

In Their Own Words

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RÉSUMÉ L'auteure commente trois ouvrages des années 1990 basés sur l'histoire orale et destinés à explorer la vie de Japonaises mariées par correspondance, de réfugiés et de vieilles autochtones. L'article montre comment ces trois livres ont réussi à utiliser l'histoire orale pour donner la parole à des personnes faisant partie de groupes non dominants et qui ont été négligés par les chercheurs dans le passé. Il explore également quelques-uns des pièges dans lesquels on peut tomber en adoptant une méthode d'histoire orale qui ne reconnaît pas le rôle de l'interviewer et qui n'intègre pas d'interprétation solide dans le travail. Dès lors, ce texte appelle à une plus grande transparence et à un plus grand équilibre lors de la production d'histoires orales.

ABSTRACT The author reviews three books written during the 1990s which rely on oral history to explore the lives of Japanese picture brides, refugees, and female Native elders. This article reveals how these three works succeed in using oral history to give voice to the individuals from these non-hegemonic groups that had been neglected by scholars in the past. It also explores some of the pitfalls that can arise when adopting an oral history method that fails to recognize the role of the interviewer as well as incorporate any authorial interpretation into the work. The article calls for more transparency and greater balance when producing oral histories.

Picture Brides: Japanese Women in Canada. TOMAKO MAKABE. Kathleen Chisato Merken, trans. Multicultural History Society of Ontario. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995. 180 p. ISBN 0-919045-68-5.

Safe Haven: The Refugee Experience of Five Families. ELIZABETH McLUHAN, ed. Multicultural History Society of Ontario. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995. 228 p. ISBN 0-919045-67-7.

Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders. JULIE CRUIKSHANK in collaboration with ANGELA SIDNEY, KITTY SMITH, and ANNIE NED. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. 405 p. ISBN 0-8032-1447-2.

Oral history has been used by academics from different disciplines since the

1940s.¹ The early practitioners tended to rely on this methodology to document elite male historical actors. With the emergence of social history during the 1960s and the 1970s in Canada, academics from many disciplines began to use oral history to give voice to the muted masses. In addition to creating new records about groups which left little or no written documentation behind, recent practitioners of oral history have tried to tap into the actual lived experiences of the people they interview, rather than recounting the stories of once historically marginalized groups such as immigrants, women, and Natives from the perspective of male elites. Oral history not only has enabled scholars to delve into previously unexplored areas of inquiry such as the private side of people's lives, but it also has permitted academics to give something back to the people they interview; as Paul Thompson states, oral history "can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place."² Oral history has therefore helped to draw certain groups out of obscurity and enabled them to speak for themselves. An added benefit is that their stories can become part of the written record.

This innovative approach to research has been adopted by the three authors whose works are reviewed in this article. Their texts, produced during the 1990s, document groups whose stories had either been ignored or misrepresented by historians in the past. Although the authors are from different academic backgrounds and examine very different groups – Japanese women, Native women, and refugees – they all share a commitment to let the narrators speak for themselves. This kind of open interviewing style, through which the narrators tell their stories without any direction or interruptions from the researcher, is viewed by many social scientists as being more democratic than the traditional method of interviewing. In all three works, the authors rely on interviews with a small number of individuals who serve as representatives of their group.

Two of these books, *Picture Brides* and *Safe Haven*, were produced by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario (MHSO). Established in 1976, the MHSO has developed, as part of their Ethnocultural Voices Series, a series of books on individual ethnic groups. In order to document these groups from the perspective of the community, the MHSO has encouraged the use of oral history and established an archive to house the products of these projects. On the whole, the books that it has funded richly document the experiences of various ethnic groups from "the inside," relying on the testimony of community members rather than input from outsiders. These two particular projects remain true to form, in that they present new and valuable documentation about two groups who had been neglected by Canadian historians.

