

Oral History as a Vocation: Classroom Questions of a Perplexing Kind

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“Why, Hal, ‘tis my vocation, Hal.

‘Tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation.”

— Falstaff, in William Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*, Part I

Regularly, in the courses I teach for out-of-school adults who aspire to master oral history skills, I read aloud a passage from the memoirs of C.P. Stacey, the eminent Canadian historian of military affairs. Stacey is unequivocal in arguing the virtues of contemporaneous evidence:

The validity of a written account of an event, or an interview concerning it, is directly related to the length of time that elapsed between the event and the moment when the account was written or the interview took place. I have no hesitation in saying that one scrap of paper written on the evening of the battle is worth reams of reminiscence written down or spoken into tape recorders after months or years have passed. The best historical evidence is evidence recorded at the time. (229-230).

Next I quote from elsewhere in Stacey’s published memoirs a statement which magnifies the point he is making: “Memory is a feeble instrument (a point that proponents of ‘oral history’ often forget). (52).

Then I juxtapose Stacey’s avid avowals against a revelation in the memoirs of A.J.P. Taylor, the prominent British historian and media commentator. During the Second World War, Taylor offered his services to the Ministry of Information, which asked him to give morale-boosting speeches in English towns, and also to gauge the condition of British public opinion about the war. “The important thing was to turn in as many reports as possible,” he recalled, admitting:

I always exaggerated the numbers of those attending and sometimes invented a meeting where I had drawn a blank. In the section marked “public opinion” I put in whatever appealed to me at the moment: “Resolute determination to go until victory” or later: “Strongly-voiced demand in Aylesbury for the immediate opening of a Second Front.” I am told researchers now study these reports

in order to ascertain the state of public opinion during the war. I do not think they should attach much weight to mine. (159).

Thus, the classroom is set for a lively debate among students and their teacher: how do you measure one historian's faith in the credibility of contemporaneous written evidence and his denigration of oral history with another historian's forthright disclosure—from memory, no less—that the evidence he created did not actually or accurately represent the realities of his life? If arguments tilt in Taylor's favor, as they expectedly do in oral history classes, I make the issue more perplexing by introducing Taylor's contemptuous opinion about oral sources. "In this matter, I am an almost total sceptic," he has declared. "Old men drooling about their youth? No!" (quoted in Burke 114).

Elsewhere in these courses, I like to recount Judson T. Hale's story about a physician who practiced several decades ago in McAdam, New Brunswick, just across the U.S.-Canadian border from Vanceboro, Maine, where Hale spent some of his boyhood days. This doctor was famous for predicting a baby's gender before the child was born. His secret?

After informing a mother-to-be that she was pregnant, he would add that it was going to be a boy. Then, in front of the woman, he would haul a black book from his desk drawer and write down the mother's name, followed by the word "girl". If, some months later, his verbal prediction turned out to be true, the mother would simply marvel, "Oh, Doctor, you were right again." On the other hand, she might say, "Well, since it was a girl and you predicted it would be a boy, guess you were wrong, Doctor." In that case the doctor would again haul out the black book saying, "No, I don't believe I was wrong, and as you'll recall, I wrote down my prediction in this black book," which he would then show her. After the mother's name would be, of course, the word "girl". Right again. (Hale 79-80; see also Giesy 29).

To emphasize how oral historians need to listen carefully when conducting interviews and not impose their own suppositions on the spoken reminiscences they are hearing, I deploy the "New Brunswick syndrome" as a didactic illustration. As told by a physician:

A friend of ours was living in Canada and his mother from New Jersey was visiting. They were invited to a party and our friend noted that his mother was carrying on a long, animated discussion with a woman with whom he thought she had nothing in common. Afterward, he asked his mother what they were talking about. She

said, "Well, we were sharing a lot of memories of our childhoods in New Brunswick." They had carried on a long, gratifying conversation despite the fact that one was talking about New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the other was referring to the Canadian province of New Brunswick. The same words mean different things to different people. (Coulehan and Block 65).

