

GEORGE MacEachern: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by David Frank

Dans sa jeunesse, l'auteur du présent article eut souvent l'occasion de recourir à George MacEachern pour éclaircir certains points délicats de l'histoire du monde du travail. Pendant qu'il étudiait à l'université, il prit l'habitude d'enregistrer ces rencontres et bientôt put envisager d'écrire une autobiographie à partir des techniques d'histoire orale.

A cette fin il utilise une démarche à deux niveaux, permettant dans un premier temps d'enregistrer l'histoire de la vie de MacEachern, puis de préciser certains points grâce à des questions supplémentaires ou des documents écrits. La transcription de ces enregistrements dans le but d'obtenir une autobiographie valable se révéla un exercice difficile, mais utile, alliant l'authenticité à la recherche stylistique. Ce travail demande une collaboration entre l'historien et son informateur, ce qui laisse penser que la technique autobiographique, contrairement aux autres démarches de l'histoire orale, offre de précieuses possibilités de "démocratisation" de l'histoire.

Les interviews ainsi enregistrées concernent l'histoire familiale de G.M. et de sa jeunesse qui se déroulait dans un coin du Cap Breton, passant alors d'un état rural à une économie industrielle. L'influence de parents et du milieu ouvrier se révèle dans son développement scolaire et professionnel, ainsi que dans la formation de ses convictions sociales. Son activité syndicaliste semble découler de son expérience pratique pendant la Crise des années 30, qui en fit toute sa vie durant un partisan convaincu du communisme. Les interviews démontrent également la valeur de l'histoire orale quand il s'agit de corriger ou d'enrichir les documents officiels; ceci est particulièrement évident à propos de la version de G.M. sur l'origine des syndicats sidérurgiques au Canada.

Ne fût-ce que pour cette raison, l'auteur souligne l'utilité d'un recours toujours plus grand à l'histoire orale; il note toutefois que cette technique qui suppose la création des documents aussi bien que leur analyse est en fait pour l'historien "un processus long et difficile", ce qui expliquerait pourquoi on y a si rarement recours.

"Go talk to George! Go and talk to George MacEachern!" We received this advice more than once as we began, during the 1970s, individually and at times together, to explore the history of labour in industrial Cape Breton. In the early 1960s, when one of the interviewers was in trouble with school authorities, his father knew where to turn for advice: "Go and talk to George MacEachern!" It seems George was always there. And so, long before we came to work on this book, we had entered into the habit of "going to talk to George". Sometimes it was for personal advice, sometimes for historical information - but it was rarely a short visit, and eventually we began bringing along a tape recorder. In 1977 the visits to George and Dorothy's apartment on Rotary Drive became more frequent. The practice of "going to talk to George" had become a scholarly project, to be squeezed in between thesis research and college teaching, and now that we were bringing along a tape recorder, it had become oral history.¹

Somehow we managed to convince George that there might be advantages in setting down his story in a permanent form. We even told him that this might stop people like ourselves from "bothering" him. We are not sure George believed us, but he nevertheless agreed to collaborate in the series of interviews that have now become the basis for the autobiography.

Oral history no longer needs to be defended as a method of doing history. It is in fact, as Paul Thompson has so clearly reminded us, the oldest of all the methods of gathering and presenting historical information.² Furthermore, the recent development of social history has demonstrated that documentary and archival records are often incomplete and misleading. Although we were familiar with some of the outstanding works of oral history which had appeared during the 1970s, neither of us would have described himself as an oral historian. Working on this project gave us a practical education in some of the methodological problems and historical claims of oral history. Between ourselves we referred to the project simply as "George's story", and, as time went on, as "George's book". In undertaking to "help George tell his story", we soon realized we were becoming involved in a long and creative process of doing history. Of course, we had both been doing oral history for years. Oral history has often served this unrecognized function as a kind of record linkage, a way of determining necessary and sometimes unexpected information which could not be learned from existing sources. We had undertaken this kind of oral history countless times, with and without recording the results on tape. How else, for instance, could we have learned the location of William Davis' grave, or the details of J.B. McLachlan's stage performances? The more specialized meaning of oral history, however, has now come to imply the creation of a new, lasting document, whether a tape recording, a film or videotape, or a transcript (or all three). But there is more to oral history than simply collecting data. Doing oral history involves two separate tasks: one the collection of the rough raw material of history; and second, the presentation or analysis of this documentary material in a form in which it can be assimilated or integrated into our general knowledge of history. In undertaking the second task, that of public presentation, one faces choices. Often oral history is used in conjunction with other sources to draw a more complete, or perhaps simply a more colourful, account of an historical subject. Less frequently we have seen efforts to use oral sources as a principle source in historical analysis. Perhaps the most common form of presentation has probably been the preparation of first person narratives, or groups of such narratives, and the autobiography clearly falls into this category of historical work.

