

Use and abuse of oral evidence

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Introduction

People have always been concerned to find out about the past and have devised ways of passing on to later generations information about the history of each particular group. In modern industrial societies, written evidence and accounts of the past have become the dominant forms, but the oral tradition has not completely died out. Indeed, as interest has grown in the relatively recent past, the use of oral sources and the presentation of oral or audio-visual forms of history have both revived.

This booklet had its origins in a talk given to some schoolteachers who wanted to experiment with oral history projects for their students. Since then it has gone through a variety of forms and been used in many different ways. Its purpose remains the same. It was intended to encourage people to make use of oral evidence in their study of the past, but to do so in a reflective way. Oral evidence is similar in many respects to other historical sources and requires the same techniques of criticism and analysis. It has its own peculiar problems and the booklet addresses some of these.

There is no single, correct way to use oral evidence in historical studies. New methods and new uses are continually occurring, throwing up ideas which often become incorporated into mainstream historical approaches. Oral history is still a young and exciting field of study and one which touches people more closely than some other branches of historical study. This booklet tries to convey some of that excitement as an invitation to the greater use of oral evidence in the future.

Use and abuse of oral evidence

The use of oral evidence in historical or modern studies is not by any means new. It is said that Thucydides interviewed participants on both sides before compiling his history of the Peloponnesian wars. But its use has certainly expanded in more recent times and oral evidence has been used in novel ways.¹ The pioneers of modern work with oral evidence were, of course, the anthropologists who often turned to oral testimony for the lack of any alternative sources among non-literate peoples. Anthropologists found that, on the basis of oral evidence, they could reconstruct life patterns and social behaviour over relatively long periods of time, with surprising degrees of accuracy, when this evidence could be checked against more traditional material.

With more 'political' activities, defined in the widest sense to cover all matters relating to government or rule in societies, however, they ran into problems. Here they tended to get not what the respondent thought the interviewer wanted to hear necessarily, which is the well-known problem, but what might be described as a version of the Whig theory of history. The losers in any past struggles tended to get consigned to the dustbin of oral history, while the difficulties in controversial areas were smoothed over to bring them into line with the current realities of the tribal situation.

For example, if there had been a struggle over inheritance in the past, the losers in the conflict might actually disappear from the oral tradition altogether. If current inheritance was through the matriarchal line, past cases of inheritance in the patriarchal line might also disappear, or the relationships might be changed to fit the modern circumstances. As one recent reviewer put it “‘genealogical conquest’ is almost as common as the more familiar forms of subjugation’.”²

Another problem for the anthropologists which also has implications for modern use of oral evidence is what is delightfully known in the trade as ‘contamination’, The ‘contaminated interviewee’ is not someone suffering from the effects of radioactive fallout. No, it is the sad case of someone who has supplemented and modified his or her oral memories from literary sources or from previous interviews. For example, two colleagues in the Department of Social and Economic Research in the University of Glasgow were carrying out a study on the reasons why businessmen decided to locate their offices in particular places. One of the hypotheses they wished to test was the notion that very little rational estimation of costs and benefits took place and that gut reaction and a follow-my-leader principle were more important. On the first interview, when respondents did not know precisely what questions they were to be asked, it seemed clear that this hypothesis was indeed valid. Subsequent interviews often on different subjects, however, produced the most elaborate rationalisations of location decisions with the respondents dragging the interviewer back to previous answers and showing how they had been based on economic criteria.³

The dangers of reinterviewing where matters of pride and performance or political issues are concerned must be kept in mind, though discrepancies between two accounts can be a very fruitful source for further investigation. The most difficult problem arises when you are the second interviewer and someone else has been over the same ground with the respondent. You will tend to get the rationalised version.

Classic cases in labour history include the use that has been made of politicians like Lord Emmanuel Shinwell, who was active in British labour and socialist organisations before the First World War and Harry McShane, veteran organiser of the National Unemployed Workers Movement in the inter-war years, and also an activist in labour politics since before 1914. Harry has been interviewed so often that he has, inevitably, tended to create a standard version of events to be retailed to the credulous. The battles have been fought and won and his own position has been secured. Anyone interviewing someone in cases like this has to be very sure of his ground and prepared to use a series of test questions to check for consistency and accuracy.⁴ This takes us on to questions of technique in interviewing which I want to deal with later.

