill and may convert many of the sceptics. For example, he cites A.J.P. Taylor, who was told by Richard Crossman the former British Cabinet minister that, "I've discovered, having read all the Cabinet papers about the meetings I attended, that the documents often bear virtually no relation to what actually happened". His conclusion that all sources are fallible and subject to bias and that oral evidence is best in some contexts and supplementary in others, is surely eminently sensible, although I suspect he has exaggerated the opposition of what he describes as "the professional old guard" to the oral method. And surely he is right to argue that the use of the oral method must lead historians to an awareness that their activity is pursued "within a social context and with political implications". Not only does he demonstrate how oral history is involving new groups and classes of people in historical work, but he shows too how the oral method, by greatly extending the potential range of sources, provides the potential for the development of "a more socially conscious and democratic history". Some scholars may find such ideological overtones less than attractive but Thompson's argument is compelling and the implications for written history should be positive rather than divisive. An outstanding book, almost indispensable, *The Voice of the Past* should be read by all those interested in historical studies.

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Catholicism and History: The Opening of the Vatican Archives. OWEN CHADWICK. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. vii, 174 p. (The Herbert Hensley Henson Lectures, University of Oxford, 1974). ISBN 0 521 21708 3 bd. \$13.95.

From 1612 the Vatican Archives had a permanent home in a wing of the Vatican Palace beside the Library but, apart from some dedicated archivists and a few very select ecclesiastical historians, the learned world was unaware of the richness and historical importance of the Archives until their removal to Paris by order of Napoleon in 1811-1813, and their subsequent return, much depleted, to Rome in 1817. Yet it took over sixty years and some five pontificates to persuade the papacy that far from revealing skeletons, the opening of the Archives to scholars in general would be an immense benefit to the church as well as to scholarship.

Professor Chadwick has documented admirably the series of fits and starts that finally led to the great moment, from the shilly-shallying between 1850 and 1856 in the face of demands from scholars for the record of the trial of Galileo to the fuss during the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) over the minutes of the Council of Trent and the entries in Burchard's diaries relative to the pontificate of the Borgia pope, Alexander VI.

During more than sixty years of official disinclination, the Archives were lucky enough to have two or three dedicated archivists in succession. Mario Marini, who was archivist for nearly fifty years until his death in 1855, supplied copies of documents to various countries, notably England, and whetted the appetites of scholars everywhere. His immediate successor, the German Oratorian Augustin Theiner, published volu-