

THE SUDBURY EXPERIENCE: REPORT ON AN ORAL
HISTORY PROJECT FROM A LABOUR PERSPECTIVE

by Jim Tester

A sa retraite, l'auteur décida d'étudier l'histoire de Sudbury du point de vue des ouvriers. Grâce à son nouvel emploi du temps et aux contacts créés au cours de sa carrière active dans le mouvement syndical, l'auteur se trouvait dans une position idéale pour obtenir de précieux renseignements par des entrevues d'histoire orale. Selon lui, l'histoire de Sudbury ne peut être racontée que par les deux forces principales en présence: la compagnie et le syndicat. Pour sa part, il choisit d'étudier la version des travailleurs. Il a par ailleurs fait d'avantage appel aux membres de la base qui ont inspiré et animé le mouvement syndical qu'aux dirigeants syndicaux actuels. Cinquante entrevues, d'une durée totale de soixante-quinze heures, sont maintenant terminées. Il se dessine déjà un tableau qui remet en question les explications classiques de l'activité syndicale dans la région de Sudbury. Pour l'auteur, l'histoire orale est très importante si l'on veut présenter la version ouvrière parallèlement à celle que les dirigeants de la compagnie ont déjà écrite.

I was somewhat surprised to learn there is some questioning in academic circles about the relevance of labour movement oral history. There seems to be a prevailing fear that the interviewer will lead the interviewed in such a way as to give one-sided responses that reflect the interviewer's prejudices.

That is a real danger, but what historian can be successfully accused of being unbiased? I recall Churchill being asked how Britain would be able to justify before history the terror bombing of open German cities during World War II. He replied simply that there was no problem with that because, quote: "We will write the history".

There is some feeling in the academic community that its members are the most competent oral historians because they are able to exercise the greatest objectivity. That is learned nonsense. Any good craftsman has to intimately know his materials and how to use his tools. Otherwise, despite the best intentions, his work will be a failure. The creative process requires knowledge, skill and preparation in order to resolve the problems en route to the finished product.

I have always been struck by the sensitivity of great novelists to their characters. Undoubtedly, all such novelists have spent most of their leisure time making mental notes in discussions with people, in all walks of life. Their novels are the essence of such oral discourse. Their characters, while invented, are typical of the human forces in real-life situations. Through these characters we observe the conflicts of interests and temperament, in

certain historic settings. Through their interaction we can understand the dominant social forces at work in that place and period.

Tolstoy in 'War and Peace' tells us more about the reasons behind the Russian Revolution than a hundred history books. Sholokov in his 'And Quiet Flows the Don' vividly portrays the struggles to win the Cossack population for socialism and for battles to transform a backward nation into a modern society. The sweep of his characters shows us the contradictory forces at work better than all the official explanations or declamatory propaganda.

What I am saying is that a good novel is an extension of oral history. It is the stuff of which the ancient sagas were made, of heroic deeds against impossible odds. These were the first artistic means for sustaining morale and giving real purpose to life's struggles.

I think a good oral history interviewer must have an understanding of human society. He should have some sympathy for ordinary people and an appreciation of the historical process in the development of leaders. If possible, he should have had actual experiences that relate to those of the person being interviewed. If one has been there, it puts one a big step ahead in empathy and giving direction to the questioning. Of course, such experience can be an obstacle, if the interviewed has a rigid interpretation of such events and is unwilling to give the interviewed free reign to his recollections.

A lack of personal experience can be overcome to a certain extent by research and preparation. As a matter of fact, even the most involved participant in labour struggles needs a perspective that has resulted from studying often contradictory sources. Research is indispensable to a good understanding and to good interviewing.

A couple of years ago, Laurentian University in Sudbury, set up a special department on Labour-Industrial Archives. The idea was to collect historical material from individuals, unions and companies that related to the building of industry in Northeastern Ontario, and to the social problems flowing from that experience.

The concept was of an even-handed approach, neither favouring management or the unions. The results so far are that many individuals who participated in the labour movement have deposited a great deal of material with the university. Virtually nothing has come from the companies, or their representatives.

This was not unexpected. I had suggested to the archivists that if the Mine Managers' Association were to give their old minute books to the university collection, that would provide some clear insight into their thinking and actions to defeat unions, in the mining areas, from before the turn of the century. Evidently, that kind of material, like radioactive spent fuel, is still too hot to handle.

