

Reflections on Oral History

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I SHOULD LIKE to speak about the purposes of oral history, in order to clarify and develop some of the telling points made by Dr. Swain and Dr. Morrissey. When Allan Nevins set up the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University in 1948, he looked upon it as an organization that in a systematic way could obtain from the lips and papers of living Americans who had led significant lives a full record of their participation in the political, economic, and cultural affairs of the Nation. His purpose was to prepare such material for the use of future historians. It was his conviction that the individual played an important role in history and that an individual's autobiography might in future serve as a key to an understanding of contemporary historical movements. I speak of this because, although gathering autobiographies by tape recorder is a relatively recent phenomenon, the historiographical tradition of autobiography is a very old one—one that reaches back to ancient times. It is, moreover, part of a written tradition.

Historians are agreed that modern industrial society rests in part on foundations created by printing and papermaking. These are not only important because they rank among the oldest of modern industrial processes but because they also serve as catalysts of human thought. Newspapers, books, magazines, and a vast mechanically produced correspondence all testify to the pervasiveness of print and paper communication in all facets of our daily public and private lives. In a little over 15 years, the Atomic Energy Commission has created well over a million linear feet of records. In Washington such agencies as the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian Institution struggle with one another for space and the privilege of storing records. In the last quarter-century a new business known as records management has made its appearance. Its major function is to advise

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business firms how best to preserve and maintain their ever-growing records. It would seem that historians who work in contemporary history bid fair to be overwhelmed by a superabundance of records.

It has been argued by some who work in oral history that the technology that produces this superabundance of records paradoxically conspires to deprive the historian of a great deal of the variety and detail inherent in the process of events. Louis Starr, the director of the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, puts it this way:

The automobile, the airliner, and the telephone between them are steadily obliterating history's most treasured resource, the confidential letter. The inner thoughts, the private revelations, the reactions of one man to another, the undercurrent of the times as reflected in our personal lives, will be lost to him [the historian] simply because we no longer confide to one another in writing as earlier generations did. As the vernacular has it, we contact one another, be it by car, plane or phone. We talk.

There can be little doubt that the revolution in communication has made the world smaller and changed the nature and uses of time. It is also true that the tempo of living today makes claims on individual time and understanding that were unthought-of 50 years ago. But I seriously doubt that superior methods of communication are eliminating the personal letter and document. When I interviewed Prof. A. M. Schlesinger, I found 40 boxes of correspondence (roughly about 20,000 letters). I should like to stress that these letters were an integral part of my preparation. Later, Professor Schlesinger graciously allowed me to choose approximately 500 letters to illustrate and buttress points made in his memoir. When I interviewed Prof. Paul Sachs, I discovered 33 4-drawer cabinets of letters, 16 bound volumes of lecture notes from 1925 to 1948, plus 2 oversized cartons of letters entirely devoted to the special commission organized by the Government during World War II to preserve the art treasures of Europe. About 5,000 pages of this letter material were later appended to Professor Sach's memoir. These are not unique examples and can be multiplied many times. I cite them to underscore the point that the old historical aphorism that "without documents there is no history" holds for oral history as well. To discover and use such documents is in fact one of the functions of oral history.

Much has been said about oral history technique but little about the technique itself, that is, how the oral historian works. Once

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a subject has been chosen to be interviewed, the burden of collecting that subject's autobiography rests on the historian-interviewer. His operation is fourfold: (1) he must prepare himself in extant primary and secondary sources so as to be able to see relevant historical relationships and define historical problems; (2) armed with a tape recorder, he must so handle himself and his preparation as to spur the chosen subject's memory of past events; (3) he must gather from the subject supporting contemporary documents as a check on memory's tenuousness and to supplement the account gathered; and (4) he must aid the subject in the final preparation of the memoir so that it says what the subject wants it to say.

The resultant interviews are deep and comprehensive. They cover a subject's life. They contain data relevant not only to the subject and those with whom he acted but also to the contextual climate and atmosphere in which the action occurred. This procedure, therefore, is not the work of an hour, or an afternoon. A year or two may well elapse before a memoir fully edited and documented is ready for deposit in the archives or for submission for publication.

