BANQUET SPEECH TO THE 1976 CANADIAN ORAL HISTORY CONFERENCE

by Peter Stursberg

It was as a result of the interviews that I had with Mr. Diefenbaker that I became involved in oral history, or living history. Which was ironical because I wasn't able to use these interviews which came to nineteen hours altogether - not a word. The former prime minister signed a contract with a publisher to bring out his own book, and the publisher wasn't going to have my Mr. Diefenbaker competing with his Mr. Diefenbaker. It was a blow as I was more than half-way through the first volume, Diefenbaker: Leadership Gained. It meant that I had to tear out the extracts from the Diefenbaker interviews that I had included and re-arrange and re-do the first ten chapters.

Fortunately, the book didn't depend upon Mr. Diefenbaker's memories as I had recorded the memories of forty other people as well. I had done so because, after four or five sessions with him, when we had got as far as the 1957 election and his coming to power, Mr. Diefenbaker began putting me off. He had all kinds of excuses. He wasn't well. He wanted to consult his papers. For a time, I gave up. But people kept telling me that the tapes would be valuable, and I felt that I was on to something historically important. At any rate, I decided that if I could not get Mr. Diefenbaker to recall the period, I would get others to do so, his cabinet ministers, his political opponents, and so on. In the end, Mr. Diefenbaker relented, and I completed the interviews - we recorded the last seven hours in Barbados where the "Chief" was spending his Christmas holidays, Christmas 1973. That was almost a year before he signed the contract with the publisher. Mind you, Mr. Diefenbaker never said No. But he did not say Yes. And I could see that we would never get the book published if we waited for his permission. So we decided to go ahead without Mr. Diefenbaker's contributions. And it turned out for the best...

I did the first interviews with Mr. Diefenbaker for the CBC archives, as the corporation, at the prompting of the late Dan McArthur, had gone in for oral history. I don't think it was called that back in 1968 - we began recording Mr. Diefenbaker shortly after he was deposed as Conservative leader - I think we called them interviews-in-depth. Dan felt that it was important to record the memoirs of people who had played a prominent part in the development of the country. So I taped interviews with politicians including former Prime Minister St. Laurent, Senator "Chubby" Powers, and General A.G.L. McNaughton. I did a series on the pioneers of radio and one on the veterans of the First World War.

While doing the latter, I heard that General Sir Richard Turner, the first commander of the Canadian Corps was still alive. It was unbelievable. I mean Sir Arthur Currie was long dead; he had been president of McGill University and when I was a freshman there I remember seeing him striding magnificently about the campus. But that was back in the thirties, and here it was the sixties and the man who commanded the Canadian Corps before he did was alive. Everyone got very excited. I traced down General Sir Richard Turner to Quebec City where he was living with his daughter and his son-in-law, Colonel Ross. Colonel Ross said that he thought we were too late, that the old man had lost his memory - but he would do his best and his wife would sit in on the interviews and help her father to recall the past. Well, I spent two of the most frustrating days of my life. General Sir Richard Turner was really past it. He remembered the Boer War where he had won the VC better than

anything else. It was an object lesson, though, that time is of the essence in oral history. It's not enough for the source to be living, he or she has to be compos mentis.

Among those I interviewed for the CBC was the famous Arctic explorer, Vilhjalmur Steffanson. I taped three and a half hours of his memoirs at two sittings in his cottage on the Dartmouth University campus at Hanover, New Hampshire. Before going there, I was told that I should ask "Steff" about an Eskimo who called himself Henryk Steffanson and claimed to be his son. This was rather a delicate matter and I thought I should approach it with tact. So, between the two sittings, the first was in the afternoon and the second the following morning, I met "Steff's" wife, Evelyn, in the Dartmouth library - she acted as the curator of the Steffanson collection there - and sought her advice as to whether I should put this question. She said that she herself would like to know - it was quite possible that he did have a son in the Arctic but she said that Eskimos did name their children after famous visitors. And she warned that "Steff" was very old fashioned and he would deny this and might clam up and refuse to go on with the interview. So I didn't ask the question.

This is an example of the limitations of oral history. You can't get a person to say what he or she doesn't want to say. It doesn't really matter much as far as political oral history is concerned. If you interview enough people, the truth will out - although I should say that, in politics, there isn't always one truth. For instance, George Hees would only agree to being interviewed if we didn't talk about his resignation. Of course, I accepted that condition. But I think you will agree when you read the second volume, Diefenbaker: Leadership Lost, that I have interviewed enough people connected with the incident so that the full story of his resignation comes out.

