ORAL HISTORY IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY: linking universities and communities
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Oral History has been making a noticeable contribution to historical research in this country for five decades or so by recording and using reminiscences. Elsewhere, oral traditions passed from person to person may still form the main way of preserving the distant past, but most western uses are quite different, involving the collection of memories of personal experience instead. Its success was largely due to initiatives from outside academia, often based in libraries and museums, which makes it one of the most democratic strands of history. Academic wariness stemmed partly from the name itself, for 'oral' clearly indicates spoken reminiscences, and not documents, while 'history' implies that those reminiscences constitute in themselves an acceptable general account of the past. Let me stress, however, that the typical academic historian does not exist, and there is certainly no official 'line' on oral history. Today, I would say that while a few still condemn it utterly, the majority accept it in some form even though few actively involve themselves in it.

In fact what gets recorded is testimony which forms a distinctive addition to the evidence base that historians draw on, not a shortcut that replaces traditional scholarship. Few people, after all, can spontaneously recount their lives in a carefully organised and coherent manner – I certainly cannot. Therefore, even seeking straightforward autobiography involves editing to produce a readable text, probably on a massive scale. Indeed, no one can give trustworthy evidence on anything they have not experienced directly, as courts of law recognise. Therefore, no single account ever forms anything like a rounded history, but acknowledging such limitations in your evidence is part of the research training all professional historians receive. More seriously, such accounts do not offer precise descriptions of events and attitudes as they were, but our memories of them. The natural urge to go back as far as possible means they are often distant memories. We all forget things, and the police will readily confirm that eye-witnesses differ enormously in describing even recent events, which was why history generally cut loose from memory as an acceptable primary source during the nineteenth century. Why then turn back to it? Simply because the preferred alternative, written documents, only reflected the experiences of a select few people, and collecting evidence from as many people as possible prevents individual perspectives taking over in oral testimony.

Certainly my own interest developed as I finished my BA in 1969 because I felt that the ordinary families and towns that formed my own background had simply been overlooked in my studies. The massive expansion of the topics historians wanted to explore then showed a growing sense that history should be a common possession of all the nation. Moreover, the new
approach was popular, for though not everyone is interested in the past, generally people do like to reflect on how they and the societies they live within have developed. Although nineteenth-century professional historians had mostly restricted themselves to the development of European nation states and empires, and the internal and external conflicts that resulted, in fact any aspect of the human past is relevant (though in practice we split off investigations mostly reliant on excavation as archaeology). Indeed, history is actually unusual in the complexity and diversity of its subject matter: no other university subject has an officially-endorsed benchmark statement comparable to this one which deliberately avoids saying that any specific period or approach is so central that all history degrees must contain it.

Moreover, in the 1960s, technology solved the key problem with oral history for serious researchers – verifiability. Modern history claimed credibility because it worked from evidence that could be checked by others, but spoken memories could not meet that standard. However, mechanical recording meant that instead of writing things down as best the collector could, with readers asked to trust the accuracy of the results, memories were now preserved exactly as they were spoken, and could be archived and footnoted like a document. Today, digital recorders have simplified recording, and computers can store the results and make them directly accessible around the world. Increasingly, historians stressed the fallibility of documents, so oral testimony no longer stood out.

Moreover, historical investigation does not create some clear set of scientific laws that can be confidently written into text books. This is not adopt an extreme position that we effectively know nothing, because that is indefensible. This country now has an established historical framework that no-one seriously argues with, and there may be no absolute rights in history, but there are a multitude of clear wrongs: events like the two world wars clearly did happen. Academic historians therefore need to keep history in an active state, not just through new research, but by ensuring that what we know is refigured to remain relevant to a changing present. That in turn requires locating academics within a wider community of all those involved, potentially or actively, if we are to understand where oral history is today. I can best illustrate this through a diagram identifying four interest groups:

Academic historians

ORAL HISTORY

Non-professional historians

'Broadcasters'

Libraries, museums and schools
The point here is that academics possess neither ownership nor automatic leadership, but constantly interact with the others to determine what is actually achieved. This is a special case in that given the need to make recordings, those with technical skills play a much more active role than here than in most other methodologies, and the recordings themselves can be used by the media. Despite this the role of technology must be kept in perspective if historical research is the prime goal. What historians want is information, and as long as it is audible and credible, they will use a recording that could never be usefully be played to an audience. Thus, if a seventeenth-century diary full on information was to turn up, no-one would advocate throwing it away because the cover was missing and rats had chewed the edges, or if the writing was hard to decipher. It is a real plus for oral history that recordings can engage and delight an audience, as I can personally testify, and everyone should get the best results they can, but to refuse to make a recording just because the equipment available is poor seems indefensible to me. Moreover, it is possible to clean up poor recordings very effectively today.

The other two corners also play crucial roles in this country because of oral history's heavy involvement in social and cultural investigations of ordinary life. The general diversity of history has preserved non-professional involvement at levels that have few parallels in other subjects, but as noted before, they are particularly significant here. In this country especially, the importance of local history in the development of our national take on the past is much underplayed in my view, and there have been superb historians outside the universities. I have drawn enormous inspiration, for instance, from the research of William Crump, a teacher in Halifax whose botanical interests led him via landscape history to an amazingly sophisticated understanding of the complexity of the early roots of modern industrialisation in the Pennines. Calling them amateurs may bring negative connotations when the intention is to recognise that many active researchers work purely due to personal interest. Such people prevent academic historians cutting themselves adrift and listening only to each other. Such introversion leads to overemphasis on technique and point-scoring, and private languages develop that only insiders understand.

