

# Articles

## SPEECH DELIVERED TO THE 1976 ORAL HISTORY COLLOQUIUM

by Bernard Ostry

Bernard Ostry, formerly Secretary-General of the National Museums of Canada, is Deputy Minister of the federal Department of Communications. His speech was delivered at the Oral History Association's colloquium held at the Château Montebello in September 1976. A revised version of the original speech has been published in the Oral History Review 1977 whereas the French translation of Mr. Ostry's address appeared in the 1976-77 issue of this Journal.

Oral History as a discipline is growing in vitality and respectability, so that people like myself who used its techniques in the days when it was less respectable (at least in academic eyes) are invited to address you as if we were pioneers -- which of course we are not. Everyone here was around when oral history at best was thought of as a contradiction in terms, and at worst as some kind of Freudian subdivision of the whole field of history -- what the other Freudian subdivisions were, I leave you to imagine. So far as the professional historians were concerned oral history was something to do with dentists or the Happy Hooker.

I think one can see why Oral History was looked on with suspicion. Memory, as Aldous Huxley pointed out, is what we forget with. If everything that came into our minds remained in the forefront of attention we should be overwhelmed by it. And oral history could well seem to be defeating the blessed selectiveness of human memory by trapping the fugitive word in a machine, sometimes with bewildering effect, as in the White House tapes. The tape recorder, it's true, is stupidly retentive; it lacks even the most elementary tact; it cannot delete its own expletives, let alone observe the rules of evidence. And yet in the hands of scholars and journalists who understand the techniques of oral history, this same stupid machine, the tape recorder, has made a revolution in the gathering and preserving of historical evidence. The wisdom of the past is clear: volat verba, manet scriptum (the spoken word flies away, only the written word endures). Now that nothing need fly away, historians confront a vast new store of evidence -- and it's evidence of a kind that their training in the handling of documents doesn't always help them to cope with.

The techniques of oral history are older than the recording machines that have given them new importance. "When I was a young fellow," Dr. Johnson told James Boswell almost exactly two hundred years ago, "I wanted to write the life of Dryden, and in order to get materials I applied to the only two persons then alive who had seen him. These were old Swinny and old Cibber. (Owen MacSwinny, that is, and Colly Cibber.) Swinny's information was no more than this, that at Will's coffee-house Dryden had a particular chair for himself which was set by the fire in winter, and was then called his winter chair, and that it was carried out for him to the balcony in summer, and was then called his summer chair. Cibber could tell no more but that he remembered him a decent old man, arbiter of critical disputes at Will's. You are to consider that Cibber was then at a great distance from Dryden, had perhaps one leg only in the room and durst not draw in the other."<sup>1</sup>

Dr Johnson's difficulties could be matched, I suppose, by almost any of us. It may be significant to remember, by the way, that two hundred years ago the distinction between scholar and journalist was not the yawning gap it's supposed to be now. Dr. Johnson, the great lexicographer, was also the essayist of the Idler and the Rambler. In the new discipline of oral history the journalists have made contributions as important as the scholars, for this is a discipline (as I shall argue a little later) which dissolves the barriers between hieratic and demotic history. In more ways than one, it is a democratic discipline.

I have been asked to say something about the interviews I conducted for CBC television's series First Person Singular and the Tenth Decade with the late Lester B. Pearson and with John George Diefenbaker. One or two points may be made. First of all, none of the interviews elicited much, if anything, that was new in the way of historical detail or insight. One could even question whether the interviews were the best evidence on the subjects discussed, since written materials had priority over them in time. This was, and remains, a source of great disappointment to me. The two series were themselves the modest outcome of a much more ambitious project which I had proposed to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in the years when I was Supervisor of Public Affairs for Radio and Television. Originally we had hoped to produce a series - one in French for the French network another in English - on the socio/political history of the period in which Mr. Pearson and Mr. Diefenbaker had been the federal leaders. There was to be one history for the whole country. An impressive team of English and French-speaking researchers and writers were assembled and began work on the project. However, after my departure, the proposal foundered and would have died except for the determination of the appointed Producer of the series, Cameron Graham, who tried to salvage at least what viewers ultimately saw. After the former Prime Ministers had agreed upon their interviews they were asked to begin to research their files and refresh their memories. Hundreds of hours of filming followed, (some, during the trying days of the War Measures Act in the shadows of machine-gun-toting soldiers). The result, I am told, proved very popular. But what was new? One evening, after an exhausting session of filming, Mr. Pearson and I were having a nightcap together and I said to him that I was extremely disappointed with the results of the interviews, that his statements to date had added nothing to the public record. Indeed, I asked him whether, when the filming was completed for the series, he would consider starting over, spending perhaps a quarter of the time already spent but answering some fifteen or twenty crucial questions about his major decisions while Prime Minister, the videotape to be housed in the Archives under the rules of the day so that for the first time in the history of the free world we would have the candid and reasonably honest opinion of a political leader on the major events in which he centred, eventually to set alongside the written documentation and interpretation of historians. To my astonishment, he agreed. Unfortunately for us all, he was dead soon after. Six months would have made the difference. Did he know?