For the moment I want to pursue the question of the nature and influence of the received version of events which arises from contamination. Contamination in a literate society like ours is unavoidable. People are always involved both in the reality of experience and in the interpretation of that experience by the media, historians and novelists. In our society you seldom come across pure experience. But this does not make oral testimony valueless, for people live by what they believe to have happened rather than by what actually happened. Images are more important than reality. The word ‘Tonypandy’ conditioned working class attitudes to Winston Churchill for many years.⁵ Similarly, an earlier Liberal Prime Minister, H.H. Asquith was pursued

through his early political life by cries of 'Featherstone', where two miners died while he was Home Secretary, and in his later life by 'Wait & see' which was first uttered as a threat, but was later interpreted as evidence of dilatoriness.⁶

Another example from labour history, though contemporary with these cases, shows both the problems and potential of oral evidence. One of my Glasgow undergraduate students, Lindsay Morrison, did a study on the Singer strike at Clydebank in 1911.⁷ In the course of this we interviewed one, if not the only, survivor of the Singer labour force at the time. Willie Lennox was then (1974) 102 and living in Pittenweem in Fife. Grandpa Lennox was very much a local celebrity, with his letter from the Queen and a position of honour in the village. His mind was quite clear, but unfortunately he was as deaf as a post. Our interview was hilarious, as we poured out our questions which were then bawled in his ear by his niece. I won't inflict the tape recording of this on you.

We learned a great deal about the sad case of a young lad who had his head crushed by the wheel of a fruit barrow, but less about the Singer strike. However from Willie Lennox and his son we did piece together a story about how the Singer Company tried to break the strike. According to their version, which we subsequently heard from other independent sources, the company paid the Post Office to make a special delivery of postcards to all those on strike. The delivery was carried out on the Sunday evening and the postcards announced that all those who failed to report for work at starting time on the Monday morning would be considered to have left the employ of the company. Obviously a fairly heavy piece of political pressure.

Now, we checked this story as far as we could from written sources, newspapers, a manuscript history of the company, and contemporary accounts. We found that there was a delivery of postcards but that they were made in the normal way and that the message they contained was somewhat different. The company said that when 60% of the postcards they sent out had been returned, signifying the willingness of the workers to return on the previous terms, then the factory would be reopened. Obviously the pressure is here too and the firm was making a clear attempt to by-pass the union. But perhaps in a less underhand way.

Nevertheless, and this is the point I want to stress, subsequent labour relations in Singers seem to have been conditioned more by the first version, which seems to have circulated widely and been believed, than by the second. For some purposes, the fiction captured in oral evidence may be more important than 'the truth'.

Another more recent example is the case of the work-in at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders which had a symbolic significance for the working class, inside and outside the West of Scotland, which far outweighed the extent of workers' control actually achieved, which was fairly limited, or the enforcement of the 'right to work', which remains but an aspiration in these days of cuts and contraction. I will come back again to UCS when I talk about methods.

The examples I have been looking at so far have tended to deal with political issues or other 'extraordinary' events in the lives of the people, where oral evidence gives rise to some of the specific problems I have touched on. But potentially a more fruitful field for studies using oral evidence is in the recreation and, in some cases,

preservation of aspects of the everyday life of individuals, groups and communities. We know a great deal about history and modern studies from above, but very little about life as experienced by the vast majority of people. Since apart from letter writing, occasional diaries and an increasing number of recently discovered autobiographical works there is next to no literary evidence available, progress here will depend very largely on oral techniques. Much excellent work is already available including Raphael Samuel's evocation of Headington Quarry in his *Village Life and Labour*, a product of the History Workshop movement, based at Ruskin College, Oxford.⁸ Headington Quarry was an open village on the margin, in all senses, of agricultural society in Oxfordshire. It had a reputation for roughness and unrespectability, and its inhabitants were regarded with a mixture of fear and contempt by their neighbours. Samuel has managed to convey what life was like for the people of Headington Quarry, to show the other side of the local stereotypes and to convey just how it felt to be at the periphery of nineteenth century agrarian capitalist society.