We have noticed that a frequent complaint on the part of reviewers of oral histories is the lack of adequate explanation of how the document was created.³ Thus, before going on to discuss the content and historical significance of George's autobiography, it is worth first explaining how this manuscript was created. The work was accomplished in two main stages. First, there were the interviews. These began in October 1977 and continued, off and on, until February 1979. The sessions lasted about one and a half hours each - the length of a 90-minute cassette - though they often continued after we ran out of tape or turned off the machine. Although tape recordings are not the only way to collect oral history, it was the appropriate methodology for this project, since the purpose was essentially one of preserving George's story in a permanent form. We followed a life-history approach, commencing as so many autobiographies do, at the beginning: "I've been known all my life as George MacEachern. I was born on the 9th of September 1904 in Sydney, Cape Breton..." We followed through from

there in a roughly chronological order to the 1950s, making detours along the way. Then, after transcripts were prepared and read, we started once more at the beginning, and in this second series of sessions, we asked more questions, not only producing clarifications but also opening up new and less familiar areas of discussion. In the end it appears we conducted 18 sessions and recorded 33 hours of tape. Meanwhile, George was himself preparing some short passages on his typewriter, and on at least one occasion, after we had left, he turned on his own tape recorder and tried his own hand at recording some oral history. For our part, we also found ourselves doing some outside work, mainly in the form of assembling documents, such as newspaper articles or archival manuscripts, which might be used in the interview process. George was delighted when we produced a brief account of his first professional appearance as a boxer, even though the Post had failed to give his name correctly. Throughout this work we were not simply gathering information for storage and potential future use; nor were we collecting data for our own historical analysis; rather we were helping to create a certain kind of historical document, namely an autobiography. Essentially we came to see "talking to George" as a work of collaboration between two historians and an historical subject. We would like to stress this point since collaboration in autobiography offers unusual promise for attempts to democratize the doing of history.

The completion of the interviews and the preparation of an accurate transcript simply marked the end of the first stage of the work. The second stage, then, has been the preparation of a book-length manuscript. This runs slightly more than 200 pages in length, compared to the more than 500 pages (of longer paper) which make up the transcript of the interviews. Where the transcript presents a nearly verbatim record of the interviews, the book manuscript offers an edited piece of historical writing in the form of an autobiography. We were not surprised to find that George was somewhat concerned about the rambling, repetitive, sometimes unfocused, nature of the first transcripts. He was sure from the start that the story was going to need "a lot of editing". Furthermore, he has reminded us more than once that he, like almost everyone, writes much more clearly and correctly than he speaks. The transcript might be regarded essentially as a field report, a set of working notes, or perhaps a rough first draft. The final version of this research, if it was to satisfy the editors, the readers - and the subject - needed more work. As any experienced writer knows, revision is an essential part of the writing process, and there seems to be no valid reason to skip over this stage in preparing an autobiography from oral history.

