

AN EXAMPLE OF AN INDEPENDENT ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:  
THE CANADIAN CONTINGENT TO THE  
FRIENDS AMBULANCE UNIT, CHINA CONVOY

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Although historians have long used personal interviews and oral history methodology in their research, it is not yet common practice for individuals to develop their own independent oral history projects. Maybe this is because the words "oral history project" usually connote a fairly large undertaking with special funding and a staff of several people. But it need not be that way at all. There are many topics which offer historians the opportunity to develop, conduct and finance personally a small independent project. One such example is my study of the Canadian Contingent to the Friends Ambulance Unit's China Convoy during the Second World War. Little has been written about their experiences and today, over thirty years later, the oral record remains the most important source in constructing a history of the Canadian contribution in this humanitarian work.

The original Friends Ambulance Unit was founded during the First World War as the Anglo-Belgian Ambulance Unit under the guidance of Philip Noel Baker, the son of a former Canadian Quaker. By 1918 the name was changed officially to Friends Ambulance Unit and although it was disbanded in 1919, reunions of old members were held from time to time. It was at such a reunion in October 1938 that plans were formulated for a new FAU to meet the challenge of renewed world crises and to provide Anglo-American pacifists with the opportunity to perform positive service.

The new FAU required a much more complicated organization than the old unit since the Second War was truly a world war spread around the globe. The humanitarian services of the FAU were needed not only in Europe but in the Mid-East, North Africa and the Far East as well. It was in the East, China in particular, where the FAU embarked on what eventually became its greatest single adventure. The China Convoy became a rare example of international cooperation in the relief of human misery. Unlike FAU war relief work in Europe, the China unit faced the constant threats of flood and famine as well as external war with the Japanese and internal civil war.

The head of the FAU in China was Dr. Robert B. McClure, a Canadian missionary doctor who later became the first lay moderator of the United Church of Canada. His first finance officer was Gordon Keith, also a Canadian. It was Dr. McClure, together with an interdenominational committee of pacifists, who encouraged young Canadians to take on this active humanitarian work. The Canadian venture was financed by the Chinese War Relief Fund, a Canadian organization formed to aid Chinese resistance to Japanese aggression, and assisted further by the Canadian Red Cross.

By 1944 twenty Canadians, eighteen men and two women, departed for China. This contingent, although organized in Toronto by the Canadian Friends Service Committee, was composed of volunteers from almost every section of Canada and represented various religious denominations: six United Churchmen- five Anglicans- five Quakers- one Presbyterian -one Disciple of Christ and two with no religious affiliations. Overall they were ordinary men and women, much the same as their fellow countrymen, except that they were committed pacifists, most of them conscientious objectors, at a time when the great majority of English-speaking Canadians were solidly behind the nation's war effort.

These young Canadians were not pacifists in just a religious or passive sense, but rather were radically committed to a new social order organized according to the Christian social ethics of love and brotherhood. Their desire to perform active, constructive peace work to help remedy the ravages of war was expressed by their voluntary service in China.

The actual services they performed included a wide range of activities from direct medical assistance and famine relief to the general distribution of drugs and other medical supplies throughout China. FAU personnel worked deep within China administering to the needs on both sides of the lines -- Nationalist as well as Communist.

I first learned of this small group of Canadians while researching the history of the Canadian pacifist tradition. Following a brief investigation, I discovered this unit provided a good opportunity for a small oral history project that would be quite manageable for one person operating on a low budget. To begin with, the scope of the project is limited since there were only twenty people in the unit, all of whom are still living and easily accessible. The participants are more than willing to recall their China experiences and, conveniently for me, the majority now reside in the vicinity of Toronto. Also, the original files on the Canadian unit compiled by the Canadian Friends Service Committee are available in their Toronto office. Other than factual data, these files contain the original letters written by the unit members while in China. Therefore, I have at my fingertips not only the human resources for an oral record but also original printed material for supplementary support and analysis. My goal is to produce an oral record that can be consulted in my larger study of Canadian pacifism and yet, at the same time, stand by itself as a separate history.

The first step in organizing the project was to compile a standard questionnaire; one that would lend some continuity in interviews and yet allow flexibility in dealing with various personalities. According to this format, participants are asked questions pertaining to their personal background and the forces which led them to take the pacifist position, including their experiences as conscientious objectors and their decision to go to China. Questions concerning the China venture simply provide the basic outline for participants in recalling their particular experiences. Some need very little coaxing while others require more specific direction. The general topics discussed vary from factual information such as their length of service and descriptions of their work and lifestyles, to more subjective observations as their impressions of China and the chaotic political situation there at the time plus their general appraisal of the work of the FAU, Canadian participation in particular.

As one can imagine, the resulting tapes are full of interesting stories, some humorous, some tragic, that shed new light on active pacifist service in time of war as well as Canadian participation in international relief activities. While the tapes

themselves are a rich source of original material for those interested in related topics, their joint analysis is providing the basic input for a written history of this Canadian unit.

An example of the type of information available from the interviews is Dr. McClure's description of medical services. The FAU consisted of two sections: the transport section which trucked drugs and other medical supplies throughout China, hence the name China Convoy, and the medical section. Dr. McClure, as head of the medical section, divided his personnel into mobile medical teams which moved around to various locations, depending on where they were most needed. Each team contained approximately six people: one doctor, one nurse, one team business manager, one laboratory technician, one pharmacist to dispense drugs and one anesthetist. Usually two teams worked together.