Tomoko Makabe, who emigrated from Japan and has studied sociology in Canada, examines the lives of five Japanese women from the Issei (first) generation who came to Canada as "picture brides" around the turn of the twentieth century. These adventurous women, most of whom were in their early

twenties and came from small villages in Japan, voyaged to Canada to marry Japanese men whom they did not know. The men were significantly older and usually had worked in Canada for a number of years before marrying. The only exchange between the partners before the arranged marriage was usually the transmittal of a photograph, typically of the bride to the prospective groom. Although the women came from different villages in Japan and lived different lives in Canada, the author contends that they all came to this country to improve their status. Since there were no jobs open to Japanese women in Canada, she asserts, matrimony was the only option available to ambitious young women interested in improving their lot:

It was a once-in-a-lifetime gamble. But to the young women who jumped at this chance, the system was not so unnatural. They had won the approval of their parents, and they had the sober attitude that all they needed was a healthy man without eccentricities, so that they could probably manage to live with him.³

In addition to their shared courageous spirit and drive, all five women were hard-working. When referring to the Issei generation of women, the author states that these women “played much more than a simple, supplementary role. Women worked uncultivated lands and the forests, joined in the clearing of the wilderness, and engaged directly in agricultural production.”⁴ Although most Japanese women from this generation worked in unskilled occupations, two of the women she interviewed worked as a midwife and a seamstress. In addition to working outside of the home throughout their lives, these women raised children and took care of their homes.

Although this book illustrates the pioneering role these women played within their community and the country, Makabe tends to overemphasize the commonalities among these five women. She notes that “when I recall the five protagonists, I am not struck by differences in personality, character or environment. Just as the interior decoration and everyday habits of these Issei are uniform, their character, habits, and attitudes to daily life are reflected in such amazing similarity that they have fused into one in my mind.”⁵ Certainly, these women must have shared some characteristics by virtue of their age and similar cultural background, but her emphasis on commonality tends to blur the various aspects of their lives which made their experiences unique.

Makabe’s book is also marred by the organizational structure that she adopts. Her work begins with an introduction, which provides information on the author and this project, as well as a chapter entitled “A Hundred Years of Japanese-Canadian History.” The introduction is useful in setting the tone, but the historical chapter is so general and covers such a long period of time that it hardly serves to place the experiences of these five women into a historical context, particularly since most of the secondary sources that she relies upon do not document women. The core of the book, however, consists of the testi-

monies given by the women, with the life of a single woman comprising one chapter. Before commencing with the testimony, the author describes, in three to five pages of text, the background of the woman, beginning with her childhood and ending with her life as a senior citizen. Since the interview itself is somewhat free-flowing, this background text helps to fill in the gaps about the interviewee's life. The whole effect, however, of providing two introductions at the front end, as well as an introductory section before each testimony, results in a somewhat choppy product which ends up detracting from the lives of her subjects.

This kind of organizational format, which highlights the testimony of the narrators, is also adopted by Elizabeth McLuhan in her book *Safe Haven*. This work grew out of an exhibition held at the Royal Ontario Museum in November of 1993. The exhibition was sponsored by the MHSO and curated by McLuhan, and it focused on refugees who had found safe haven in Canada following the Second World War. Unlike Makabe's work, McLuhan is the editor, not the main author, of the book. The preface is by Milton Israel, the introduction is by Harold Troper, and most of the background texts are by various individuals who had ties to the refugee groups that they documented; McLuhan is the author of the conclusion, or afterward. The organizational structure is quite similar to Makabe's in that the testimonies of the narrators form the core of the monograph, but the writers of the background texts rely on a variety of secondary sources to help provide context for these stories. The introduction, which is broad and sweeping, provides a general history of Canadian refugee policy, along with a description of the various refugee groups who found safe haven in Canada following the war. Once again, while this type of structure may be necessary to fill in the gaps, it produces the same disjointed effect as in *Picture Brides*.

Safe Haven documents the lives of five refugee families who fled from Czechoslovakia/Slovakia, Chile, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and Somalia. Each chapter is dedicated to a refugee family that serves as a representative of its ethnic or racial group. The chapters are arranged chronologically by the date that the refugee movement took place. Within each chapter, an introductory section furnishes background information about the country from which the family escaped, the families' experiences within their native lands, and, finally, their new lives in Canada. The bulk of each chapter is dedicated to testimony from the family members and ends with a short description of the community they represent.