Because oral history for narrators is a form of story-telling and for interviewers entails a skill at story-prompting, it is appropriate in oral history classes to pose likely problems neophytes will confront by embodying these hazards in a story format. Moreover, many of the adults in my courses will soon be launching their individual pursuits of oral history testimonies. For these incipient practitioners of oral history as a vocation, I share stories from my own experiences since 1962 (or versions derived from them) to put these encounters into a practical context. While all of these vignettes pertain to oral history concepts, methodologies, strategies, and ethics, none of them—as classroom discussion routinely demonstrates—have answers that are necessarily "right" or "wrong." Readers of this journal, like students arguing around a seminar table, are invited to volunteer their own solutions to these ten scenarios.

Meeting with the Program Officer of a large philanthropic foundation, you warmly praise oral history as a technique for obtaining evidence about neglected groups and topics in your nation's history. But the Program Officer eyes you warily and declares, "Numbers are more meaningful than words. Numbers are reliable; spoken memories are not. If the oral histories you collect disagree with quantitative analyses of the past, those recollections are inaccurate. You can trust numbers; you have to distrust the way people verbalize their pasts." After a pause, during which the Program Officer arches her eyebrows and taps her pencil ominously, she says, "You'll have to persuade me I'm wrong to get this grant." Another pause indicates it is time for you to speak in defense of your application. What do you say?

You are recording oral history interviews for an association of former Congressmen, based in Washington, D.C. You have more than 800 former Senators and Representatives to choose as interviewees, but only enough grant money to cover the cost of interviewing a maximum of 150. (How you determine which former Congressmen among 800 are selected for your top category of 150 is an interesting question in itself, deserving separate analysis). The director of this association asks you to record an interview with a one-term Congressman who represented a western state during the Harry S. Truman presidency of 1945-1953. You say the one-term representative won't merit the significance of performance within the House of Representatives to justify an interview, especially since others who served briefly are also being excluded. "But he is such a rich man," you

are told, "we need to cultivate him so he'll donate funds to this association and thereby help us financially. He should be interviewed so he'll think kindly of us and contribute money to us." What do you do?

The president of a large philanthropic foundation contracts with you to record oral history interviews about the foundation's activities over the past thirty years. "I want you to focus primarily on how policy evolved within this organization," he instructs you. "I want to know how policies were derived which governed the areas we supported with grant money, how policy determined who received grants, and how policy changed over the years." You are recording these interviews when a new president replaces your mentor. The new president asks you to review the status of your oral history project, and he seems pleased with the emphasis on policy formation. "But one thing," he cautions you, "... this foundation has the reputation of being antifeminist. Be sure to include women among your interviewees. I don't want them to feel neglected." From your interviews to date, you know the foundation has been incredibly chauvinistic about maintaining an exclusively masculine control of key positions of power. A long-time trustee of the foundation had been heard to say no female would serve on the board without first stepping over his dead body. How do you continue to explore policy-making as the focus of your interview project while including women who did not occupy policy-making positions in your roster of interviewees?

You begin an oral history project by interviewing the three most elderly and physically infirm among your prospective respondents, lest "the actuarial imperative" (a euphemism coined several years ago at the Regional Oral History Office of the University of California-Berkeley) silence these witnesses to history in the immediate future. Two of your interviewees are so far into their dotage years that your interviews produce very little of enduring historical significance. The third interview is a gold mine, full of rich detail illuminating aspects of the past which are not documented elsewhere. But this informative respondent, in exchange for candor, decides to seal the interview tapes and transcripts until her death has occurred. The agency funding your interviews has asked to see evidence of the quality of your interviewing when your grant is subject to review for renewal. You don't want to show your grantors the two disappointing interviews you did, and you tell them the one you think is excellent is sealed. They reply by asking if you could lift that seal temporarily, and in this single instance only, so they can see for themselves why you are so enthusiastic about this particular interview. Do you accede to their request?

On a Saturday morning in Lancaster, New Hampshire, you are conducting a one-day workshop, sponsored by the New Hampshire Committee on the Humanities, for out-of-school adults who want to learn oral history skills. You begin by asking fifteen registrants why they are

attending this workshop and what they would like most to gain from it. One woman says, "I dunno; I must be doing something wrong. I'm trying to write the history of this community, and I have a deal with the nurse at a local nursing home. When one of their elderly patients is having a good day, they phone me up and say, 'Come on down. So-and-so is really clear-headed today.' But by the time I get down there to do an interview, the old-timer isn't coherent anymore." This frustrated local historian asks our advice about how to get the recollections of these elderly people before they expire. What advice do you give her?