Dr. McClure recalled one instance when he entered a Chinese Military hospital to find over a thousand patients, Chinese soldiers, but no doctors. A few attendants did nothing but change dressings, even rewashing the gauze for future use. Fractures were not set, anesthetics were not used. The death rate was five to six patients per night. The FAU medical teams created a special 20-40 bed hospital in order to treat properly selected patients from the larger military pool and a "pool of pus it was" to quote Dr. McClure. The FAU teams performed six operations per day per doctor until they did all they could. Then they moved on to another location.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the heroic work of the medical teams, it was the transport section which proved to be the life line of Free China during the war. The FAU trucks were solely responsible for keeping the various Chinese and mission hospitals scattered across China stocked with drugs and other medical supplies, even though the communication system was completely disrupted in war-torn China.

Once the oil supply to China was cut off by the Japanese, the China Convoy became well known for their charcoal burning trucks, copied from a system first developed by Sentinel steam trucks in England. Each truck was equipped with a hopper in which charcoal was burned to produce the gas to feed the engine. One of the main difficulties involved was getting enough power to climb steep mountain roads. According to one Canadian member, sometimes it took all afternoon to get up one mountain, yard by yard. The truck would move forward a little until its power gave out and then the Chinese charcoal boy who accompanied each truck would place a triangular block of wood under the rear tires to prevent the truck from rolling backward. When the truck revved up enough power it would inch up a little further and so on until it reached the top.<sup>2</sup> Despite such problems the FAU trucks had a reputation for dependable and safe delivery of supplies.

Besides medical and transport work, some Canadian personnel were seconded to other humanitarian organizations working in China. In the summer of 1945 George Wright, now a United Church minister in Mount Forest, Ontario, was assigned to the American Advisory Committee to work in a famine area around Tating and Pichieh in Western Kweichow province. Rev. Wright travelled to the villages in the area questioning people on their different family situations in order to allocate sufficient funds for each family to buy enough corn to tide them over for one month. This usually amounted to 6,000 Chinese dollars since the inflation rate was about 500 to one. FAU members would also try to find some way to help in the long run.<sup>3</sup>

Another Canadian who worked in famine relief sadly recalled going to a village of starving people to distribute food and milk. Unfortunately, there was not enough

food to feed the entire village. Only an oral recording could capture the emotion, the pauses and the cracks in the interviewee's voice as he described the painful process of selecting those people to get food while being fully aware that those turned away would probably starve to death.<sup>4</sup>

Another interesting experience was told by Jack Dodds, the only Canadian member to work in Communist territory. In 1946 Dodds accompanied an FAU team across Nationalist lines to Yen-an, the capital of Communist China. There he worked as a laboratory technician in the International Peace Hospitals dedicated to another Canadian--Dr. Norman Bethune. In December of that year the Nationalists launched a big offensive on Yen-an. When American Army personnel pulled out the Communists offered FAU personnel the chance to leave also. They decided to stay and together with the Communists pulled out of Yen-an and into the hills. The whole hospital moved en masse and reassembled in caves where they treated casualties from the front. Dodds described Chou En-lai, whom he saw about once a week, as a clever, effective administrator who left FAU members with the impression that he understood Western attitudes. Overall, according to Dodds and other Canadian members, the FAU was always welcome in Communist China and at times were accused by Nationalists as being too sympathetic with the Communist cause.<sup>5</sup>

It was a big and lasting experience for young Canadian pacifists from rural Saskatchewan and urban Toronto to travel throughout an impoverished country like China, parts of which were still controlled by war-lords and infested with bandits and disease. Few suffered from cultural shock but their impressions say almost as much about Canadians in 1946 as about the Chinese. Their story would be lost to later generations of Canadians, however, without an oral history. Other than their letters, the participants themselves are the only source of information. Now a history of this unit is being written based on their oral record.

The important point, I believe, is that this project did not require special funding or a staff of interviewers. It was all possible as a small independent project. There must be many other good topics manageable enough for similar independent projects. All it takes is a little hard work on the part of an individual historian.

The expense of such an undertaking can be relatively small. I secured a good portable cassette tape recorder for under fifty dollars and bought most of my tapes in a two for one sale. They are BASF 90 minute tapes with the special mechanism to prevent jamming. Rather than transcribing the tapes, which is just too costly and time consuming for an individual, I index each tape according to topic using the gear driven counter reading on my tape deck. I simply designed a special index form and reproduced enough copies to use with each tape. The tape index is not only easy to make, but I find it completely satisfactory for my purposes. I currently have over 25 hours of taped interviews which I hope to deposit in an archive following the completion of my work.

Of course, there are always problems, especially when an individual with little experience working in oral history tackles a project alone. I am fortunate in that most of my problems were relatively small. For instance, when I first began taping interviews I did not ask participants to release the tapes. Only later did I devise a tape release form especially suited for my project. This means back-tracking to get the forms signed properly. Also, only after a few tapes of poor quality did I discover that the microphone built into my cassette recorder was picking up more machine noise than voices. An inexpensive external microphone easily solved that problem.

Probably the major drawback to an individual project--the stress associated with one person being solely responsible for organizing the project, conducting the interviews, indexing tapes and finally analyzing the oral record--is also, paradoxically, its most attractive feature. The heavy workload is offset by the fact that one individual has full control and complete knowledge of the project from the first interviews to the final stage of writing the history. My independent project on the Canadian Contingent to the FAU in China is one example.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Interview with Dr. Robert B. McClure, 13 May 1976.
2. Interview with R. Beck, 30 December 1975.
3. Interview with Rev. George Wright, 20 May 1976.
4. Interview with A. Dorland, 16 June 1976.
5. Interview with J. Dodds, 18 May 1976.