The verbatim accounts reveal that the interviews with the families were open and free-flowing. In some cases, only the couple who emigrated was interviewed. Several of the chapters include testimony from members of the whole family. Since there is very little that has been written about refugees in Canada from their own perspective, this book provides rich and revealing details about the lives of the individuals who were interviewed. Considering

that the narrators came from different countries, are of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, escaped from very different conditions within their native lands, came to Canada at different points in time, and are from different generations, it is not surprising that their stories are unique and distinct. Despite the focus on only five families, the book provides an array of refugee experiences.

In contrast to the approach adopted by Makabe in *Picture Brides*, which emphasizes the commonalities shared by the five narrators, McLuhan focuses on the obvious differences that exist among her five refugee families, as well as the differing perspectives that can be found within each family. There is therefore a refreshing emphasis on diversity of experience. For example, while some of the families found the transition to Canadian life quite pleasant and received a warm welcome from Canadians, others confronted financial difficulties once they arrived, as well as incidents of racism or prejudice. Gabriela Enriquez, who emigrated to Canada with her family from Chile when she was a child, recounts how she hated the idea of leaving her country and found the transition to Canadian life very difficult. She states:

we moved to Etobicoke where we were so discriminated against that it was a real down part of our lives. The Spanish people were on one side and Canadians were on the other. A whole gang of Canadian youths were harassing Chileans, especially the children. It was like gangs in the movies – it was that bad. The police didn't seem to care. ... That's how I got the feeling that I wasn't part of the system, because of the discrimination and harassment."⁶

Most Canadians would assume that refugees would be content to stay in Canada after fleeing repressive regimes in their own countries; however, some of the narrators, who all displayed a great deal of gratitude towards Canada for providing them with safe haven, exhibited a desire to return to their homelands and clung to that hope.

McLuhan's work succeeds in exposing the reader to the diverse lives of the five refugee families, but the approach that she adopts makes it impossible for her to satisfy one of her stated goals, that is, to use the testimonies to trace "the changes in refugee-producing situations throughout the world and to follow the development of Canada's refugee programmes and policies at home and abroad."⁷ Although the interviews with the refugees illuminate their own personal experiences and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the impact that Canada's refugee policies had on them, the refugees would not have been in a position to elucidate how Canada's policies were developed and implemented. Had McLuhan wished to document Canadian refugee policy, the best sources to use would have been secondary sources, government records, and interviews with senior officials responsible for refugee policies. McLuhan therefore produces an accessible and revealing book on refugees'

lives, but she falls short of her somewhat unrealistic secondary goal of documenting policy changes.

Unlike the two MHSO books, which are essentially popular works intended for a general audience, Julie Cruikshank's book, *Life Lived Like a Story*, is a more scholarly study that delves into the lives of three female Native elders from the Yukon. The three women, Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, who are of Athapaskan and Tlingit ancestry, are collaborators in this study, rather than its subjects. As an anthropologist, Cruikshank is particularly sensitive to establishing a cooperative working relationship with her narrators. She therefore adopts a more participative approach than many other oral historians by acknowledging her narrators as coauthors and giving the royalties of her book back to the community. In addition to providing background information on the individuals and community that she documents, she provides extensive information on the methodology that she employed when undertaking this study. This feature alone distinguishes *Life Lived Like a Story* from the other two works, which are devoid of any details regarding methodology. Although oral history almost always entails the use of a tape recorder as well as the involvement of at least two participants, the interviewer and the narrator, the reader is not privy to the questions that were asked or the techniques that were employed without details regarding the methodology. Even if they were aiming at a general rather than a scholarly audience, the authors of the MHSO books could have included in one of the introductory chapters at least some details about the approaches they employed.