Another Glasgow example, from a sociological perspective, is Sean Damer's 'Wine Alley: the Sociology of a Dreadful Enclosure', a study of the Broomloan Road housing scheme in Ibrox since the 1930s.⁹ In this article, Damer demonstrates the pernicious effects of the labelling process which attributed a whole range of vices to the inhabitants of Wine Alley and shows the way in which police, public officials and social workers combined to reinforce the stereotypes. More dramatically, though, he brings out the consequences for the people themselves as they found themselves trapped by their image and how some felt that they had to justify the reputation which had been imposed on them. He also traces the image back to its origins when the houses were allocated, not to the inhabitants of Govan, who expected to be rehoused in them, but to 'incomers' from other parts of the city. Since in those 'foreign parts' they probably ate babies for breakfast, for all the deprived inhabitants of Govan knew, it was easy to represent the incomers as sub-human without actually experiencing any contact with them. Violence and disreputable behaviour was always rampant at the other end of the street, no matter whether you begin interviewing at No.1 or No. 150.

Several large oral history projects are in progress or have recently been completed with the explicit intention of recreating aspects of life before the First World War. First in time was Paul Thompson's mammoth exercise at Essex University, which was financed by the SSRC. The intention here was to obtain representatives from the various classes and occupational groups revealed in pre-war censuses and to interview them in a standard form on the basis of a long (28 page) questionnaire. The hope was that this would produce information in relatively standardised form which could be used for comparative studies covering the whole of the United Kingdom. The first results of these studies have become available in articles and in Thompson's much praised book *The Edwardians*.¹⁰ Another major oral history enterprise is the South Wales Miners Project which has located and preserved the contents of many of the Miners' libraries in addition to carrying out a host of interviews with different generations of miners.¹¹

Building on this there was a conference in South Wales in 1976 at which several participants in the General Strike recounted what went on when the miners remained out long after the official strike was called off. Here is one participant recalling how the people were fed.

We had the Guardians, Boards of Guardians (in existence). Some young people only know the existence of those as the result of reading a history but they were nasty peices of work. And in feeding the people we had to discuss seriously whether it was right or wrong on occasions to take a sheep from a field without asking the local copper whether it was against the law. Some people got scared. I did myself. We drew up a rota and a dozen people drew what day, what week their responsibility was to take a sheep. And it came my turn. And I went. And we had a very nice place from which to take a sheep. And the practice as to how you had to do it was laid down by the Council of Action. It had to be humane. And to get the sheep you had to leave home in the middle of the night, walk through the Ebbw River get to the bank on the other side, the other side of that again, the Rhymney River running down and they converged at the bottom of the field - at the bottom Newtown in ...

I walked through the River, wondering now whether I was going to fail where others had succeeded and I thought in any case I must try, and taking along the implements as laid down - a nine inch bolt with a head on it they use in truck repairing. You got to the sheep very quietly, stunned it on the head, dragged it up on your back and carried it back through the river. This I did. There they were waiting now for me to come back, dark as pitch. No noise. Dong on the head, up comes the sheep, through the River, and when I talk about the River at this time or the year it was only about 2' 6" deep and about up to your waist. And I'm more than half way through the River when this sheep recovers consciousness. In the dead silence of the night, if you've had that experience of being in a river with one on your back, it said in your ear "Behhh". I won't leave it your imagination to remember what I did and I'll tell you what I did. I said it that fellow is alive "give him a chance" and off I went and got to the bank empty handed. Then I got a row from the members of the strike committee and the Council of Action, that I hadn't done my job. But I told them I done my job, but this was a strong sheep'.

This of course was the centrepiece of a major period of industrial unrest in this country, but other projects are concerned more with day to day existence, where it could be argued that the prospects for oral history may be even greater. There have been several regional studies including one on 'Everyday life in Kent before 1914'¹² and there is the work of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh which has spread well beyond its original interest in folk-lore, speech and dialect.¹³

In Australia, the work of Patsy Adam Smith, Wendy Lowenstein, Michael McKernan and a major project by the National Library in Canberra compares favourably with this British research.¹⁴