My perception of this situation explains my decision to work in museums after leaving university, and I maintain it today by giving talks to societies, a very enjoyable process. I find that the results of my PhD thesis on Yorkshire farm horsemen can be put over with equal clarity and interest in village halls and international conferences, as long as you are sensitive to your audience. I also feel that in a time of enormous and fundamental social change, the need for a widely-based recording project has never been more urgent, and the possible range of topics is vast. Take, for instance, childhood, something very much in the news for many years now, with debate about both abuse of all sorts and whether children grow up far too fast. Many
commentators contrast our current state with the past, yet a lot of what is written is effectively wishful thinking, and I would say that museums do a very poor job in this area.

Thus, the average childhood gallery is dominated by displays of toys, dolls, special clothes and nursery furniture, usually from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, even a moment’s reflection should tell us that this reflects a tiny fraction of the population. Nurseries were extremely rare, and the overwhelming majority of children simply played outside the house, in groups rather than as individuals. They filled their time with games played to traditional rules, learned from other children, and had little to do with their parents – my generation was still largely told to go out and play and just to come back for meals, even in poor weather. Women had too much to do and fathers were out at work. Equipment for games was generally gathered together rather than bought, and in my experience ranged from stones that could be used to mark arrows on pavements for tracking to old, bally tennis balls and home made guns and vehicles. The latter had a multitude of local names such as trollsies, bogies, go-carts and so on. I have several times remarked during talks that the greatest wish of most ten-year old boys around 1960 was a functional set of pram wheels with which to build such things. Bought toys existed, but in general they soon got very battered and even broken. Iona and Peter Opie showed that even very young children can be interviewed with great results on this topic, and there is no other way of recovering the reality.

Taking this further, my PhD research ended up dealing with the transition from childhood to adult status in the rural East Riding of Yorkshire. This was entirely due to following up unexpected material that came out of my first oral history sessions. I had got interested in the old horse economy while working every summer for many years on grass-cutting gangs for my local council, and listening to the older men who had often worked on farms and evidently knew all about horses. There was very little in print about farm workers then, and what there was focussed on southern England, including the pioneering oral history work of George Ewart Evans, another non-academic who I found inspirational. I never drew up a formal questionnaire, but even so the early interviews overthrew everything my reading led me to expect. Whereas southern horsemen were middle-aged or older, and enjoyed a high status, Yorkshire boysmen looked after horses on leaving school aged twelve or thirteen. Hired for a year at a time, they received no wages till the year was up, and were lodged and fed on farms. They were called farm servants, and further research showed surprisingly few teenagers lived at home before 1800: in his influential book The World We have Lost Peter Laslett said that this system was one of three distinctive aspects of early-modern English society – and here this lost world was, still recoverable in the 1970s by talking to men who had lived that way of life.
I remain proud of the book that came of all this, but very conscious that my academic role was to follow leads, like a detective, and to make a wider sense of what emerged but not to impose some expected pattern. Leaving it as a collection of evidence would still have been worthwhile since everyone I spoke to is now dead. However, turning it into connected, meaningful social history meant combining it with more conventional approaches, and asking why the boys accepted this and what society got out of it. The latter was apparently a combination of a lot of work resulting from a very effective organisation of their duties (something McDonalds and similar enterprises have realised today) and also the control of a potentially disruptive element. Many parents acknowledge that their teenagers get on better with others than with them, and it is evident that most like spending time with others like them, while sheer hard work for twelve hours a day or more, six days a week, used up most of their energy. They got a sense of responsibility, and plenty of food. It was not an idyllic way of life in any sense, or one that could be revived today, but it worked then. You can see more about this, and read extracts from the interviews on the BBC local history website.

In museums, I maintained my interest as a minor theme, and the government schemes to help unemployed people in the 1970s and 80s funded a vast amount of oral history work, mostly outside the universities. I worked for Kirklees Libraries and Museums Service, based in Huddersfield, for a decade or so, and contributed a little to the foundation of the Kirklees Sound Archive, which is now a very impressive research resource. We also undertook more conventional museum work through the same schemes, and found local libraries excellent partners in providing research bases and venues for displays of social history that resulted. The disappointing part was that there were few links to universities, and although there is a sort of superficial goodwill, a functional rift still exists between most museums and university history departments, for no very clear reason. At the moment we at the University of Central Lancashire are trying to create bridges through modules that provide work placements and community history project teams, as well as encouraging students to base their final-year dissertations on topics of interest to museums and other groups. Certainly, it is a great shame for me that we have a lot of students who get far more out of their studies if a part of them is manifestly meaningful in the real world, and museums like that of the Queens Lancashire Regiment, or the new Ribble Steam Railway, can get jobs done that would otherwise be impossible. This includes oral history work, and we ran one highly successful project with the National Football Museum, for instance, which led to a display which ran for some time and has left them with an archive of football-related memories. Another, linked to a regeneration project in the Frenchwood district of Preston, has led to a booklet being published, including sections on childhood. When universities, libraries and museums work together, we can achieve a great deal even without huge resources.

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