Editing oral history involves a "new kind of literary skill", one that requires the editors to remain "as faithful as possible to both the character and meaning of the original".⁴ And so, working with the transcript, we began to create the final draft. First, we outlined a number of possible chapters, with general topics to be included under each. A copy of the transcript was taken apart and sorted into the appropriate chapters. This rough edit continued, with scissors, paste, pen and pencil, as we deleted our own questions and comments from the interviews and attempted to eliminate repetition and excessive detail. Closer editorial work added punctuation and paragraphing, and inserted fragmentary comments orphaned by earlier excisions. We drew as well on some of George's typewritten comments, and also from the published version of an important interview in Cape Breton's Magazine. Spellings and unfamiliar names were questioned, some dates and titles were verified. Occasionally some words of transition or explanation were added. Some characteristic verbal

punctuation - "you know", "that sort of thing", "you see" - was deleted, though we tried, you know, to keep enough of this sort of thing, you see, to convey in print the familiar, colloquial flavour of George's speech. The result of this editorial work was a group of draft chapters, which, after more consultation with George, became the final manuscript. Without doing violence to George's story or to his way of speaking, we have tried to bring many fragments of memory together into a compact, readable narrative.

Some of this story has been told before, for George had spoken to public meetings and union meetings and college classes; he had appeared on local radio and television programmes; there were also occasional newspaper stories,⁵ and while we were working on our interviews, he was also interviewed for Cape Breton's Magazine⁶ and for Gloria Montero's book, We Stood Together.⁷ In these situations, though, George was often cast as an unofficial historian of local labour, and his visitors and audiences were more often interested in general accounts of Cape Breton labour history than in his own story. In following a life history approach, though, we found that some new and less familiar areas opened up for discussion and that George was able to offer some broad insights into several themes in Canadian labour history.

We begin then with an account of growing up in Sydney in the early years of the 20th century. It is interesting to note that George describes his neighbourhood as both "a-working class neighbourhood" and "almost as a rural community". These were boom years for industrial Cape Breton, and after the construction of the great steel plant at Sydney in 1899, the community was rapidly industrializing. George's mother and father had both come from the rural parts of Cape Breton County: Katherine from a family of millers at Marion Bridge, and Duncan was the son of a blacksmith at Little Bras d'Or. George's father, who had worked in the lumber woods of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, farmed on the Miramichi and helped build the Cape Breton Railway in the 1890s, was one of the returning Cape Bretoners who helped swell the population of industrial Cape Breton. Neighbours came from Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland; and there were many other immigrants in this most cosmopolitan of Maritime communities. There were many links with the pre-industrial way of life. The MacEachern house on Ash Street was completely unserved by light or water; they kept cows and hens and a horse, and grew their own hay and vegetables. His mother's people maintained a traditional rural household economy, and spoke Gaelic. Apparently his grandmother remained sceptical about the fate of the daughter who had gone to Sydney and taken up praying to God in a language He wouldn't understand. Still, George gives us a portrait of a community in which family ties and neighbourhood loyalties were strong. More than once George would move away from Cape Breton, but he always returned. And when his loyalty was questioned in later years, he would be able to respond, to the delight of his audience, that his first loyalty was to Cape Breton Island.

The formation of the industrial community also involved the growth of a working-class culture, and a sense of the limitations of working-class life in these new industrial centres. Though George does not dwell on these, the hardships that followed his father's death in March 1917 remind us of some of the insecurities of working-class life at the time. Duncan had died on the fifth of the month, and as a result the city, his employer, did not want to pay out his last month's wages; fortunately a

sympathetic lawyer took up the case and recovered the last pay. We notice how George's appreciation of his mother is mixed with a questioning of the spirit of fatalism that marked much early industrial culture: "One of her favorites was, and I guess this was a result of the poverty that came after my father's death, 'the Lord will provide'. I think she really believed that almost till the time of her death, though she had very little evidence to put forth. Nonetheless it was a good thing to know that the Lord would provide". Meanwhile, first his older brother, who was 14 at the time, and then George himself when he reached the same age, left school to go to work.