If areas of ordinary life rather than the extraordinary are the most fruitful for oral history, one should not underestimate the potential of such studies for generating completely novel information. I want to illustrate this again with two examples - one English and one Scottish. The first is a product of the work of George Ewart Evans, the doyen and guru of oral history in Britain. He had spent years conversing with his neighbours in his Suffolk village and producing marvellous books based on their recollections including *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay, Where Beards Wag All*, and *The Horse in the Furrow*.¹⁵ In these books he recreated the life of communities of marsh people and of migrant workers who each year journeyed from East Anglia after the harvest to the maltings at Burton-on-Trent. He also spent some time talking to the last generation of horsemen, whose animals had just been replaced by tractors in East Anglian farming. In the course of this he discovered the secret rituals, spells and artefacts which the horsemen used to maintain control over their beasts and to increase their fertility. This 'horse magic' was a closely preserved secret handed on from individual to individual, with pains and penalties for disclosure of information which were more horrific than anything dreamed up by the Masons or the Knights.¹⁶ Ewart Evans was very lucky to interview the horsemen when he did, because their knowledge had ceased to have economic and social value and hence was accessible, but it would have died out with that generation.

In the course of his investigations, it became dear that he had unearthed an oral tradition which stretched back virtually unchanged into mediaeval times, which illuminated a whole range of agricultural practices and social relationships in rural East Anglia. The horsemen maintained their position through their skills and economic performance but this was based in turn on their control of the 'horse magic' which gave them the power over the horses.

In a similar case in Scotland, Ian Carter from Aberdeen has recreated the life on the 'farm toons' of the North East of Scotland, which most people know only from the Bothy Ballads. What Carter has done is little less than rewriting the history of farming from the point of view of the agricultural labourer rather than that of the farmer or landlord. He has rescued them from urban condescension and shown how they were far from being the deferential oafs often pictured. The Society of the Horseman's Word was a secret society parallel in many respects to the illegal trade unions of nineteenth century England.

The etiquette of the bothy and stable was equalled in rigidity only by that of the court of Louis XIV. Each man had his place and was taught to keep it. For the second horseman to have gone in to supper before the first horseman would have created as much indignation as an infringement of precedence at Versailles. The foreman was always the first to wash his face in the bothy at night; it was he who wound the alarm clock and set it for the morning, and so on, and so on. The order of seniority was as strictly observed between the second horseman and the third, while the halflin always got

the tarry end of the stick... But the foreman had pride of place in everything. he slept at the front end of the first bed - that is, nearest the fire; he sat at the top of the table in the kitchen; he worked the best pair of horses; and he had the right to make the first pass at the kitchen maid.'

I've been working in a different field from the foreman, and trying to be home when he came home. But I was home first, just by mere chance, and I was at the horse trough with the orra beast when he came in about. He gave me a swearing - he said I had no damn business to be there until he came with his pair. I was supposed to stand back. This is the sort of thing that went on. He started harnessing his horses first. You were not supposed to take a collar from a peg until he did it. And at the same time you were supposed to be at his heels when he went out - you didn't have to fall behind just because of that. You had to be ready when he wanted.

As in East Anglia, the senior horseman was the lynch pin of the agricultural work force, as the extracts show, and his power vis-a-vis the owner was exerted by the process of the 'clean town'.¹⁷ In other words, when the grieve, or senior farm servant, left a particular farm it was an unwritten law that all the other servants left at the same time. So if the farmer fell out with his grieve he knew that at the next term day he would have to replace his whole labour force. At the feeing market at term time, though, if the farmer had got a bad reputation then he might have difficulty in recruiting labour. Many of the ballads circulated at the feeing fairs were not the cosy songs of 'Bothy Nechts' but, lampoons against hard-driving farmers like 'Drumdelgie' or 'Sleepytown'. Now it strikes me that the opportunities for the discovery and recreation of aspects of urban life are almost as great as these examples from rural life suggest. We know a fair amount about the institutions or urban life and the activities of organisations like trade unions, friendly societies and so on from written sources, but life outside these organisations has hardly been touched on. One local story can act as example. The Partick Oral History Project, was an offshoot of the Partick Housing Association. Colin Richardson and some colleagues tried to piece together a picture of what life was like in Partick with the assistance of the inhabitants of the tenements taken over for redevelopment and modernisation by the Association.¹⁸

Another area which has been opened up by oral evidence is some of the social history of Scottish football (soccer). Bob Crampsey did a fair amount of interviewing in connection with a thesis at Glasgow University. He managed to piece together the story of the latter days of Third Lanark Football Club, which was systematically destroyed by its chief director in order to produce a vacant area of land which could be sold for private housing development. One point of wider significance, though, emerged from interviews. It was often said that, in the old days, some second division teams did not want promotion. The optimum position for them was to come third in the league, thus maximising income from gates, pools money and supporters dubs contributions. Even the older players preferred it that way since they knew they were not up to first division standard any longer, and were better off picking up winning bonuses in the second. This type of analysis was confirmed when we found cases of

second division managers who were paid bonuses, based not on success on the field, but on a percentage of the transfer fees they brought into the club.