Of course, the real challenge of oral history or living history is to convert the spoken word into the written word that is readable and yet does not lose the emotional quality of spontaneity and direct involvement. I mean, in speech, in conversation, there can be broken syntax and missing verbs and sentences that don't end - some of Mr. Diefenbaker's sentences didn't end and yet there was no question about his powers of communication. There is another factor about political oral history which my books represent and that is accuracy and integrity. I was fortunate to work with the Public Archives of Canada on this project and to have as my publisher the University of Toronto Press. The Public Archives got the tapes transcribed - and some idea of the magnitude of this task can be gathered from the fact that there were 120 hours of interviews which comes to more than a million words.

I had to be very careful about the editing of the excerpts because these weren't going to be anonymous quotes, they were all going to be identified, names were attached, and I had to make sure that they weren't taken out of context or their intent or meaning altered. Sometimes, this wasn't easy. I used to paste up the cuttings from the transcripts and make the changes in such a way that the editor of the University of Toronto Press could read the original words as spoken. I hope that I have been successful and when you read my books, Diefenbaker: Leadership Gained and Diefenbaker: Leadership Lost, that in your mind's eye it will seem to be the person speaking to you, Donald Fleming telling how he struggled against financial odds, and Pierre Sévigny giving his side of the Munsinger affair, and partisan Jack Pickersgill tearing into the Tories.

Yet, despite all this, you can't get everything down in black and white.

Even if I had been able to use the Diefenbaker tapes, you wouldn't have heard the birds twittering in the background during the interviews in Barbados, or the off-tune singing of a couple of politicians. Allister Grosart wrote a song about Diefenbaker for his leadership campaign, largely so that people would know how to pronounce his name, and he sang it. I was astonished when Senator Joe Greene broke into song during our interview - he had apparently won his nomination with an anti-Diefenbaker song. And there was John Diefenbaker himself and what an actor and raconteur he is; he mimicked some of the important personages he had met during the interviews and obviously there was no way of doing justice to this in print.

I should like to refer to part of the Diefenbaker transcripts. This is where the "Chief" talked about Prime Minister Harold MacMillan whom he met on various occasions in London. I don't think that he liked Mr. MacMillan with whom he had some well publicized differences about Britain joining the Common Market, but he appreciated his histrionic abilities. He said that he was a "great play actor" who used to speak in a "lachrymose tone" when thwarted. Mr. Diefenbaker described how at a dinner party in London Mr. MacMillan moaned about the way that his foreign minister, Sir Alec Douglas Home, had taken off and gone grouse shooting in Scotland. "Nobody cares about us any more", and Mr. Diefenbaker imitated Mr. MacMillan's lachrymose tone, "Nobody cares about England any more".

Then there was the way that Madame Bandaranaike, the woman prime minister of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), used what you might call oral history to get elected. Mr. Diefenbaker first met her when he stopped in Colombo on his trip around the world. I think he told this story because as a good politician, he had a high regard for other good politicians. I'd like to quote directly from the transcript because it will give you an inkling of what the interview was like. There we were sitting on the patio of the Diefenbaker's cottage at the Coral Reef Club in Barbados. First, I'd better explain that Madame Bandaranaike succeeded her husband as prime minister after he was assassinated.

John Diefenbaker: "She began to fear, in the election, that she was going to lose. It didn't take her long to fix up that situation. She said that she was acting under instructions of her husband. She had some of the views that Mackenzie King had, of direct communication, but she proved that she had more than that because a few days before the election, in various cemeteries, suddenly from a gramophone record, came speeches by her husband which were attributable not to those that had been delivered during his lifetime but as a message from the hereafter. Did you know that?"

Peter Stursberg: "No I didn't. That's a marvelous story."

John Diefenbaker: "Isn't that the way to campaign. Now you can see, Olive [Diefenbaker] , what has happened. Have you noticed that I have to have Olive to fill in places because I concentrate on what I am saying."

Olive Diefenbaker: "She would start to speak and then she would be overcome with emotion and she would start to cry. Then the voice would come from a grave that had been dug, from the record in the grave."

It is the portable electronic tape recording machine which has made oral

or living history possible, and this is a relatively recent development, as I well know. The first tape recordings I made were at the United Nations in the early fifties. The first portable tape recording machine was the bulky old Webcor. Remember that. It was as big as a suitcase. However, even at that it was half the weight of one of the two black boxes which contained the so-called portable recording equipment which we used during the Second World War. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation provided its war correspondents with the very latest electronic gear, which was a high fidelity disc recording machine that was portable to the extent that it could be carried around on a jeep. I remember helping Paul Johnson, the CBC engineer, to lug these small trunks to Sicily and up to the front. The equipment had to be run off the jeep's battery as it had no power source of its own, and the jeep's engine had to be kept running to provide it with enough charge so that we could capture the sound of battle. And that's what we did.