Most of George's early education probably owed more to the social life of Ashby and the work-culture of the machine shop than it did to the efforts of local schools and churches. Following an operation for a ruptured appendix, George took up regular exercise, which led him eventually into a short career in boxing, that most characteristic of working-class sports in industrial Cape Breton; for George, who was not a big man physically, it "did a lot of good for my health and a lot for my confidence". He is less happy with his rather longer career in drinking, another highlight of male working-class culture, especially in the prohibition era. Interestingly, he notes that he did not drink until he went to work in the steel plant, where it was the custom to consume all the beer as soon as it arrived from Montreal on the coal boats. In the machine shop, where he was hired on in 1922 at the age of 18, George was impressed by the noise and dirt and danger of the steel industry; he also learned to appreciate the skill, precision and knowledge of his trade, which he learned from the older machinists in the shop rather than from any formal training as an apprentice. From the conversation in the shop, he learned something of the horrors of the First World War, and something too of the labour movement. Yet it is interesting to note that George heard nothing of the union organizing drive at the steel plant in 1923 until his foreman advised him to stay away from the union; George's comments imply that we must revise our view of how strong or well-prepared the Amalgamated Association may have been for their last attempt to organize the plant. Although the 1923 strike left a legacy of defeat, under the influence of older machinists, George later became involved in organizing a lodge of the International Association of Machinists at the plant in 1930. The day the charter arrived, George and 50 other members were laid off: "So now I was active in the union and beginning to pay for it".

The Great Depression brought more troubles, but George's experience confirms the view that the early years of the Depression were extremely significant in educating a generation of working-class leaders in the importance of organization. It was in the unemployed union, in its battles against an archaic welfare system and in defence of the security and dignity of the unemployed, that George received his first full initiation into the working-class movement. Organizers such as the veteran labour leader Forman Waye and the maverick journalist M.A. Mackenzie served as local models, and George was also much impressed by visiting agitators such as the old Wobbly Sam Scarlett, who was touring on behalf of the Canadian Labour Defence League. In George's words, the "need for reading became strong" in these years, and between Haldeman Julius' bluebooks, and a copy of Capital borrowed from an old member of the Socialist Labour Party, George resumed his education.

It was at this time that George joined the Communist Party, and he has remained a party member ever since. His account of party membership may sound almost a dissonant note these days, since he offers no regrets or apologies and little by way of criticism of the party's policies, whether in the union field or elsewhere. He reminds us of the considerable real influence "the party" had among his generation in industrial Cape Breton, and his own decisions, both personal and political ones, appear to be made under many influences. Certainly, it appears that if the party had had its way, George might have become a more prominent public figure, perhaps in Ontario rather than in Nova Scotia. He comments briefly that he felt somewhat out of place at the national committee meetings, when he served on that body in the late 1930s - "I was kind of confounded by the words they used. I knew the meaning of the words alright but they weren't the kind of words I used at all". But he adds: "I have throughout maintained a high respect, and knowing perfectly well that mistakes were made at times". He is particularly proud of his two campaigns on behalf of the LPP, in 1945 and 1953; in both cases the vote was respectable for the LPP, and George feels he was able to introduce a constructive local, regional component into the election platforms. In short, George's position might be summed up briefly in his own words, which apply as much to his political affiliations as to his Cape Breton loyalties: "I just figure I'm where I belong".

Perhaps the most important chapter in the autobiography is the one devoted to the building of the steelworkers' union in the 1930s. It is important because this detailed account of the early years of Local 1064, United Steelworkers of America offers some revision of the account, as it appears in standard sources in Canadian labour history, thus underlining the ways in which oral history can offer an alternative view of events than is to be found in some archival sources. It is also not entirely an heroic story, and stands almost as a kind of tragedy, when viewed from the perspective of one of the pioneers who built the union. Let us first consider the accepted version of these events, as outlined in Irving Abella's monograph on industrial unionism in Canada: In the fall of 1936, CIO president John L. Lewis appointed Silby Barrett to organize Canadian steelworkers into the Steelworkers' Organizing Committee (SWOC). According to Abella, by 1930 there was nothing left of the old Amalgamated Association in Canada, and Barrett was being appointed to "fill this void". He succeeded remarkably well: "Within two months Barrett had succeeded in enrolling into Local 1064 of SWOC at Dosco in Sydney, 2600 of the plant's 2900 workers". Abella then goes on to refer briefly to the Nova Scotia Trade Union Act, which compelled Dosco to recognize the union and grant a union dues check-off.⁸ The same account is repeated in Desmond Morton's history of Canadian labour, though Morton attaches rather more significance to the 1937 Trade Union Act: "For the first time, a Canadian province asserted that workers had the right to form a union, bargain through its officers, and collect a payroll deduction". Again, Silby Barrett is the only individual mentioned.⁹