To take one final example, the history of women in their domestic, industrial and political activities is an area where oral evidence is being increasingly used but where much more could be done. Sandra Holton, Valerie Atkinson, Edith Hamilton, Elspeth King are only some of the people engaged in work in this field already.¹⁹ School projects could be enormously fruitful here in both social and educational terms. There are hundreds of old ladies within walking distance of your schools, who carry between them the collective memory of the communities in which they live and of their own social role within them. They are often lonely, neglected and what is more they are unaware that the facts of their narrow, circumscribed lives and their experience of discrimination could be of any interest to the younger generation. Is it possible that some of you could use oral history projects as a means both of tapping this source of information and giving your local old people back some of their dignity and a sense of comradeship at the same time?

Just beware of the pitfalls though. One teacher I know in Manchester got a project of this type under way, which obviously caught the imagination of some of her wayward pupils. Two of them, whose previous record for truancy had almost made the Guinness Book, announced to her, 'Please Miss, we are going to interview all the old people in Manchester, and we want to start with you'.

I now want to turn to the techniques of collecting and presenting oral evidence and I will look at the problems first of the interview itself and then the separate problems of transcribing and presenting the taped interview. There are two schools of thought about interviewing. Firstly there is the 'objective/comparative' approach usually based on a questionnaire, or at least a very highly structured interview in which the interviewer keeps control and asks a series of common questions to all respondents. The aim here is to produce material which transcends the individual respondent and can be used for comparative purposes. It is also designed to produce information on a pre-defined range of topics though sensitively handled, it can be used to explore new areas when unexpected or off-beat answers are given by respondents. In some respects this type of interviewing is the counterpart of the media approach, where the ideal is said to be 'Never ask a question to which you don't already know the answer'. In the hands of flexible, sensitive interviewers, who are prepared to abandon the script when necessary, this approach can generate very useful material indeed, but it can be deadly. Promising lines of enquiry are too easily choked off and, worse still, people are forced into the predetermined framework of the interviewers and so large relevant areas of experience are never examined at all.

At the other extreme is the free flowing dialogue between interviewer and respondent, with no set pattern, in which conversation is followed wherever it leads. This method occasionally turns up the very unexpected and leads to completely new lines of enquiry, but it can very easily degenerate into little more than anecdotal gossip. It can produce miles of useless tape and impossible problems of selection and transcription. Such a conversational and informal approach may be very valuable as an initial interview, which is not recorded. It helps to establish the range of the respondents' interests and those areas in which investigation is likely to be fruitful. These can then be followed up at a later stage in a recorded interview based on a more structured

approach. Though here, of course, you have to be aware of contamination. Often there is a freshness about the initial telling of a story, which can never be recaptured in a subsequent interview.

There is no single ideal (optimum) type of interview. For some purposes a structured approach may be necessary especially if a group of people are working together on a common project, if only to ensure that all the areas to be investigated are in fact covered. In the case of school projects, certainly in the early stages, I think this would be essential though flexibility could be gradually increased.

For interviews on political subjects, I have found that a creative dialogue not to say an argument can be very fruitful. Here are a couple of examples from the oral history of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders which John McLauchlan and I undertook.²⁰ The first is an early interview with the leader of this novel form of industrial action, Jimmy Reid, under somewhat difficult background conditions. I put to him the criticism from the left wing socialist groups of the line the shop stewards were taking and got in return this statement of his own position and beliefs.