However, what was new, and I think valuable, was the revelation of personality -- and in ways which could not be reduced to writing.

I say "reduced to writing" advisedly. There is something reductive about written history. The advantage of this reduction is intelligibility and clarity; we are given the illusion of understanding what happened. What we lose is the vast penumbra of doubt, the extraordinary untidiness and ambiguity of life, above all the mystery of human personality. The television interview, even the sound-

tape interview, can lead us into the presence of this mystery. The truth of this kind of history can be much more resonant and commanding than the truth of written history. For, as Northrop Frye remarks in his recent book, The Secular Scripture, "a writing culture tends to identify truth more and more completely with truth of verbal correspondence".<sup>2</sup> Telling the truth, that is, becomes more important than showing it forth. The historian's quest for truth in writing his page could take the form of a quest for the right adjective, and the confused reality of an event may often be sanded down to fit the smooth contours of a flowing prose style.

When one is conducting a television interview one is seeking a different kind of truth, the truth of personality. Not verbal correspondence, but the correspondence of the image with reality. In this kind of interview the historian conducting it is not the judge and jury of events. The audience is the jury and as such, the ultimate authority on the facts.

In my own experience, when I collaborated in the writing of a facet of history, a biography of Mackenzie King,<sup>3</sup> I discovered the authority that inheres in a written record. But since the written record, the diaries of Mackenzie King himself, was intended to influence the future interpretation of the events it recorded, it was obvious that biographers should not regard it as the last word.<sup>4</sup> I certainly did not and one of the ways it could be and was checked was by dozens of oral interviews with less partial witnesses, including many of those with whom Mr. King corresponded regularly. This was an extraordinarily lengthy if rewarding process and one, I am sure, I would have given up had it not been for one curious incident. As a young student and teacher I came to Ottawa to examine the various correspondence of Canadian political leaders that were listed as being in the public domain by the Public Archives of Canada. I was shown every courtesy and cooperation a Canadian scholar could have wished for. That lasted 24 hours. The following day I arrived to find a clear desk where the previous day were piled the letters of Laurier, Murphy and other cronies of the young King. I was told there had been some terrible error and that I no longer could see anything relating to King's career. I was 25 or 26 at the time and as conscious of my rights as a citizen as any young post-graduate student of today. How I reversed that decision is another tale but the incident burned into me a determination to get at everything written down on the subject of my biography wherever it was and to search out everyone who had had anything whatever to do with the budding politician. And what I discovered over and over again was how lacking in meaning was his written record without the special diversion which the memoirs of his contemporaries brought to bear on his correspondence and diaries. The written record was often accurate, it was rarely true.

I could tell other stories about that, as I could about interviewing Mr. Pearson and Mr. Diefenbaker, but I do not want to lose this opportunity of telling you about the work in oral history which has been going on for some years in the federal government and in the National Museums, particularly in the Museum of Man and its component the War Museum, though the National Gallery also makes use of taped interviews. In addition, the National Museums provide funds to a number of oral history projects in every region of Canada, as the federal government has done through the CBC and programmes I have been personally closely associated with, Opportunities for Youth and Local Initiatives Programme.

I should say that historical reconstruction is only one of the uses to which the museums put oral data. The History Division of the Museum of Man and the historians of the War Museum employ oral methods to complement documentary and other evidence. But in the anthropological disciplines of folk culture and ethnology the oral interview is used for much more than the gathering of historical material, whether the questions are narrowly directed, as in linguistic inquiries, or less structured, as in interviews intended to elicit an informant's way of thinking or speaking.

As some of you know, a great deal of the work done by the Museum of Man's Canadian Ethnology Service entails extensive interviewing of individual Indians and Inuit, since the service exists only in order to study the people of these groups. Our ethnologists try to work in the appropriate native language, since one key to a people's culture is the terms that have been developed for its institutions and special domains of interest -- for example, kinship terminology, and the vocabularies of government, law, medicine, ritual, subsistence, and so on. Sometimes the object of research is the language itself, with the purpose of writing grammars and dictionaries. And here the interviews are systematically planned in advance. Often the interviewers will have formulated certain preliminary hypotheses about speech, social organization, economic relationships and the like, before they go into the field. Wherever possible the oral data are recorded on sound or video tape and the Canadian Ethnology Service claims a substantial archive of sound recordings.