George's account of these developments begins not in the fall of 1936 but at least a year and a half earlier. Having returned to the steel plant, George and other labour activists had undertaken to participate in the plant council, established in the wake of the 1923 strike, and attempted to use the council to demonstrate the need for a workers' union on the plant. He recalls an important confrontation with Dosco president Sir Newton Moore in April 1935, which sparked the creation of an independent local union, which they called the Steelworkers' Union of Nova Scotia. At its peak the union had more than 600 members, and was supporting a newspaper, The Union News. George, of course, was in the thick of it, and was corresponding with

the Trades and Labour Congress and with similar steelworkers' unions at Hamilton and Montreal and the Sault, with the idea of creating a Canadian Federation of steelworkers.¹⁰ It was in this context of a search for outside allies and support that George's union turned to the CIO. It was also, as George points out, in the context of a general move on the part of Communist trade unionists to link up with the mainstream of the North American labour movement in the CIO. George recalls writing to the CIO and receiving credentials as a volunteer organizer in June 1936. He then recruited an executive of ten people and applied for a charter from SWOC, drawing on people such as Carl Neville who had been president of the independent union. In George's account, Barrett does not appear on the scene until the first meeting of SWOC 1064 in December 1936, and played little more than a figurehead role in representing the CIO. Using the independent union's treasury, and mustering support from the United Mine Workers, an organizing drive was launched. Within three months the overwhelming majority of steelworkers had put down their 25 cents and joined the union; George estimates a membership of almost 3,000 by March 1937.

Then came the second stage of the battle, the struggle for the Trade Union Act, a campaign which is lightly glossed over in the standard accounts. Following a conference with Angus L. Macdonald and a bottle of rum at the Isle Royale hotel in Sydney, the unionists set out to mobilize support for the kind of legislation Nova Scotia trade unionists had been seeking since at least the time of the 1909 strike: legislation requiring an employer to recognize their workers' organization. George modelled the legislation on the Wagner Act in the United States, and then had it framed in legal language by a sympathetic Sydney lawyer - the same individual who had pursued his father's lost wages in 1917. The campaign for the Trade Union Act was in a sense a demonstration of the amount of support for the union in the industrial community; not a single community organization, including the Board of Trade, was left untouched in this campaign. He recalls going up to Halifax on the train, armed with resolutions to place before the House of Assembly that spring. The expedition was a success, and for George and many unionists of his generation this achievement confirmed the value of political action in securing the rights of labour.

The third act in this drama, however, has a more tragic aspect, and that was the troubles of the steelworkers' union in the following years, as Local 1064 and its pioneers became involved in internal battles within SWOC. Within a few years several of the pioneers of Local 1064, such as Carl Neville and Norman Mackenzie and eventually George himself, had resigned in frustration over the transformation of SWOC into an organization heavily dominated by Phillip Murray's anti-Communist headquarters in Pittsburgh and his allies in Toronto. He recalls the search for the Canadian flag at the 1942 convention which founded the United Steelworkers. His alienation from the union he had helped created was completed perhaps at that convention, and soon after George and Dorothy left Sydney for Pictou County.