Jimmy Reid

Now first of all, I've got to say this. The highest form of democracy that I've experienced in my life in Britain is in the UCS at this moment. People talk about, at least politicians talk about, peoples' involvement or participation in decision making - they are platitudes. In the UCS since we started this exercise all trade union and management structures have been superseded by a coordinating committee representing the total labour force. Representing them, there is no doubt about this. They are elected by them. We take the decisions about the day to day matters, about what comes into and what goes out of the yards. Then once a week there is a mass meeting of all the workers, manual workers, clerical and administrative, technicians, management we all meet and the decisions of the co-ordinating committee are put to them for amendment, for new proposals and so on, but ultimately for acceptance or rejection. I'll take a bit of convincing that there is a more democratic structure operating in any institution academic or industrial in Britain today, than that in UCS.

Next by contrast is a militant worker's perspective where on this occasion I was taking a reactionary line.

Clydebank engineer

I think it was spontaneous, I think, without being too tendentious.

Q Was it not just the appeal of the idea?

Naw, naw. I think there's a lot of things in the argument. They had made an arse of Fairfield. The Party had made a cock-up of Fairfields. In less than two years 4,000 guys went down the street. They continually retreated in the yards. People like ... a small story of interest. A bloke I know who is now a small businessman and therefore worthless was a steward in Simons Lobnitz. When they shut down Simons Lobnitz, and the deputy convener was a guy called Jimmy Airlie and at the time the bloke got up ... he was the woodworkers' steward and as usual in the shipyards they had the most members... and he got up and proposed that they should take the yard over under workers' control and just continue to work and he was laughed at. So there was a history of people actually talking about these things. Airlie was the man who actually spoke against it on this occasion. But the Trades Council over something like 5 years that I was there, the issue kept coming up. It came up with the Barclay Curle's, it came up with the Blythswood, came up with Harland and Wolff the closure in Scotstoun, it came up with Fairfields itself. And continually the left Trades Councillors were called the sloganisers but the things which were raised were... take over the yards, don't allow any more redundancies and I've got the feeling that at that meeting the Party had been retreating for so long, the opportunity came up to take a stand, and a lot of the militants were hoping for a chance to take a stand.

Now, obviously the more information you can bring to an interview the better. You are able to ask informed questions, to check dubious statements, and you can assess reliability more easily. You must try to be sensitive to local issues and local variations. For example, John Marshall, in interviewing Lancashire mill-girls, always asked them when they left school. Usually the answer was at 14. But he then followed this up with 'when did you start work?', for he knew that the majority of them had been half-timers in the loom sheds from much earlier, spending only two and half days a week in school.²¹

But one's own ignorance can be turned to good use. On many occasions older workers have greeted my naive questions with amused tolerance and told me, 'Naw, naw laddie it wasn't like that at all', followed by a graphic description of the real situation. Here is another UCS example, when I asked a boilermaker what was wrong with a plan to do away with wage differentials.

Clydebank Boilermaker

They all want to go to the welding. This is Utopia this welding. I'll tell you another wee story. In 1966 they were going to payoff sheet ironworkers so the boilermakers said we'll take them in. Well, the blokes went and got trained. They wanted to volunteer because there was extra money there. O.K. Fair enough. They go to the welding, they are

trained for the welding and the boat got tacked up. Fair enough. I say, tack all that up. About a month ago they wanted to send the same blokes to the welding. Ah no! We don't want to go to the welding. How no? We had enough of that the last time. Because it's the same money. They get the same money for sitting on their arse as for welding, so that they don't want to go to welding. Why not go to plating or some other trade. They all want to go to welding. See maybe I'm prejudiced that way. See I put you in here. Suppose it's a wee store or something, a vegetable store. You tack up the bulkheads, tack up that, tack up the stanchions and you walk out the door, you are finished. They send for the dumplings and they come in and they've to weld it all for the same money that you've been getting for playing yourself. It's no fair.

I deliberately have not talked about the technical problems in tape recording - cassettes versus reel to reel, which is the best machine, how should you go about recording -[though we can take these points up in a discussion, if you wish] There is an enormous, and I think unnecessary, mystique about all this. Personally I feel that recording is best done informally, in surroundings where the respondent feels at home, especially his or her home, and with background conditions which are not necessarily conducive to the production of professional-standard tape recordings. As long as you can hear the playback tape well enough to understand what is said for the purpose of transcription then that will do. If you want to use the tapes for the study of intonation, dialect and use of language, or for playback to audiences, then higher standards are required.

For the latter, I've learned from bitter experience that it is essential to provide the audience with a transcript of all but the best quality recordings, otherwise by the time they have adjusted to the recording, the extract is usually over.