Although ethnologists appear to sniff a little at the free-wheeling methods of some oral history collectors, they concede that non-directed research has its uses in their field too, especially in obtaining life histories, myths or other narrative material.

Everything the Canadian Ethnology Service does in the way of collecting oral data is influenced by the fact that its first commitment is to document native cultures at a time when they are being changed drastically in the face of white contact, and in some cases disappearing altogether. In the course of this work, historical problems present themselves almost every day. Carefully used and evaluated, oral traditions of native peoples can shed light on historical events. This was demonstrated vividly in a paper by Gordon M. Day of the Museum of Man. "Oral Tradition as Complement",<sup>5</sup> as the paper was entitled, set the oral traditions of the Abenaki people alongside the written records in an attempt to reconstruct what really happened when Major Robert Rogers and his Rangers destroyed the Abenaki village of St. Francis in the year 1759. A sober assessment seems to show that the event did not happen exactly the way Francis Parkman and other English historians have told it.

The new historical evidence in this case, in the form of Indian oral tradition, was turned up in the course of ethnological work, beginning with the study of the native language.

Urgent linguistics have again been a feature of the Ethnology Service's field research for the 1975-1976 season. Researchers spent two periods in the field, three months over the summer and three weeks last February, both at the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario, working mainly with Cayuga informants. The reserve is considered the last and best stronghold for research on Iroquoian languages and

traditional culture. Six of the Northern Iroquoian languages are still spoken here by several hundred persons -- Seneca, Cayuga, Onandaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora.

One researcher, Michael K. Foster, was gathering data in special areas of Cayuga lexicon and morphology for work in progress on a Cayuga dictionary-grammar. He also made initial contacts among the few remaining Tuscarora speakers at Six Nations, recording some six hours of tapes from an informant in his eighties, including a basic word list and a life history in Tuscarora. This kind of work has to be regarded as in the nature of salvage. A third purpose of the same field trip was to record an important example of Cayuga oratory in order to study performance variations of the Cayuga Thanksgiving Address among different speakers, longhouses and reserves.

On the February trip Mr. Foster worked with a Cayuga chief on the taping and preliminary translation of native speeches used in treaty sessions and on the taping and translation of a recently discovered Onandaga manuscript version of the Code of Handsome Lake. But let me quote from the researcher's own report. "For several months I have been conducting library research on 17th and 18th century treaties. I am less interested in the content and historical outcome of the treaties than in the pattern of forest diplomacy used by the Indians and colonial officials; the formal procedures, settings, speaking styles, manners of greeting and taking turns of exchanging wampum strings and belts and appointing speakers ..." <sup>6</sup> Noting the absence of written information on such points, Michael Foster goes on to say, "The ethnographic dimension is largely missing from the published accounts, and for this we must turn to present accounts. One may, therefore, understand the excitement I felt on discovering that Chief Thomas still knew the speeches and formal procedures connected with two wampum belts, the Friendship Belt and Two Row Wampum Belt. The agreements symbolized by these belts are very ancient, reaching back -- if one is to accept their wording at face value -- to the time of Dutch settlement in New York .... It is not overstating the case to say that here is possibly a last chance to record on tape the remains of a tradition that once distinguished forest councils and turned large historic events in the northeast. Mr. Thomas is one of, at most, two living Iroquois who in words can still lead his listeners over the forest path to the wood's edge to hear the Three Rare Words of Condolence, the extended greetings of the chiefs, the stirring up of the council fire and the vicissitudes of argument on the white and red man's canoes whose parallel paths are forever to remain close but distinct. Here is a native document to bring ethnographic life to the historical past."<sup>7</sup>

I've quoted this passage from Michael Foster's report because it illustrates so vividly the ways in which ethnological and linguistic research, using oral techniques, sheds light on history and gives it the missing dimension that comes from some understanding of Indian values and procedures. Preliminary study of some 32 translation tapes has already elicited some striking observations.

For example, in published accounts of the Indian treaties, the usual English phrase for "alliance" between Indians and colonists is "the great covenant chain". The native texts, however, never use the word "chain" to express the Indian view of alliance; where Chief Thomas uses the image of a chain, he is quoting from the white men who made the first treaties. Another point that emerges is that the tobacco pipe was not smoked simply as a gesture of peace. It

was to bring power to the agreement and to purify the speaker's words. The taste of tobacco was to remind the speaker of the importance of speaking sincerely; the smoke rose skyward to penetrate the Creator's realm.