The autobiography that emerges as a result of the oral history research process is a new kind of historical document. To be sure it has been created by the participant in past events; it is also, however, the creation of the historian-interviewer who has led the person interviewed to examine relationships he might otherwise have passed over or deemed unimportant. This mutual creation contributes to both the strength and weakness inherent in such a document.

The autobiography gathered by oral history methods is not merely an addition or a supplement to other extant documents; actually it stands as an attempt at a first interpretation of a series of given events. It is also the first reduction and ordering of a mass of primary and secondary material germane to a particular man's life. Because of this, the historian-interviewer is under special obligation to be meticulous in his research and to make clear, to those who in future will use the memoir, the materials he worked with in preparing his interviews and his philosophical and historical preconceptions. In other words, oral history memoirs should contain the questions put by the interviewer and should be accompanied by bibliographies of the primary and secondary material used by the interviewer. I shall be plain; it has been my experience that many oral historians are less than meticulous in their research, that they do not include their questions in the

memoirs, that they care little for the niceties of bibliography and care less for coping with historical problems. They are prisoners, in part of time and in part of economics. A full-time interview program for an oral historian for a year should be between 100 and 125 hours. Such a program will produce between 2,500 and 2,800 pages of manuscript and, more important, will allow the interviewer time to think, research, and edit. Increase the interviewer's hours and the only thing you increase is the number of pages he produces. If you hire interviewers on a part-time basis and pay them for each hour of interview they submit, you can be assured that you will get a minimum of research; for each hour of research in effect decreases the interviewer's earnings per hour. Finding a historian-interviewer may be easy; finding a historian-idealist who can live on psychic income may be quite another matter.

The problem of the short interview, raised by Dr. Swain, is a knotty one. Although I am one of those who believe in long and intensive interviews, I know that shorter interviews can be extraordinarily useful to historians who are engaged in examining particular historical problems. For example, this is a technique that Richard Hewlett and Oscar Anderson used to good effect while doing their first volume of the history of the Atomic Energy Commission. It is a technique that Tom Kuhn is currently using in doing research on his history of quantum physics. Much revealing and interesting data can be gathered in this way. In 1929, for example, the distinguished psychologist, Carl Murchison, asked many of the then living pioneers of modern psychological research to write brief autobiographical accounts of their careers and work. Later he edited and published those autobiographies as a 3-volume autobiographical history of modern psychology. It is a classic. A young sociologist at Columbia is currently engaged in making an intensive study of Nobel Laureates in science and is conducting interviews with these scientists to learn about the people associated with them in their work and the sequence of events leading to the discoveries that resulted finally in their receiving the Nobel Prize. These interviews have been admirably researched and conducted—yet none have run more than 3 hours, some no more than an hour. While they are of extraordinary usefulness to the person doing the study mentioned, they will be of less use to the historian of the future both in the range of material and in the problems examined. It is conceivable to me that the historian of science in future will not only want to know about the sequence of events

that led Max Theiler to develop a live-virus vaccine against yellow fever; it is conceivable that he would also want to know from Dr. Theiler about Dr. Theiler's father, Sir Arnold Theiler, one of the most distinguished bacteriologists of his day in South Africa. He might want to know about the education that Dr. Theiler received as a bacteriologist at the School of Tropical Medicine at London right after World War I. He might want to know about the department of bacteriology at the Harvard Medical School, where Dr. Theiler worked in the twenties, and about the Rockefeller Foundation Virus Laboratories, to which he went in 1930 and which he heads today. The historian might be interested in tracing the transition from bacteriological to virus research and a host of other subjects that Dr. Theiler's experience encompassed. Oral historians must ask themselves whether they want to work for themselves or whether they want to prepare materials for future historians.

