

Ethnicity in Nova Scotia and Canada: Continuing Problems

Dorothy E. Moore and James H. Morrison, eds., *Work, Ethnicity and Oral History: Proceedings of a Conference at Baddeck, N.S.* Halifax: Saint Mary's University, International Education Centre, 1988 (ISBN 0-921793-02-2).
Issues in Ethnicity and Multiculturalism Series, No. 1.

Review by Myron Momryk

This publication contains the proceedings of an interdisciplinary conference held at the Alexander Graham Bell Museum, Baddeck, Nova Scotia, on October 15-18, 1986, and organized by the Society for the Study of Ethnicity in Nova Scotia, the Atlantic Oral History Association, and the Canadian Oral History Association. Although the conference was entitled "Work, Ethnicity and Oral History," it also included papers on related topics, such as religion, language, music and gender. Since the conference and the organizers were mainly from Nova Scotia, it was inevitable that there was a heavy focus on that province.

The common goal of the conference sponsors was the dissemination of new information on research and methodological techniques among their memberships and the community at large. The conference was also a forum to share this information among academics and members of the ethnocultural communities attending the conference. There were twenty-seven presentations and the large variety of contributors, from academics to community leaders, archivists and others, inevitably produced a wide range in the quality of papers presented. Some of the more memorable papers were well researched and documented with footnotes; others were transcripts of short, almost improvised presentations. Not all contributors used oral history techniques in their research.

The large number of proceedings have been organized into eight parts. Parts II to VIII include Introductory Comments by the editors and others. Part I is the keynote address by Gilbert H. Scott, who at the time of the conference was Director-General of Multiculturalism, reporting to the Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism. This federal government program, administratively part of the Department of the Secretary of State, was one of the main supporters of this conference and the publication of the proceedings. In his speech, Scott attempted to establish a link between the concept of multiculturalism and the theme of the conference. He was aware of the obstacles faced by researchers involved in oral history work. Among the problems he

identified were the recognition of peers, perception of their role in academic and community life, dissemination of the results of their research and access to work of colleagues, funding, access to subjects, and the need to establish and maintain respect and cooperation among communities and researchers. He spoke of the researchers' problems in establishing a working relationship with individuals and communities based on mutual respect and trust. He also asked the participants to share the results of their research with their colleagues and the general public. This aspect is an essential part of the multiculturalism policy and program, which attempts to sensitize all Canadians to their socio-cultural rights as citizens and residents of their country.

Part II deals with the "Social and Cultural History of Blacks in Nova Scotia." The Black community was and still is the victim of myths and errors in research that are only now being corrected by Black and other researchers. Generalizations that were accepted by many generations of researchers are being questioned and revised. David W. States, in "Researching the Social History and Genealogy of Blacks in Nova Scotia," describes his involvement in family history research, which led to his study of the larger history of the Black community in Nova Scotia. Bridglal Pachai provides a detailed and perceptive analysis of the economic history of Black land ownership in Nova Scotia. His study contains useful historical and contemporary information necessary to any further study of the Black community in the province.

Part III deals with "Ethnicity and Life Chances in Nova Scotia," and more particularly the influences of ethnocultural origin on the life chances of various groups in Nova Scotia. Anthony A. MacKenzie in his comparative study, "The Irish and the West Indians in Nova Scotia," states that the Irish Catholics had more educational opportunities and physical mobility. The Blacks retained closer ties to their homelands in the West Indies and were able to maintain their culture and traditions more successfully than the Irish. However,

they suffered discrimination during both World Wars, which was bitterly resented, and racial prejudice was the determining factor which prevented the West Indians from fully integrating into Canadian society.

Ronald Labelle, in his presentation, "Cultural Contacts in the Workplace: Some Acadian Experiences," examines contacts between Acadians and English-speaking Maritimers. He makes the observation common in other areas of cultural relations that these contacts were always made in English, the language of the dominant group. He suggests that language, religion, and also attitudes to other groups and to their own group are important factors in the retention of cultural heritage.

In "Acadian Fisheries of Southwest Nova Scotia in the Nineteenth Century," Nicholas Landry describes his research on the role of Acadians in the evolution of Maritime fisheries. Marie Battiste describes the "Different Worlds of Work: the Mi'kmaq Experience." She states that the encroachment of a cash economy and the attempts to integrate the community into the general economy have benefitted few and have generally disrupted the traditional ways of native life. Her presentation is an extract from a forthcoming book.

Wanda Thomas-Bernard, in her contribution, "Black Families and Family Therapy in Nova Scotia," outlines the problems faced by Black families and described in the other presentations at this conference—prejudice, discrimination, oppression. With the long history of these problems, she inevitably concludes that Black families are at the bottom of the socio-political and economic hierarchy.

In Parts II and III, research mainly through oral history methods reveals that many of the attitudes relating to ethnocultural and inter-group relations were implanted with the conquest and settlement of the first colonies. Despite the evolution of democratic political institutions and traditions, views and attitudes based on earlier political and economic relations imposed at that time have survived into the contemporary period.

Part IV deals with "Studying Work and Gender Historically." Isabelle Shay, in her presentation, "Interviewing Tribal Elders and Native Women," discusses the role of oral tradition and the fear that the traditions will be lost if recorded. For this and other reasons, it seems that there is a strong reluctance to document religious traditions.