On the other hand, labour activists are quite free and open about their activities. Retired union leaders are especially good sources of information. Most of them have little to hide and have few reservations.

This contrast between labour and managements' willingness to tell all is not accidental. Labour wants people to learn the lessons of history, to help carry on the struggle for a better life. It represents the majority of people. Management, on the other hand, represents a small majority, but maintains a front of operating in the interests of everybody, especially the community in which it has its plants. The truth about its past might well prejudice its operations in the future, especially when dealing with the younger generation.

Oral history is a rare thing from captains of industry. Most prefer to give their story to a biographer, or prepare a carefully edited version in collaboration with a professional writer, ghost or in the flesh. Two such books are "For the Years to Come" by John F. Thompson and Norman Beasley, and "As I See It", an autobiography by J. Paul Getty. Thompson, a former president of Inco, told his story in long interview sessions with author John Beasley. Presumably, J. Paul Getty wrote his own story. Both were carefully edited.

These two industrial leaders come through as strong figures, with good personalities and an understanding of people. Both showed a grasp of organization and the ability to surround themselves with competent people. Getty, in particular had a wry sense of humor, which he, indeed needed to have survived five unsuccessful marriages. He mainly blamed himself for being an incompetent husband, because he rarely found time for family affairs, so engrossed was he in expanding his empire in oil.

In the body of his book, Thompson gives no mention of the unions at Inco. He does give a couple of paragraphs about the union movement in a chapter titled "Recorded Conversations", a short question and answer section near the end of the book. This was part of his philosophical rambling, in which he mentioned nothing about Sudbury, despite his connection with Inco management from 1906 until 1960. For Getty, unions simply did not exist.

Both these men had many commendable qualities. They knew technology and people, but both were autocrats who believed in the divine right of the rich to run things. Both were highly successful as industrial leaders and accomplished a great deal for their companies. Neither showed much concern, or interest, in the lives of their workers. Their consciences never bothered them, simply because they had no sympathy for democratic ideas, in the real sense. Although, it must be said, that Getty had some sympathy for Roosevelt and the New Deal. As the world's richest man, that was an accomplishment beyond most of his corporate contemporaries.

One has to have, at least, a grudging admiration for such captains of industry. But what about the masses of workers who made all their scheming and dreams possible? What about the leaders who represented those workers, who indeed were produced by them, in their efforts to improve their lives on and off the job?

Essentially, their struggles were for measures of industrial democracy. They believed they should have some control over their working conditions, and their lives in the company-dominated villages and towns. At the turn of the last century they did not gracefully accept the 12 hour day and the bad working conditions. Their ranks were rampant with thoughts of revolt and revenge.

Next year, Sudbury will be celebrating its 100th Anniversary. Many books have been written about Canada's foremost mining and smelting city. None have told the story of its working people, their aspirations and their struggles, which have built the Sudbury communities into what they are today. If official historians have their way, none will be written. The truth is too staggering in its ramifications. It must therefore, be suppressed or subverted.

When I retired six years ago, after nearly 25 years service with Falconbridge Nickel Mines, I decided to dedicate myself to uncovering labour's story in Sudbury. It seemed to me the main tool would be oral history. I also decided that history lay, not in the minds of the average workers, or the respectable right-wing labour bosses, but in the experience of the rank-and-file left leaders who had done the spade work and planted the seeds of unionism, despite an inclement social climate and an unyielding soil.

Like all aspiring historians, I applied for a Canada Council grant. Like most applicants, I was turned down. In a way that was fortunate, because I was freed from time constraints and outlines. I could engage in a great deal of experimentation, which I did. It also left me time to check various historic events, from newspapers and union sources, to ensure accuracy in placing events and incidents.

I now have some 75 hours of tapes, with some 50 interviews. I am presently into the utterly miserable, but often exciting, job of transcribing and editing them. All are interviews with left-wingers.

When I speak of the left, I take the broad meaning - all the anti-establishment thinkers, most of whom were socialist-minded, but some of whom were liberals and even conservatives. Before the union was recognized in Sudbury, there were few opportunities in the union movement. It was only when the union became a legitimate organization, fully recognized by the companies and governments, that careerism began to raise its ugly head. It was only then that division and struggle for power began. What careerist would want to risk his fortune, even his neck, in the early union activities, which were of necessity, often clandestine in nature?