Again, the exchange of wampum belts was more than a mere formality. It was the wampum string or belt that contained or carried the message. Yet all the white man's written record notes at the end of a speech is simply the cryptic phrase: "Here a belt."

For the folklorists of the Museum of Man, the techniques of the oral interview are of major importance since they are specifically interested in those aspects of folk behaviour that are not based on the written word. Folklore is the study of that part of culture which is transmitted by word of mouth, independently of the rhythm of elite culture.

Investigation takes two forms: the non-participating, in which one uses material recorded by others; and the participating, in which the researcher himself gathers the information. The quality of the investigation depends on the degree to which the researcher can discard his own prejudices and enter into those of his informant. Researchers normally work with a very carefully thought-out questionnaire, drawn up before going into the field, but they are always ready to adapt their questions and vocabulary to local or regional peculiarities. The material generated by folklore interviews may take several forms in the archives: manuscripts, typescripts, photographs, sketches, wax cylinders, magnetic tapes and videotapes.

I should add that -- as with the results of ethnological interviews -- the information gathered may be useful in more than one discipline. Historians may want to use it to complement other material. And there have been several studies in human geography which depend on the kind of oral interview that folklorists specialize in. Even the medical profession has been able to make valuable use of folk material.

I'd like to go back, now, to the use of oral methods in the Museum of Man's History Division. It has been the practice of the Museum for a number of years to gather oral testimony on any artifacts that the Museum acquires. This testimony goes not only to questions of provenance, but also to the use or function of the object. There's not much point in collecting a whatyoumaycallit if you don't know what it is, what it's for, or how it's used. Even if the researcher knows what it is -- let's say a mattock (though that, being a tool, may be a bad example, since one would probably find it in the Museum of Science and Technology) it may be of great interest to a human geographer or even a historian to know that the man who uses it calls it a gruffawn. The persistence of a Gaelic name for a tool like this in certain areas has implications for ethnic history.

As I say, the use of this kind of oral testimony is a practice of long standing in the History Division. But the use of oral techniques in other areas is a comparatively recent development. It has been used extensively in only two areas in the recent past. One is a project on the history of the time of troubles in the coal mining industry of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, in the 1920s. The other is in conjunction with a broad-ranging study of artisanship in the province of Quebec in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The project on coal mining in Cape Breton had two distinct beginnings. First, Dr. D.A. Muise was involved in a long-range study of the history of coal mining in the area. Secondly, the Museum agreed to cooperate with the National Museums Corporation and National Film Board in making a film on the coal mining industry's troubles in the 1920s. The oral history project was undertaken in connection with the film conceived as a documentary whose most important technique was to use the recollections of those who were involved in the events of the time. Over seventy hours of interviews were taped (twelve of them on film) from a number of persons who had taken part in the strikes and lock-outs of the coal mines in the 1920s. The testimony of these participants, naturally enough, is sometimes contradictory, so that the historical facts of the background of the events of 1922 and 1925 had to be established by more traditional methodology, but the words and the presence to the viewer of people who were actually there give a sense of immediacy and reality which could be given in no other way. It is as if the people themselves have become their own historians.

The study of artisanship in Quebec has entailed seeking out living participants in the various trades and interviewing them extensively about the work they have done. The interviews were conducted on their own turf, sometimes on film. What is important in this project is that these oral interviews are most often the only source of knowledge that we have on the subject. Here the oral interview truly represents the best evidence available. And once again the people are telling their own story. The scholar is not telling it for them, or bending it to fit a thesis or the demands of narrative.

The same sort of use of oral techniques is being made by the historians of the War Museum. First hand accounts give the historian a chance to glimpse the dynamics of what actually happened -- which under battle conditions may sometimes seem like opening a can of worms. Statesmen and generals have written their memoirs, often with a view to improving their image in the eyes of posterity. Not many private soldiers, sergeants, ordinary seamen or gunner's mates have published their memoirs. But in the hands of a skilled interviewer they can tell their own stories with an effectiveness that is all the more telling for being artless.