Another aspect of Cruikshank's work that is unique is her rejection of oral history in favour of oral *tradition*, which she argues is an approach that is most suitable for documenting Native experiences. By examining traditional lore, she attempts to document the three female elders' lives through oral narrative, songs, and the names of places and people. She contends that "Native women's stories differ both from Native men's accounts and from those of non-Native women," adding that within these stories "the recurring theme is one of connection – to other people and to nature. Connections with people are explored through ties of kinship; connections with the land emphasize sense of place."⁸ Instead of focussing on anecdotes and the narrators' experiences as interpreted by the interviewer, Cruikshank documents changes in social reality and investigates narrative forms of talking about, remembering, and interpreting everyday life.⁹

The three female elders whose lives are documented in this book were born during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All three women lived through many of the same events and cultural experiences, since they shared a similar ancestry and culture. Yet, the three elders rely on stories and songs to give meaning to their experiences, rather than recount tales or anecdotes about their own lives. Their stories unveil telling details about the role of potlaches within the community, the division of labour within the family, as well as

details about fertility customs, child rearing, and ceremonies surrounding death. The women also use stories to reveal the impact of events such as the Gold Rush and the building of the Alaskan Highway on their lives.

Since Natives believe that authority comes from accurate repetition and not from originality, the women who were interviewed turned to traditional stories to give meaning to and explain the events in their lives. Traditional stories are also used to educate and to pass down established truths to the younger members of the community. Cruikshank emphasizes this point, asserting that “the persistence of stories and storytelling suggests that oral narrative is central to an indigenous intellectual tradition and provides the core of an educational model.”¹⁰ In addition to imparting information that they felt would benefit younger members of the community and provide context to events in their lives, the three Native elders relied on stories and songs to explore conflicting versions of a story. Since many Native women felt their own experiences were trivial, telling stories was a way for them to impart wisdom from their ancestors and apply the skills of past storytellers to their own experiences. Along the way, they could reveal some of the social contradictions that they had confronted.

Although all three books rely on individual stories to recount the experiences of the people they document, Cruikshank’s model is far more complex and scholarly than the two books produced by the MHSO. The strength of *Picture Brides* and *Safe Haven*, however, is in the extremely personal and moving accounts of the lives of the narrators. These two works are also more accessible than Cruikshank’s book, and this ensures a larger audience for them, including the communities they represent. Like many works of oral history, the main contribution of the MHSO works is to bring the voices of previously unknown historical actors to the fore. Makabe and McLuhan have successfully relied on oral history to create new sources on groups who were once absent from Canadian history. All three works, in fact, help fill a void by providing information about groups who have been neglected in works of history. The first two would best serve as primary sources, mainly due to the absence of any discussion regarding methodology.

There are, however, limitations common to all three books. First, all three authors rely on a small number of individuals to represent their communities. This approach, followed by most oral historians, relies on a representative group to serve as a microcosm of their community. In addition to leaving the false impression that all people from the community had the same reactions, emotions, and experiences as the individuals interviewed, it suggests an overly positive portrayal of the community. As Paul Thompson contends, “local history drawn from a more restricted social stratum tends to be more complacent, a re-enactment of community myth.”¹¹ Although most authors would test out certain assumptions about the community by investigating other sources, this is not always possible when the primary intent is to highlight the narrators’ voices. Oral historians should therefore be wary of making broad assumptions

or drawing conclusions about communities when relying on a small representative group, particularly when conclusions derive from a single source.

Second, all three authors document the narrators' lives by allowing them to speak for themselves. They therefore intentionally avoid any interruptions in the dialogue or the injection of authorial interpretation into the testimonies. As such, the reader is exposed to the real life experiences and feelings of the narrators rather than the scholars' assessment and interpretation of their lives. This approach, in many respects, represents a rejection of dominant official history, which tends to focus on male elite actors and highlight the voice and impressions of the scholar. Although this approach of focussing on the narrators' voices may appear to be more democratic, it actually provides the illusion that the historian is not involved in the dialogue. This point is insightfully articulated by Alessandro Portelli, who states:

The historian may validate his or her discourse by "ventriloquizing" it through the narrator's testimony. So far from disappearing in the objectivity of the sources, the historian remains important at least as a partner in the dialogue, often as a "stage director" of the interview, or as an "organizer" of the testimony. Instead of discovering sources, oral historians partly create them. Far from becoming mere mouthpieces for the working class, oral historians may be using other people's words, but are still responsible for the overall discourse.¹²

Regardless of how hard a researcher may try to give her subjects a voice unmediated by the academic, she always leaves her own imprint on the project. Thus, in contrast to the written document, which is shaped by the creator alone, oral historians cannot help but become part of the source.