Carole A. Hartzman based her presentation, "Not Yet Canadians: Integration and Isolation of Latin Americans in Nova Scotia," on forty personal interviews. She states that integration depends on the level of competence in English, success in finding employment and attitudes towards Canada and Nova Scotia. The main problems are the language barrier and employment. In "Work and Gender in a Scottish

Community on Cape Breton Island," Pieter J. de Vries and Georgina MacNab-de Vries also use information gathered from interviews. Their research was complemented by field observations, census data, archival materials, a household survey and genealogical data. This study, however, is marred by their attempt to use politically oriented analysis, which results in the excessive use of jargon.

Part V deals with "Documentary and Oral Sources for Labour, Ethnic and Community History." Burnley A. "Rocky" Jones describes the various phases of the Black Historical and Educational Research Organization (HERO) project. Interviews were taped in 1971 with 270 Black individuals over 65 years of age. Jones describes the various administrative problems associated with this project, which was one of the earliest oral history projects. In summary, he states that it was a good learning experience.

In "Towards and Expanded Definition of Oral Tradition: The Coal Miner on Nineteenth-Century Vancouver Island," Lynne Bowen proposes to expand the definition of oral testimony to include letters, poetry, diaries, and testimony at trials. She claims that the use of these sources of oral history makes the historical past vibrant and interesting.

Peter S. Li's presentation, "Constructing Immigrants' Work Worlds from Oral Testimonies," is based on the work experiences of Chinese and Greeks in Saskatchewan. His research focuses on marginal employment and ethnic businesses. He discusses a number of theoretical and practical problems in oral history research relating to accuracy, typology, and generalizations. He also attempts to analyze the difficulties of oral history research and the nature of oral history data.

Part VI deals with "Religion in Ethnic Communities." The articles in this section stress the important role that religion plays within the ethnocultural communities. They also describe the difficulties in maintaining the continuity and intensity of religious traditions when the community occupies a minority position in a rapidly changing society.

In her article, "The Mormon Experience in Alberta: Oral History of the Polygamy Question," Jessie L. Embry proves that in some communities where there exists or existed some form of official and legal restriction and control, the community develops and official interpretation of their experiences for "outsiders" and a popular interpretation of their experiences for their own members. The popular interpretation describes much more accurately their history and traditions, but is seldom recorded.

Geraldine T. Thomas bases her article, "Role of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Hellenic Community of Nova Scotia," on the results of 300 interviews. The

information obtained through these interviews provides insights into the occupational mobility of Greek immigrants and the growing divisions within the community among the Canadian-born and immigrant generations. This information would be very difficult to obtain through official and similar documentation.

Part VII deals with "Ethnicity, Work and Community in Canada." The articles in this section also provide information on relatively unknown aspects of the immigrant and ethnocultural experience in Canada. Krzysztof M. Gebhard bases his "Polish Veterans as Farm Labourers in Canada, 1946 - 49" on numerous archival sources, including approximately thirty interviews. This article provides personal reactions of Polish veterans to their fate after the Second World War. Although they were among the victorious Allies, they were treated in Canada little better than the German prisoners-of-war who preceded them in their jobs as agricultural workers. The bitterness was characteristic of this wave of Polish military immigration. In "Hard Work and a Strong Spirit: Macedonian Work and Enterprise in Toronto to 1940," Lillian Petroff describes the occupational careers of the first wave of Macedonian immigrants to Canada. This article is also based on a number of interviews with members of the Macedonian community in Toronto. One of the more interesting aspects of this study is the information on occupational accidents, which were so common during this period, and how the immigrants coped with these personal disasters. In ordinary accounts of their experiences, most immigrants prefer to stress the "success stories," and this other aspect of their existence was rarely described.

Part VIII is the last part of the proceedings, and is entitled, "Songs of the Workplace: Coal Miners." There is only one presentation: John C. O'Donnell with Men of

the Deeps, "Contributions of American Folklorists to Research on Canadian Coal-Mining Songs."

In general, the conference raised, but did not come to grips with a number of crucial problems relating to the experience of ethnocultural groups in Canada. Unfortunately, these proceedings cover too many topics and there is an evident lack of focus. One can sympathize with the editors in their task. In summary, the proceedings, despite the editorial and other problems, are an interesting and, in a few cases, a valuable contribution to the study of ethnocultural groups in Canada. The proceedings also provide general information on the status of these studies in various parts of Canada.

Through these and similar studies, it becomes obvious to the serious student of the multicultural experience in Canada that individuals, communities and ethnocultural and other groups that were and continue to be perceived on the social, political and economic margins of Canadian society are also the first victims of prejudice and discrimination. This is especially noticeable when recording the histories of Acadians, Native Peoples and visible minorities. Despite the many years of the official federal government policy of multiculturalism, the poor and politically powerless continue to be the usual targets of official and unofficial mistreatment. In March, 1990, Toronto newspapers reported the existence of a "Gypsy Crime Task Force" in the Toronto Police organization. One wonders how long such a Task Force would continue to exist if it were identified with another, more powerful ethnocultural group in Canada.

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