As an example of the practical use to which oral interviews can be put in the ordinary business of the museum I'd like to tell you just this one simple anecdote. A recent art exhibit on an aspect of the Second World War was to employ mannequins dressed in uniforms and equipment of the period. All documentary dress regulations specified that webbing equipment (the supporting straps for infantrymen's equipment) was to be worn in a certain manner. But questioning of several individuals who had actually worn the equipment revealed that no Canadian ever wore it in the regulation manner. The reasons were various: a desire not to look like British troops, comfort and so on. Further questioning established the way Canadians in fact wore and used the webbing. The exhibit was dressed accordingly. Oral techniques had corrected the documentary evidence.

To conclude this necessarily incomplete account of some of the ways our museums use oral techniques, I'd like to draw attention to some of the projects across Canada which are funded by the National Museums.

In New Brunswick, the York County Memory Bank project; in Newfoundland, Remembrance of Things Past; in Quebec, Ilnut; in Ontario, Revelation '74; in Manitoba, Indian Cultural Revival; in Alberta, the Telelegend project and the Oral

History of the Métis of Alberta; in the Northwest Territories, the project of Historical and Cultural Information; and in British Columbia, the Cultural Heritage Project and the Neskainlith Youth Research Team. Among other benefits these projects have created dozens of meaningful jobs.

What I believe emerges from this survey is something that seems to be inherent in the nature of oral history as a science and art. I wonder if you remember that poem by G.K. Chesterton which has the refrain: "We are the people of England and we have not spoken yet." Until recently, written history has concentrated on high policy, the deeds of great men and women, the performance of generals and admirals, the conflicts of great masses of society. How rarely the face of an ordinary man or woman emerges from these vast historical pomps and cavalcades!

I think that the tape recorder and the film and the videotape have allowed the common people to step forward and tell their own stories, without the mediation of academics or professional story tellers. It has taken historians a little while to catch on to what has been happening. But one can see its great beginnings in a book like Oscar Lewis' The Children of Sanchez<sup>8</sup>, more absorbing than most novels, where a group of desperately poor Mexicans speak from their own heart and mind, revealing the simple truth that it is not only great men and women who create the fabric of history, that one does not have to live in a fine house with books around one in order to take part in the beauty and dignity of man. In the hovels of men and women broken on the wheel of history the mystery of human personality is realized in birth, and love, and anger, and hunger and violence, and courage, and death.

And Oscar Lewis was followed by those vulgar fellows - to call them vulgar is not to disparage them - the journalists, especially the so-called new journalists like Tom Wolfe and even in his own queer way the novelist Truman Capote, who in the pages of In Cold Blood<sup>9</sup> took us into the interior darkness of two desperate criminals all the way to the gallows. Studs Terkel in the United States and Barry Broadfoot in Canada used the tape recorder to reveal the part played by unpretending people -- people without power or influence -- in the cruel times of the Great Depression and the Second World War.

If the people of England have not spoken yet, if the people of Europe and the Americas have not spoken yet, if the people of Canada have not spoken yet, the techniques of oral history are at our disposal to let them speak, and speak out, to add their voices to the chorus of history, to teach humility to statesmen and mandarins and scholars, to open a new literature and a new vision of the motions of time and fate.

There is a connection, then, and a vital connection, between the various disciplines I've been discussing. Ethnology and folklore, the history of artisans and miners, the correction of official myth by oral tradition, all reflect the same central concern, which is to reveal ordinary men and women as they go about their ordinary lives, above all to reveal what I have spoken of as the mystery of personality in all its wonderful variety.

There is a new urgency to the work of recording the thoughts and feelings and values of people and communities who have been left too long in the dark, and who are now suffering not only the insults of history, but the shocks of technical and



social change. And in this urgent endeavour the National Museums of Canada are playing their part, and will continue to play their part with all the resources, human and technical, at their disposal.

The task, our task, your task, is to offer a deeper orchestration to the elegant formulations of academic history, not to supplant it but to augment it by something new in the world, a secular history.

#### NOTES

1. James Boswell, The Ominous Years 1774-1776, ed. Charles Ryskamp & Frederick A. Pottle, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1963 pp. 348-349.
2. Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976 p. 18.
3. H.S. Fern and Bernard Ostry, The Age of Mackenzie King, London, Heinemann, 1955. Republished by James Lorimer and Co., Toronto, 1976.
4. J.W. Pickersgill (editor), The Mackenzie King Record, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1960-68.
5. Gordon M. Day, "Oral Tradition as Complement" in Ethnohistory 19 (1972) pp. 99-108.
6. From an unpublished field report written by Dr. Michael K. Foster, Canadian Ethnology Service, National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada, Ottawa, 1975-76.
7. Ibid.
8. Oscar Lewis, The Children of Sanchez, New York, Random House, 1961.
9. Truman Capote, In Cold Blood, New York, Random House, 1965.