Out of that whole left entourage, I interviewed only two who were a disappointment. One was an old Mine-Mill activist and union builder in Sudbury, Jock Turner. The other was a long-time union builder in Timmins, Joe Corliss. Both had been members of the Communist Party; both were too modest to talk about themselves, insisting the labour movement was the thing and they played but minor roles!

The true story of the founding of the union in the Sudbury nickel industry can only be told by the two protagonists in the struggle - the company and the democratic coalition of workers. It was a confrontation that challenged the divine right of autocratic rule. It was a struggle between the masses and the mining barons.

The balanced view, of course, must come from the mouths of the main actors, not the bit players who presume to speak with authority.

The workers were not led by middle-of-the-road compromisers. They were inspired and rallied by left-thinking activists. Only they can lay legitimate claim to a true labour view of events. For that view we have to go to them.

I make no pretense of being unbiased. Others will have to tell management's story, if they be sufficiently bold and sympathetic. I seek only to discover the union side. That is a task of some dimensions because of distortions and distractions by interpreters of labour history who have a right-wing labour ideological axe to grind. In my opinion, they represent the status quo, not progressive social change.

Most labour historians conceded that Mine-Mill was the most democratically constituted of all the unions in North America. It was not only a rank-and-file oriented union, but actually had a federated structure, with real power residing in the local unions. For example, in Sudbury the collective agreements were between the companies and the local, not the international union.

During the Cold War, which officially began with Churchill's Fulton, Missouri speech in 1946, one of the main targets of the U.S. State Department was the Mine-Mill Union. The most popular explanation for this is that the U.S. Government could not stand for a union in the basic metals industry that was communist-led. That may be partly true but I am inclined to the view that it was the democratic structure of Mine-Mill that had to go. It was much easier to wheel and deal with a centralized union such as the Steelworkers, under the leadership of the likes of Wavy Davy MacDonald.

In any event, after the merger of Mine-Mill with the Steel Union in 1967, all the Mine-Mill leaders became part of the Steelworkers' staff organization. Even the reddest of the red, Harvey Murphy, was accepted into the ranks. So it certainly was not the personnel, no matter how red, but the structure they were out to destroy. This, they accomplished, with the help of the right-wing opportunists in the labour movement. It was an unholy alliance.

Some labour historians have pictured the struggles in Sudbury, during the Steel raids in the late 40s, as being a fight between the CCF and the Communists for control of the union. Nothing could be further from the truth. CCF adherents had complete control of Mine-Mill's local 598. The split that occurred was in the CCF itself. The Sudbury CCF club was the largest in Ontario at the time. The overwhelming majority was opposed to Steel taking over from Mine-Mill. They supported Bob Carlin who was the CCF Sudbury provincial member and Mine-Mill leader. Bob Carlin and the CCF club were expelled by the provincial leadership. The Sudbury CCF was in a shambles for the next ten years, until revived by Norm Fawcett and Ed Martel under the NDP banner.

The real division in Sudbury was not between the CCF and the Communists, but between those who believed in Mine-Mill as a rank-and-file union and

those who supported a strong centralized union such as the Steelworkers. Despite all the calculated myths to the contrary, the Communists in Local 598 were among the strongest supporters of the rank-and-file aspects of Mine-Mill. None were in the top leadership of the local; a small handful were on the local executive, most were active in the steward body.

It is ironic that the strength of Mine-Mill lay in its active stewards. Most grievances were settled in the work place. Despite a militant reputation, Mine-Mill had only one strike in the Inco Sudbury operations, from 1944 to 1962. That was in 1958. Rank-and-file activity solved problems with management on a day-to-day basis. There was better work discipline and self-control as a result of such rank-and-file self confidence and militancy. So history puts to rest another myth about the destructive conspiracy of militant unionism. It is just the opposite.

A great deal of what I have related has come from the many interviews I have had with former Mine-Mill activists. Much of it is part of my own experience as a trade unionist who signed his first union card with the Mine Workers' Union of Canada in 1932, in Kirkland Lake.

I have seen a great deal of hostile propaganda against the union movement in my day. I have seen sell-outs and betrayals, but I have maintained an abiding faith in the working class, its common sense and its ability of produce outstanding personalities and great leaders.

The future belongs to them. They deserve to know of their own past. In a large measure that task belongs to the oral historians who can work with living material, not simply fossil remains from the past.