Dr. Morrissey has suggested that it might be fruitful to interview less-known people rather than to concentrate on the well-known or famous. I should like to underscore and develop that point. It is a conceit to believe that only those who have led "significant lives" have reminiscences that are important for history. Historians have long bewailed the fact that the large mass of society leaves few personal documents because multitudes of people do not read or write. We learn about these people from what others write or say about them; they rarely speak for themselves to historians. We make inferences about them, we deal with them as groups, but basically we don't know them as people except in those rare instances when someone records the eloquence of a Chief Joseph or a Nat Turner. Their tradition is basically an oral tradition that lives within the family group or the locality for a generation or two and then slowly disappears. Paradoxically, oral historians have neglected this oral tradition. What makes this neglect trying is that other social scientists, notably anthropologists and folklorists, have long demonstrated the fruitfulness of the oral tradition for history. Oral historians can make an important contribution to an understanding of recent American history by gathering the autobiographies and life histories of immigrants who came to the United States in the early 20th century or of industrial and farm workers or of Negroes. When I mention these groups, I do not mean their leaders—I mean *them*.

In the oral history process a man's voice is ultimately reduced to pages of typed material. Historians find it easier and less time-

consuming to analyze and use oral history accounts if they are typed. In the transcription, however, much is lost because the physical voice disappears. That physical voice can betray a man's age, his class, his intelligence, his sensibility, and his education. The meaning of a word or phrase can well be modified by the inflection of a man's voice. Because of the expense involved in buying and preserving tape, most oral history offices save only a snippet of a man's voice for posterity and reuse their tapes. Expense or not, there is much to be gained by keeping the entire tape because the physical voice helps give a rounded psychological portrait of the man or woman being interviewed and contributes a truth to the oral history account that the typed page can never convey.

I should like to go one step further and suggest that, in addition to capturing the inflections of the voices of individual men and women of our time, oral historians might begin to catalog and preserve the envelope of sound in which we all live. Sound is a factor in history that has hitherto been little analyzed although it is an integral part of our physical and social environment.

Perhaps the most important gift that oral history has to offer is that it affords us an opportunity to revitalize undergraduate and graduate instruction in history. Gathering the autobiographies of contemporaries in effect makes a historical laboratory of the recent past and brings living memory in contact with both primary and secondary materials. By organizing oral history seminars, historians can take the first steps in interpreting aspects of the history of the recent past. For example, a seminar organized in the history of contemporary American medicine might operate in the following manner. Initially, the instructor would be responsible for conducting interviews with given medical scientists or physicians. Both he and the seminar would have the chore of seeking out relevant primary and secondary data necessary for conducting the interviews. Each week the instructor would let the seminar listen to the interview in process, and the seminar, on the basis of its preparation, would be required to criticize the problems being analyzed and the relationships being developed. In this way an opportunity would be afforded the student to deal critically with both primary and secondary data and to develop an appreciation of the limitations of such sources. In the second semester students would be required to create their own background materials for interviews. While all students would use similar secondary sources each would be required to seek out new primary sources unique to

the person being interviewed and to prepare catalogs or descriptions of such material. In an area such as the history of science, where there has been relatively little bibliographical work on extant primary sources, such activity would be invaluable. By a judicious choice of topics an oral history office might in time collect an archive of precious manuscript sources that students might in future explore monographically.

Perhaps what I have envisioned is a pipedream. Some may go so far as to argue that what I have said about oral history is not very practical—is nothing more than a counsel of perfection. I won't deny that I am given to dreaming, but why settle for a foothold on Parnassus when you can lay claim to the whole mountain?

In Context

Antonio. Then tell me,
Who's the next heir of Naples?

Sebastian. Claribel.

Antonio. She that is Queen of Tunis; she that dwells
Ten leagues beyond man's life; she that from Naples
Can leave no note, unless the sun were post—
The man i' the moon's too slow—till newborn chins
Be rough and razorable; she that from whom
We all were sea-swallowed, though some cast again,
And, by that destiny, to perform an act
Whereof what's past is prologue, what to come,
In yours and my discharge.

—*The Tempest*, II: I: 278–289.

Beans

When we complain about security, we mean people steal books. This is not unusual in libraries and in museums, as witness the theft of the jewels from the American Museum of Natural History, New York. But it is depressing. We don't want to put beans up the noses of our criminal element, but we observed the other day that we could get \$2,765.00 for five printed volumes of Mississippi Constitutions in our library. Our library is about as insecure as a library can get, and this is another reason why we need a new building. To protect our investment.

—*Mississippi History News-Letter*, vol. 6, no. 7:2 (Nov. 1964).