There is much more to be told of course. There are the revealing portraits of people such as J.B. McLachlan and Clarie Gillis, J.S. Woodsworth and Norman Bethune, to name some of the better known. There is the remarkable portrait of shipyard work in Pictou during the Second World War, which George sees almost as an anticipation of a worker-controlled industry, and then there are the tragic battles and rivalries which tore through the working-class movement during the years of the Cold War. The story ends, more or less, in 1953, at George's 50th year. This ending was not a

deliberate strategy on the part of the interviewers, but the early 1950s certainly seemed to mark the end of an era. The great breakthrough in labour relations had come, and was enshrined in the labour legislation and collective agreements of the late 1940s. Meanwhile, the reactions of the Cold War years had arrived in force. George remained active, running in the 1953 federal election for the LPP, circulating peace petitions, organizing for the Garage Workers' Union, and writing occasionally for the Canadian Tribune -- including some remarkable discussions of the longstanding crisis of deindustrialization in industrial Cape Breton.¹¹ Eventually at age 65 he received his first appointment to a union job, serving from 1969 to 1974 as general representative for the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen and General Workers. After his formal retirement at age 70, his attention turned to the Sydney pensioners' club and the peace movement, both of which have benefitted from his energy and organizing talents. Finally, in collaborating in this autobiography, George has persistently looked forward as well as backwards. Labour, he tells us, is once again in for a tough time, and he reminds us once again in his final pages: "There is no substitute for the old time rallying cry, 'An injury to one is an injury to all'".

In the end, we can offer one other kind of conclusion out of our experience in oral history. The reason there is not more oral history done in Canada today, we suspect, is simply that doing oral history happens to be a long and difficult way of doing history. Historians by and large are conditioned to accepting the discipline and the limitations of archival documents; by contrast, in doing oral history one is plunged first into the collection of data. Just when the project seems completed, it is really only beginning: the source has been created, but it still remains to be studied and made a part of our knowledge of the past. As we look forward, then, to the publication of George's autobiography, we are conscious that this is only a beginning. But the result is, we hope, an engaging and accurate autobiography, one in which George tells his story as effectively as he and his collaborators could manage. We think it will be of interest as a story of personal experience and observation, both to the local community and beyond. And in "helping George tell his story", we can also be satisfied that others soon can share the pleasure we have had in "going to talk to George".

NOTES

1. The project was undertaken jointly by David Frank, now at the University of New Brunswick, and Donald MacGillivray, University College of Cape Breton. Barbara MacLeod and Beckey Daniel spent long hours transcribing and typing. The University College of Cape Breton and the University of New Brunswick provided research grants to assist in the costs of the project.
2. Paul Thompson, The Voice of the Past: Oral History (Oxford, 1978), pp. 19-64.
3. For extreme contrasts, see the cursory explanations of method in Barry Broadfoot, Ten Lost Years, 1929-1939: Memories of Canadians Who Survived the Depression (Toronto, 1973) and, more recently, Howard White, A Hard Man to Beat: The Story of Bill White, Labour Leader, Historian, Shipyard Worker, Raconteur (Vancouver, 1983), and

the much more helpful discussions such as Rolf Knight's note on "Collecting and Editing" in A Very Ordinary Life (Vancouver, 1974), pp. 302-3, and Russell Hann's brilliant introduction to the Canadian oral tradition in Daphne Read, ed., The Great War and Canadian Society: An Oral History (Toronto, 1978), pp. 9-38.

4. Thompson, The Voice of the Past, p. 201.
5. See, for instance, Stu Ducklow, "George MacEachern Recalls Colourful Career", Cape Breton Post (Sydney, N.S.), 18 October 1978.
6. "The Coming of the Trade Union Act (1937)", Cape Breton's Magazine, No. 23 (August 1979).
7. Gloria Montero, We Stood Together (Toronto, 1979), Chapter 3.
8. Irving Abella, Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-1956 (Toronto, 1973), pp. 54-5.
9. Desmond Morton, Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour (Ottawa, 1980), pp. 160-2.
10. See, R.G. MacEachern to P.M. Draper, 19 March 1936, P.M. Draper to William Green, 23 March 1936, William Green to R.G. MacEachern, 30 March 1936, National Union Files, NAT #5, AFL-CIO Library, Washington, D.C.
11. See, for instance, "Nova Scotia Sellout", Canadian Tribune, 29 June 1953, "Labour Won't Write Off Cape Breton Island", Canadian Tribune, 28 February 1955, and "Nova Scotia Coal Mines Battle for Survival", Canadian Tribune, 22 August 1955.