

"Ethnic Voices Above the Atlantic Roar"

Collecting Ethnic Oral Material in Nova Scotia

by James Morrison

Bien que les statistiques actuelles démontrent que les Maritimes sont fortement anglo-celtiques, ces statistiques cachent à la fois le passé socio-culturel et la diversité ethnique de cette région. Récemment, les techniques de l'histoire orale ont été utilisées par des organismes communitaires, des institutions et des individus intéressés à la documentation de l'histoire des groupes ethniques; histoire qui, dans une large mesure, n'a été ni documentée ni écrite.

Cet article souligne les étapes requises pour entreprendre et réussir un projet d'histoire orale dans ce domaine. Premièrement, le projet doit être clairement défini, bien organisé et adéquatement financé. Les manuels d'histoire orale devraient être consultés afin d'adopter la bonne façon d'aborder le projet et afin de maîtriser les techniques de base. Les interviews sélectionnées devraient constituer un échantillon représentatif de la communauté et non de l'élite. Pareillement, les interviewers devraient avoir la confiance de la communauté et l'habileté à obtenir des renseignements importants et délicats. Finalement, ils doivent s'engager à entreprendre toutes les tâches exigeantes qui succèdent aux entrevues; ces tâches sont nécessaires pour mener le projet à bonne fin.

L'auteur conclut qu'un programme réussi d'histoire orale ethno-culturelle est un investissement valable pour la communauté ainsi que pour la nation. Non seulement fournit-il un outil aux groupes qui désirent reconquérir leur passé et devenir plus conscients de leur contribution à notre héritage, mais il fournit également à tous les Canadiens un document historique plus complet et une identité nationale plus riche.

This presentation will attempt to provide an overview of what has been done in the area of oral research in the Maritime Region with particular emphasis on Nova Scotia. I will introduce the major participants, the type of work they have done and briefly examine the advantages and disadvantages of collecting oral history in the ethnic communities of Nova Scotia. However, first it is important to provide a context for this discussion, an historical weave that reveals the many hued threads that form a surprising tapestry. The standard image of the Maritime tapestry is usually one of picturesque Bluenose blandness; the reality is somewhat different.

In the many volumes of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, the Maritimes generally were perceived as Anglo-Celtic provinces, that is a population, the majority of whom were English, Scottish or Irish with a small French-speaking population classified as Acadian. Certainly the statistics for Nova Scotia supported this observation, as they showed that 78% of the population was British, 14% was Acadian, and 8% were considered other - some 60 or 70 ethnic groups.

The ethnic make-up of the province has not always been this way.

Until 1600, Micmac was the lingua franca of the province and Europeans brought their own translators to trade with the indigenous population. Ironically, one of these was a Black ex-slave, Mathieu De Costa, who was placed in the position of translating for the European people who had enslaved him to the inhabitants of the New World to which many of his own people had been brought in chains. Long after Port Royal was founded in 1605 by the French, the importance of understanding the Micmac language and culture was vital to French survival. The Scots attempted a settlement in the 1620's, but departed in 1631, leaving behind only a name, Nova Scotia, and a coat of arms. The English occupied the province with military might from time to time, but it wasn't until Halifax was founded in 1749 that an English presence took root and settled. With them came the Jewish population in these early years and over 2,000 "Foreign Protestants" (Germans and Swiss) to Lunenburg during the 1750's. The next large migration was by American Loyalists in 1783-84 who were both Black and White. The Black population was augmented by Jamaican Blacks in the 1790's, known as Maroons. Both Irish and Scots came during the last half of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth century. By the 1850's an urban centre like Halifax would echo with the various dialects and accents of English, Micmac, Gaelic, German and French. An ethnically diverse community indeed!

As the decades passed after Confederation, more ethnic groups were added. Ukrainian, Italian, Chinese, Dutch, West Indian, Pakistani, Vietnamese, and most recently the Poles, are just a few of the over 70 ethnic groups that have come to Nova Scotia. (My recent book, entitled Common Heritage: An Annotated Bibliography of Ethnic Groups in Nova Scotia, lists 50 organizations in the Halifax-Dartmouth area alone). The diversity of ethnic origin was no doubt an integral part of Nova Scotia's history, but the multiplicity of ethnic groups is a phenomenon of the last two decades, coincidental with the interest in oral history - a not very surprising connection.