Third, besides their emphasis on cooperation, and avoidance of interruptions, these three oral historians also try to avoid injecting their own perceptions or interpretations into the narrators' accounts of their lives. As such, they intentionally try not to appropriate the words of the narrators by imposing their own politics into the narrators' stories. This approach enables the writer to avoid misusing or misinterpreting the narrators' words, yet it often results in a stream-of-consciousness monologue. As well, without any scholarly intervention or interpretation, the text often lacks historical context and, in some cases, any direction.

Given these limitations, one could argue that the new brand of oral history highlights the importance of unfettered testimony to the detriment of history. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that most of the practitioners of oral history today are not historians. This celebration of ordinary people's lives often leads scholars to turn a blind eye to the perils of refraining from offering a judgement or interpretations when documenting these groups. Kathleen Blee's study of female members of the Klu Klux Klan from Indiana highlights this problem. She asserts:

Traditionally, oral historians have emphasized caution, distance, and objectivity in interviews with members of elites and egalitarianism, reciprocity, and authenticity in interviews with people outside elites. However, this epistemological dichotomy reflects implicit romantic assumptions about the subjects of history from the bottom up – assumptions that are difficult to defend when studying ordinary people who are active in the politics of intolerance, bigotry, or hatred.¹³

As Klee illustrates, if she had refrained from offering her impressions regarding her subjects, she would have given these right-wing extremists a forum to voice their bigoted opinions. By intervening, then, the historian has the opportunity to place the narratives within their historical context, as well as reveal any biases or distortions in the testimonies.

It is therefore the scholar's duty to both document the role that she played in the oral history process as well as interpret her findings. For as Joan Sangster states, "... in the last resort, it is our privilege that allows us to interpret, and it is our responsibility as historians to convey their insights using our own ... interpretation."¹⁴ Rather than following the futile path of giving full control to the interviewees, it might be best for oral historians to try to strike a balance by providing their narrators with a voice and at the same time protecting the interviewer's or scholar's right to interpret. Such honesty and transparency – in regard to the role that the author plays in the oral history process – would result in a more valuable product in the end.

In conclusion, the three works reviewed here provide new and rich information on Japanese picture brides, refugees, and female Native elders, groups who were once absent in Canadian history. In addition, by producing new sources about these non-hegemonic groups, the authors have opened up new areas of scholarship to those who may wish to delve further into the activities and experiences of these groups. Although there are some shortcomings with the approaches followed, all three are pioneering works because they bring the voices of their narrators out of obscurity and into the homes of readers across the country. It is clear that this interdisciplinary method still holds great promise and is likely to flourish and develop as the century progresses. We can hope that new groups will be targeted, and that new methods will be devised which will achieve a better balance of power and presence within the text between the narrator and the author.

Notes

- 1 The first individual to employ oral history was Allan Nevins, a history professor at Columbia University who began using this method in 1948. See Ernest Dick, "Oral History in Canada: An Archivist's Commentary," *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977), p. 36.

- 2 Paul Thompson, "The Voice of the Past: Oral History," in Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), p. 22.
- 3 Tomoko Makabe, *Picture Brides: Japanese Women in Canada*, Kathleen Chisato Merken, trans. (Toronto, 1995), p. 7.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 6 Elizabeth McLuhan, *Safe Haven: The Refugee Experience of Five Families* (Toronto, 1995), p. 92.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- 8 Julie Cruikshank, in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Vancouver, 1990), p. 3.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. x.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 340.
- 11 Paul Thompson, "The Voice of the Past: Oral History," p. 27.
- 12 Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, p. 72.
- 13 Kathleen M. Blee, "Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan," *Journal of American History* 80, no. 2 (September 1993), p. 597.
- 14 Joan Sangster, "Telling our Stories: Feminist Debates and the use of Oral History," *Women's History Review* 3, no. 1 (1994), p. 12.