According to Charles L. Briggs, an anthropologist at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, "... the communicative structure of the entire interview affects the meaning of each utterance." Pursuing this logic, he contends, "Perhaps the most basic maxim to be followed is that the interview must be analyzed as a whole before any of its component utterances are interpreted" (102-4). Does his emphasis on context mean that you must carefully read the entire transcript of an oral history interview before you extract for quotation in your manuscript a single statement embodied within it? If so, how does this concern with context affect your limited travel budget and your tight research schedule when you are on the road, visiting libraries and oral history depositories far from your home base?

You visit a library to look in its archives for photographs pertaining to your subject. Happily, you find about six prints and ask the archivist if you can borrow them in order to duplicate them. The archivist says, "Yes." You ask about the procedure whereby such prints can be borrowed. "Just put them on the bottom of your briefcase and the guard at the security gate will not see them," you are told. "In fact, I'll walk with you to the guard's desk, and chat with you so the guard won't look carefully. After you have made your duplicates you can mail the originals back to me." Do you collaborate with the archivist in the ploy so proposed?

Two British historians note that, "Increasingly, authors mention in their acknowledgments insert that the author has a right of access to subjects, and that they do not have a good reason for declining; it is, therefore, we feel, to be avoided" (Seldon and Pappworth 132). Do you agree with this position? Or contrariwise, will readers wonder why the recollections of people with experiences germane to the subject treated in the books they are reading are not cited as sources consulted during the research process? Should historians protect themselves from critics by explaining that some prospective informants were approached but declined to be interviewed, and this "bibliographic" information will be helpful to other students in the same field?

You are interviewing an elderly lady in her home, high in the Berkeley Hills, about the impact of the Great Depression and World War II on the San Francisco Bay area. After recounting the shock of Pearl Harbor Sunday, she

describes how Americans of Japanese ancestry were “relocated” inland during 1942 because, she says, they posed a threat to America’s mobilization for war against Japan. Indeed, she gestures to the sparkling waters of San Francisco Bay, visible in all its glistening splendor through her living room window, and explains how Japanese-Americans could easily observe ship movements and transmit their reports via shortwave radio to Tokyo. She discloses that she was convinced that a Japanese storekeeper in a nearby shopping district along Euclid Avenue had a shortwave radio in the back room of his retail outlet. She justifies the “relocation” as a necessary action during wartime and, looking at you with a sweet smile, she asks, “Don’t you agree?” How do you handle her question?

Your interviewee is greatly dismayed when you provide him with a transcript of the oral history interview you recorded with him. He is appalled that his spoken language contains so many grammatical mistakes, that his syntax is poor, that his prose lacks succinctness. He tells you he wants you to destroy the tape and transcript. You tell him that his memories are historically significant — that his inside accounts of how Franklin D. Roosevelt chose Henry A. Wallace as his vice-presidential candidate in 1940, and then replaced Wallace with Harry S. Truman in 1944, are extremely informative and worth preserving. But he is not convinced by your pleas. You tell him that you have already invested many hours of expensive labor in preparing for the interview, conducting it, and having it transcribed. You have assured people that the interview is important in your project design and will be done. Still, your interviewee demurs. He adamantly insists that the tape and transcript be destroyed. Reluctantly, you agree to abide by the wishes of your interviewee. But through your mind passes the thought that you could surreptitiously make a duplicate of the tape and transcript without telling anybody, squirrel both away in a safe place, and years hence, after your demise, the world would be surprised and pleased to learn that you preserved this historically valuable reminiscence, despite the preferences of your interviewee. You have read accounts in *The New York Times* about people who violated the preferences of superiors in order to serve, decades ahead, the needs of history. Your plot may be unethical now, you admit to yourself, but scholars in generations to come will admire your convictions about preserving historical knowledge. Do you undertake an effort to preserve what your interviewee wants you to destroy?

After you ponder these questions, I hope you will discuss them with colleagues, students, and others. Oral history is dialogic in more ways than one. And to echo Shakespeare’s Falstaff: “ ‘Tis not a sin for oral historians to labor in their vocation, but ‘tis hardly virtuous to labor without addressing the pesky problem oral historians encounter while practicing their craft.”

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