Oral history in Nova Scotia, however, has deeper roots. Beginning in the 1920's to the 1970's, Dr. Helen Creighton amassed folklore collections (stories, songs, sayings, and medicinal remedies) from groups like the Germans in Lunenburg County and the Acadians. Some work was done in the 1920's by Arthur Huff Fawcett on the folktales of the Black community. True to the province's name, a wealth of Gaelic oral material was collected in Cape Breton Island and eastern Nova Scotia. Since the 1960's however, with the refinement of the portable tape recorder, oral research in Nova Scotia, as with other parts of the country, has produced miles and miles of tape featuring ethnic groups. Much of it has yet to be digested by researchers or the Sound and Film Department of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia where it will, one hopes, eventually end up. As with many oral research projects, the quality of the tapes varies in sound production, interviewing techniques and the value of the material gathered. However in this overview, I intend, not to examine such collections critically, but to inform you of what has been done, is being done, and for what purpose.

The major actors in collecting oral material have come from community organizations, institutions (usually universities) and interested individuals. At the community organizational level, the Multicultural Association of Nova Scotia (MANS) has carried out a number of

interviews with individuals from representative ethnic groups, while ethno-cultural organizations or societies like the Atlantic Jewish Council, the Black United Front, or the Federation Acadien de la Nouvelle-Ecosse have gathered some oral interviews from their specific ethnic groups. The purpose of such collections has been to create slide-tape shows, video productions, books or education modules.

A sub-category of this grouping are individuals who decide that they wish to undertake some interviews on their own. Eventually they build up an extensive private collection of tapes which could be excellent resource material, but which nobody may even know about. For those of us involved in collecting information, this is the most difficult area to survey.

The institutional collections in Nova Scotia have centred in the Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton, the International Education Centre, Saint Mary's University, and L'Université Ste. Anne. The former two, the IEC and the Beaton Institute, have just completed an invaluable inventory of ethnic written and oral sources in Nova Scotia. This inventory focuses on unpublished materials of all ethnic groups, excluding the Anglo-Celtic and Acadian groups, and will include diaries, photos, albums, letters and scrapbooks, as well as some original oral research material with some individuals.

Finally, the relevant Governmental Departments, Provincial (Education and Culture) and Federal (Secretary of State and Multiculturalism Directorate) have been active in creating written and visual materials for the general public and for the schools. The best example of this is "You Laugh Like a Duck" a film examining children of different ethnic origins in Nova Scotia and Manitoba - a very useful comparative approach. The Department of Education in Nova Scotia also has a division called Ethnic Services which concentrates on ethnicity, international development education, and human rights in the schools.

Thus, there is considerable activity in the "Far East" and the history and culture of our many ethnic groups is being collected and researched - usually by oral means because there has been no other. As with labour, history, women's history or Black history, minority or ethnic history has remained a story unwritten; thus it must be told, transcribed, translated and retold. Written documents may be useful for "mainstream" history, but not for those who are not a part of that mainstream. In Nigeria, it was said the "Court" historian knows the history of the court, but not necessarily of the people. The history of our common heritage is the same.

But how does one begin? Where does an ethno-cultural community start in collecting its history, faced with interviews, tapes, electronic machines, transcribing, et al. Let's start with first things - one must be prepared and be familiar with the documents before one can do a successful interview. A careful reading of the primary and secondary sources must be done and the archives combed for material. This not only provides original material for the researcher but also "text" material for the informant when interviews are carried out. By this I mean that archival sources can aid in establishing a dated chronology of events which the oral informant may not be able to provide. The researcher may also talk to others in the community about source material, diaries, letters, or journals that are in private collections.

Once the written sources have been collected, the researcher must then ask the question: What do I want to know that oral research can tell me? Are there specific areas where the documents did not provide information? What is the purpose of the study? Do I want to do a biography, a study of a significant event, the patterns of immigration, or one of a host of other themes? In order to formulate the appropriate questions and learn something of oral history methodology, it would be useful to read the recently published Voices; A Guide to Oral History (Sound Archives, Public Archives of British Columbia), which is helpful, as is the older but still useful Oral History For The Local Historical Society by Willa Baum. Thus equipped, you can begin the most exciting part of oral research, the interviewing - that process of private yet public dialogue between the knowledgeable and the curious.