What does one do with the tape when it has been made? For some purposes it is sufficient to keep the material only on tape, but for most research, study and comparative work it is necessary to transcribe the tape. This is a long, slow and painstaking process. It takes up to six hours to transcribe one hour of tape, perhaps even more with difficult dialects or poor recordings. And transcription is far too important to leave to a secretary or audio-typist.

Again for some purposes a rough approximation to what was said may be enough, but if you want to capture the texture of experience, not only what was said but the way it was said and the feelings which underlay the saying, then accurate transcription is a first essential. People do not speak grammatical prose and you must beware the spurious cleaned-up transcript. Here are two examples to illustrate the point, the first from Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield*, the second from George Ewart Evans, *Where Beards Wag All*. The first is so clear, logical and relentless in its pursuit of information but it is dead because no Suffolk labourer ever spoke like that. The second is much closer to the texture of speech, though even here hesitations and repetitions may have been gently excised.²²

There were seven children at home and father's wages had been reduced to 10s a week. Our cottage was nearly empty - except for people. There was a scrubbed brick floor and just one rug made of scraps of old clothes pegged into a sack. The cottage had a living-room, a larder and two bedrooms. Six of us boys and girls slept in one bedroom and our parents and the baby slept in the other. There was no newspaper and nothing to read except the Bible. All the village houses were like this. Our food was apples, potatoes, swedes and bread, and we drank our tea without milk or sugar. Skim milk could be bought from the farm but it was thought a luxury. Nobody could get enough to eat no matter how they tried. Two of my brothers were out of work. One was eight years old and he got 3s a week, the other got about 7s.'

It's like this: those young 'uns years ago, I said, well, its like digging a hole, I said, and putting in clay and then putting in a tater on top o' that. Well, you won't expect much will you? But no with the young 'uns today, it's like digging a hole and putting some manure in afore you plant: you're bound to get some growth, ain't you? It will grow won't it? The plant will grow right well. What I say is the young 'uns today have breakfast afore they set off - a lot of 'em didn't used to have that years ago, and they have a hot dinner at school and when they come home most of 'em have a fair tea, don't they? I said. These young 'uns kinda got the frame. Well, that's it! If you live tidily that'll make the marrow and the marrow make the boon (bone) and the boon make the frame.'

Remember that with the transcript you are creating another form of evidence. Not best evidence, for that is the tape itself, but evidence which may be used more often. In future you or someone else may be much more interested in a point which you thought insignificant, or in use of the material for entirely different purposes. In these cases verbatim transcripts, warts and all, are essential. One of my Deakin students had his revenge on me after I had hammered this point to him in connection with an essay he was writing, based on oral evidence. He had interviewed three survivors of a Japanese bombing raid on Hong Kong, but his account of their experiences seemed too grammatically correct to me. I queried this, but he replied, 'The original interviews were in Chinese, did you wish me to leave them as they were!'

I ought to mention copyright and confidentiality at this stage. Remember that copyright in tape recordings and transcripts exists and that the permission of the respondent for its use should be sought, preferably in writing at an early stage. In local studies, confidentiality can be a problem, for what Mrs Jones said in passing about Mrs Macdonald's husband may be a focus of local scandal or gossip.

Interviewing people in groups rather than individually can be very rewarding because one participant's memories spark off the recollections of another. In the village I lived in in Scotland, Lochwinnoch, one of my friends had three old ladies talking about life in the village and they got on to the influenza outbreak immediately after the First

World War, which killed more people than the war itself. They were able to describe its impact in the village, which was much smaller than it is today, by recalling four funerals on the one day. On the other hand, group interviewing has its dangers, and only the foolhardy would willingly get involved in a neighbourhood therapy session, if he wants to continue to reside there!

Finally how does one present the material obtained from tapes and transcripts. If you are concerned with matters of everyday life and experience and have a range of respondents and no serious problems of confidentiality arise, then you may find that a Chinese technique of history writing is worthwhile. In this, when the researchers have compiled their study they must take it back and present it to their informants. Only when the latter are convinced that this is a true record and account of life and events can the project be considered complete. Short of this you may find that playing the tape of one informant, with his or her permission of course, to a group of other participants will spark off a whole gamut of extra memories and corrections which you can then incorporate in your study.