Looking back from these television times, it's difficult to realize the impact that radio reporting of the war had. I mean there is not much that amazes us now that we have seen a man on the moon, but in those days, thirty years ago, it was a sensation to be able to listen to a reporter describing the battle raging thousands of miles away on another continent and to hear the roar of the guns and the crash of the bombs. I don't know why but the radio reporting of the Second World War and the Korean War seemed to me to be much more immediate and involving than the television reporting of the Vietnam War or much of it - I suppose it has something to do with the fact that the sound gave greater scope to one's imagination. At any rate, there were editorial comments about this new kind of reporting, and cartoons showing people suffering from shell shock in their living rooms.

I did a number of articles about the Canadians in action for MacLean's Magazine, and, accompanying the first one on the Sicilian campaign, there was a note about the author. The editor wrote that I was one of the voices bringing news of the Allied advances in Europe, and then he went on to compare me with Pheidippides, the man who ran from Marathon to Athens with the news of the Greek victory. I suppose that this is journalistic license but I did think he was going to extremes as Pheidippides, after making his report, fell down dead. However, it is an illustration of the impact of the radio reporting of the war.

I might add that, without knowing it, we CBC war correspondents were engaged in making oral history. The recordings of many of our war reports are being preserved in the Public Archives.

The latest generation of tape recorders is so small that it fits into a woman's purse; it is about the size of a large notebook and not much heavier, and newspaper reporters have taken to carrying it around and using it to record interviews and announcements. The tape recorder saves them a lot of scribbling and is much more accurate. However, the newspaper reporters use it as a notebook, and that's what other writers do too. James Gray who wrote some marvelous books about the early days on the prairies said that he recorded interviews with old timers but he used those tapes as notes, and so did Peter Newman in writing his books about the Diefenbaker-Pearson years. A lot of instant history has come about as a result of the portable tape recorder but I don't think it can be counted as oral history.

I believe that oral history depends upon the spoken word and consists of excerpts taken from the transcripts of the interviews. It is history as recalled by those who made it and thus is living history. There are bound to be different interpretations, different meanings given to the same event, especially if it is

a matter of controversy because people don't see a happening in the same light. It is like being there at the time and hearing all the arguments and explanations. What a thrill it would be if we could have recorded the reminiscences of the Fathers of Confederation. And what a revelation it would probably be!

Some of my friends in the Parliamentary Press Gallery wonder how I was able to get former Conservative cabinet ministers to talk so freely and even reveal cabinet secrets. I must say that I found them, generally speaking, very co-operative. There were one or two who refused to be interviewed, but most of them - and they were mostly politicians - were only too anxious to get their side of history recorded for posterity. Some of them regarded it as a confessional, and I remember one person who played a prominent role in the period saying to me after the interview, "I feel as though I have got a load off my mind".

In doing these books, I did have a distinct advantage in that I knew the period inside out as I had covered it as a reporter in the Parliamentary Press Gallery, and I was on a first name basis with most of those I interviewed. Furthermore, the fact that I was working in such close co-operation with the Public Archives and had as my publisher the University of Toronto Press was a great help; it made the cabinet ministers and others I interviewed confident that they would not be misquoted or misrepresented in any way.

When the first volume was published, Marsh Jeanneret, the director of the University of Toronto Press, told me that he believed it was unique, that nothing like it had been done before. And Louis Starr of Columbia University, in reviewing Diefenbaker: Leadership Gained in the Oral History Association's recent Newsletter said that he knew of "no equivalent" (in the United States at least). He was kind enough to call it a "model of its kind and an eye-opener for those who imagine that Canadian oral history is limited to history-from-the-bottom-up". Dr. Wilf Smith, the Dominion Archivist, spoke of it as being "a breakthrough". It is certainly a new application of the modern technique of oral history which in itself is a very new development. In this sense we are all pioneers, and I think we can be justly proud of what we are doing: we are using the latest electronic means of communication and we are opening up a vast new field of human knowledge.

As I said, I have done hundreds of interviews-in-depth - I did fifty-six interviews for the two Diefenbaker books - and it has been my experience that a person who is not a professional writer is likely to be much more frank and interesting when talking, when telling a story, than when writing. There is something about the act of putting pen to paper that makes for caution, dullness and officialese, especially as far as politicians are concerned. Of course, people like Barry Broadfoot and Studs Terkel have shown that by means of this technique the ordinary person who doesn't write and in some cases cannot write can contribute to our history and our knowledge of ourselves. It could be said that they have made the illiterate literate.

I should like to end by referring to a review of the first volume of my book by Dalton Camp who is featured in the second volume. He said that people don't write as many letters or memoranda as they used to do - after all this is the electronic age - and very few people keep diaries. Maybe it's just as well they don't because, as he said, everything is being leaked - it's no time for secrets, be they cabinet secrets or international secrets. As a result, Dalton Camp went on to say that oral history "may be the only political history we have left".