The methodology for collecting, transcribing and storing oral research is fairly standard in most research projects. However, there are specific paths that an ethno-cultural group must consciously follow in order to successfully negotiate the minefield that an ethnic research project represents. If followed successfully, there can be a number of advantages which accrue to the group. If unsuccessful, resentments and jealousies can be aroused that will continue for years to come.

### Advantages:

A carefully planned research project will provide the group with a manageable set of objectives and a common goal which everyone can rally to. It is rare that "collecting our ethnic heritage" as a goal is opposed by any number of members. This allows the group to heighten its ethnic coherence and become more aware of its place in the larger community. This in turn may aid in overcoming racial or ethnic bias that may be directed towards the group. The "Black Heroes" project of the 1970's in Nova Scotia served to make Nova Scotian Blacks and Whites aware of the role Blacks have played in Nova Scotia history. Such a research project may not only have local repercussions, but also change public perceptions at the provincial and national level. A project will not only inform but also serve to alter stereotyping and bias.

Also at the national or provincial level, valuable connections can be made between like-minded groups. The shared research will be of value to all in constructing a comparative history of the various ethnic groups and their experiences in Canada's diverse regions.

At the individual level, an interviewer from the same ethnic group is certain to exhibit the necessary cultural sensitivities to put an informant at ease and to elicit the maximum information from the interview. It follows that the interview should be conducted in the informant's first language or the language in which he/she is most comfortable. The interview should be transcribed into that language as well. These are all part of what an ethno-cultural organization can offer and these are some of the advantages that such an organization will gain. There are of course disadvantages.

### Disadvantages

In an essentially voluntary, and at times politically diverse group, it is very often quite difficult to ensure that the basic steps of a research project are undertaken. Who will examine the primary and

secondary sources, attend the oral research seminar, get funds for tapes, recorders, transcribing, and all the many other items which must be looked after. Many times research by committee is not the most desirable. It was a committee that set out to make a newer, better horse and ended up with a giraffe. The project must be managed diplomatically yet persuasively by one, two, or three people who believe in its importance and can make the vital decisions - the hard decisions - in order to keep the project on track and not lose direction or impetus. I am sure there are community histories still being planned that were to be published in Canada's centennial year - 1967.

One of those hard decisions is to ensure that an appropriate person is chosen as the interviewer, not the organization member who is the most talkative or asks a blizzard of questions without waiting for an answer! The need is for a clear, concise interviewer who asks the right questions, listens carefully to the answer, and can critically evaluate immediately if the question has been answered, if more information is needed, and how to ask for that information. A number of interview practice sessions among members is always useful.

A second disadvantage that ethno-cultural communities face is the lack of adequate financial resources for the successful completion of the project. The costs are usually under-estimated and when the exciting part - the interviewing - is completed, the exacting part begins. Tapes have to be labeled, transcribed, carded, typed interviews proofread, materials stored and decisions made on future use. This is usually where the project's cohesion breaks down as not many really want to carry out these exacting tasks. When the interviewing glamour is gone, so are the project workers. The project must thus work in stages where possible so the drudge work is being carried out at the same time as interviews are taking place.

Ethnic research, especially in one locale among one group, also tends to be exclusive and introspective. In this instance it is important from the beginning to start a comparative dialogue with other groups. The whole point of the project is presumably to foster a deeper understanding of the past in its complexity, not simply to draw up a long shopping list of unintended slights and/or to resurrect historic wrongs. A broader canvas of Canadian history and ethnic history is vital here to give a context to bias, prejudice and racism which occurred and continue to occur in Canadian society.

This leads to a constant irritant in ethno-cultural organizations - the resumption of social, political or religious quarrels begun in the homeland. Whether one examines the Irish, the Ukrainians or the more recent arrivals, the ethnic Chinese - all have very different perspectives on the past which will affect the material collected. A knowledge of who is interviewing and who is being interviewed is important and should be made clear in the notes about the tapes. In my own experience in Nigeria, if my interpreter did not have the appropriate "tribal" marks there would be no interview.

Finally, an ethno-cultural organization must avoid the temptation to interview only their own "elite" - those who have "made it" in Canadian society. A real effort has to be made to correctly portray the whole group - its traditions and its values - and how these traditions and values are still theirs to hold yet Canadian to share.

Oral research gives voice to the voiceless and in Canada's long history those who are non-white, non-English, and non-French have been left out of the chorus for many decades. To the ethno-cultural organization goes the challenge to preserve this past - their own past - through oral research before these voices are stilled.