The potential of studies using oral evidence is enormous. Used critically and sensitively they can be valuable in schools for educational and social purposes. Don't be put off by the difficulties and problems I have mentioned, but try them and see what the effects are on pupils and participants and as Leonard Sachs would say 'chiefly yourselves'.

References and Further Reading

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Paul Thompson (ed.), *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe*, Humanities Press, New Jersey, (1982).

Endnotes

¹ Most of the examples in this booklet are drawn from the United Kingdom, since it is primarily a companion to SSS101 War and Modern Industrial Society, but they can be paralleled in Australian history.

² Elizabeth Tonkin, reviewing David P Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (1974), in *Social History*, 3 (1976), 399.

³ J T Hughes & S Price, Social and Economic Research project on Office Location, University of Glasgow, (1976).

⁴ Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *Harry McShane: No Mean Fighter*, Pluto, London, (1978).

⁵ For the best version, R Churchill, *Winston S Churchill: The Young Statesman, 1901-14* (1967), 378.

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- ⁶ Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (1964), 68-9.
- ⁷ Lindsay Morrison, 'Singers v Wobblies: the Singer Strike of 1911', unpublished MA dissertation, Glasgow University (1976).
- ⁸ R Samuel (ed.), *Village Life and Labour*, Routledge, London (1975). See also, R Samuel (ed.), *Miners, Quarrymen and Saltworkers*, Routledge, London, (1977).
- ⁹ Sean Damer, 'Wine Alley: The Sociology of a Dreadful Enclosure', *Sociological Review*, 22 (1974).
- ¹⁰ Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, (1975).
- ¹¹ See H Francis, Final Report of the SSRC Coalfield Project (1975), and reports in *Llafur: Journal of the Welsh Labour History Society*.
- ¹² M Winstanley, 'The Rural Publican and his Business in East Kent before 1914', *Oral History*, 4 (1976), 63-78. See also R Moore, *Pitmen, Preachers and Politics: The Effects of Methodism in a Durham Mining Community* (1974), which makes effective use of oral evidence.
- ¹³ The journal *Tocher* includes regular extracts from their work and is well worth consulting.
- ¹⁴ See for example, Patsy Adam Smith, *Hear the Train Blow: An Australian Childhood*, Ure Smith, Sydney (1964); Patsy Adam Smith, *The ANZACS*, Nelson, Melbourne (1978); Patsy Adam Smith, *The Shearers*, Nelson, Melbourne (1982); Wendy Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour: An Oral Record of the 1920s Depression in Australia*, Hyland House, South Yarra (1978); Michael McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney (1980); Michael McKernan, *Padre: Australian Chaplains in Gallipoli and France*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney (1986).
- ¹⁵ G Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* (1972); *Where Beards Wag All* (1970); *The Horse in the Furrow* (1967). All published by Faber.
- ¹⁶ The Masonic Order and the Knights of St. Columba. Respectively Protestant and Catholic societies, whose activities involve secret ceremonies and whose actions have often been interpreted as subversive.
- ¹⁷ Ian Carter, 'Class and Culture among Farm Servants in the North-East, 1840-1914', in A A Maclaren (ed.), *Social Class in Scotland*, Donald, Edinburgh, (1976) and Ian Carter, *Farm Life in North East Scotland, 1840-1914: The Poor Man's Country*, Donald, Edinburgh, (1979).
- ¹⁸ Colin Richardson, Partick Oral History Project, The St Bride's Centre, 19-21 Rosevale Street, Glasgow G11 6EL.
- ¹⁹ Sandra Holton (University of Stirling), National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies; Valerie Atkinson (Glasgow University), The Suffrage Movement in Scotland; Edith Hamilton, Feminism and Socialism in Glasgow; Elspeth King (The People's Palace, Glasgow Green) interviewing older residents on various aspects of their life.
- ²⁰ J R Hay & J McLauchlan, 'The Oral History of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders', *Oral History*, 2 (1974); see also John McLauchlan, *John Brown's Body* (1975) for a Modern Studies Pamphlet using oral and visual material in a very effective way.
- ²¹ John Marshall, 'The Sense of Place, Past Society and the Oral Historian', *Oral History*, 3 (1975), 21.
- ²² These examples are taken from R Samuel, 'Perils of the Transcript', *Oral History*, 1 (1971-3), 20.