

Reflections on Thirty Years of Oral History in Canada

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The first conference I ever attended was the St. John's, Newfoundland meeting of the newly formed Canadian Oral History Association in October of 1975. As an undergraduate at Memorial University, I was studying both folklore and history, and recognized oral history as a natural link between the two disciplines. The 1975 conference gave me the opportunity to discover the various approaches used in the study of oral sources, and influenced my later career as a folklorist. Whether studying traditional crafts, folk beliefs or folk songs, I have always tried to relate people's traditional knowledge to their life experiences and I have also tried to view folklife in its historical context.

The 1970s were a time when new approaches to the study of human culture were being developed, and when cross-disciplinary research seemed to be on the brink of blossoming, especially with the emergence of the field of Canadian Studies. I embraced this movement and saw oral history as an exciting field to be involved with. During the past three decades, it is obvious that not all the practitioners of oral history in Canada have taken advantage of the opportunity to join a formal organization, and the result has been that the COHA has struggled through the years. In fact, the association would not have survived the cruel decade of the 1990's without the dedicated efforts of a few individuals.

To answer the question, why has oral history not expanded as a field in Canada, it is useful to go back to an article by Richard Lohead based on a paper written in 1974. The title "Three Approaches to Oral History: the Journalistic, the Academic and the Archival", (1) points out both the inherent strengths and weaknesses of oral history. On the one hand, oral history is an important research tool for people working in very different spheres. Archivists carry out interviews to complete the historical record to be preserved. Journalists carry out research on

specific questions that provide historical insights with relevance to the present. Academics integrate information gathered orally in an interpretive framework centred on questions to be analyzed.

Lohead could have added folklorists as a fourth group of oral historians with a specific approach. The best known folklorist to have been extensively involved in oral history is Edward D. Ives, author of *The Tape-Recorded Interview*. (2) Ives realizes, as do many folklorists, that what people think happened in the past is often more important than what actually happened, because we are influenced by what we believe to be true about the past, regardless of the veracity of our beliefs. According to Edward Ives, the oral history approach used by folklorists looks for patterns in the narratives told about the past. (3) The oral account therefore becomes a narrative genre on its own.

Here we are far from the archivist's concern with adding to the historical record. The folklorist's approach to oral history can even be set apart from all three described by Richard Lohead, because it is the only one that is not centred on the gathering of information. To the folklorist, the form the oral history account takes is inseparable from its content. Perhaps this could be labelled the "formal approach". It is also an approach that is shared by another group of oral historians, those with a literary background. The best known example of these is Alessandro Portelli, who holds a Chair in American Literature at the University of Rome. Portelli's work entitled *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (4) has attracted much interest since appearing in 1991.

Referring again to Richard Lohead's article, the problem oral history has had in affirming its status as a specific field of research is related to the very different concerns of its practitioners. Journalists tend to work on individual projects and rarely see the need to share their approaches and experiences in an organization such as the COHA. Academics, on the other hand, are constantly discussing their work with their peers, but tend to remain within the confines of a specific discipline, be it history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics or folklore. This leaves the archivists. In order to understand the leading role played by archivists in Canadian oral history, it is useful to think back to the movement that

lead to the creation of the COHA. As Léo La Clare recalled in the first issue of the COHA Journal in 1976, (5) the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association first recommended the creation of a committee to deal with oral history in 1969, and after a few years, the committee encouraged the formation of a distinct association in order to include practitioners of oral history outside of archives and history departments.

The invitation to open oral history meetings to various disciplines originally met with a positive response, as witness the founding conference of the COHA at Simon Fraser University in 1974 and the second conference, held under the auspices of the Department of Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland the following year. At that time, a fierce debate was raging between the proponents of the term "aural history" and those who opted for either "aural / oral history" or simply "oral history". This debate arose from the fact that one of the most active centres of oral history work during the 1970s, the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, referred to its program as "Aural History". The debate quickly faded away as "oral history" became the internationally accepted designation for the field.



The 1975 conference in Newfoundland, although organized by the Department of Folklore at Memorial University, included participation by several historians, anthropologists, journalists and broadcasters. Most of the participants had in common not only their use of oral sources but also their concentration on topics related to Newfoundland. This reveals one aspect of oral history research in Canada that is rarely pointed out. Most Canadians involved in oral history focus their research on one province, one region or one cultural group. This regional focus is not conducive to their linking up in a national organization. Initially, the COHA sought to encourage regional oral history activities and one of the results of this was the series of four Atlantic Oral History conferences held between 1979 and 1982.

The organizer of the first conference in the Atlantic region, historian James Morrison, has been, from the start, one of the main proponents of oral history in Canada. But there have been too few such individuals, and although there was a wide participation at the Atlantic Oral History conferences, it was not possible, with only a handful of committed individuals, to continue holding meetings after 1982.

In the past thirty years, several oral history conferences have been held in Western Canada, Atlantic Canada and Ontario, sometimes under the auspices of the COHA, and at other times following the initiative of a regional group or a university department. The participation of French speaking Québec has, however, been almost absent in the COHA, although some of the most ambitious oral history projects have taken place in that province. Life history research became a major field of investigation in Québec during the 1980s, as evidenced in the "Mémoire d'une époque" project, where each year hundreds of life histories of Québécois were recorded and submitted to a province wide competition, with prestigious prizes awarded by the Québec government. (6) Although at least one of the organizers of the competition, Nicole Gagnon, was a member of the COHA, for the most part the life history movement in Québec was an offshoot of a similar school of research in France, and had little to do with oral history activities in Canada. As editor of five volumes of the *Oral History Forum / Forum d'histoire orale* between 1995 and 2002, I was only successful in publishing two articles from Québec.

One of the main problems faced by oral history in Canada has been that few academics have chosen to highlight it as their main focus of research. Some excellent oral history work has been accomplished in Canada by proponents of women's history, labour history, and by left-wing historians in general. An example that springs to mind is one of the finest oral history books to have been published in Canada, *The Great War and Canadian Society – An Oral History*, edited by Daphne Read with an introduction by Russell Hann. (7)

Scholars who are categorized as either social historians or labour historians generally consider oral history as a research methodology, and therefore tend to avoid designating themselves as "oral historians". Similarly, folklorists have always carried out oral history research as a part of their examination of folk society, but have not generally given much importance to its specific characteristics. Even Edward Ives, one of the most accomplished oral historians in the United States, refers to it as simply a research method. He thus describes his own approach to the past: "It is anything but a new approach, and it has labored under several different names – traditional history, folk history, even oral history (thus turning a useful technique into a bogus genre)". (8) This quote eloquently explains why folklorists have not been more active in oral history societies. And yet, they would have much to contribute to the development of oral history as a separate field of enquiry, especially given their sophisticated approach to the whole question of the interpretation of oral testimony.

Folklore Studies is the main discipline that concentrates primarily on the collection and analysis of oral narratives, and folklorists have been reflecting on the nature of oral sources ever since the term "folklore" was coined in 1842. Far from being put off by the many unpredictable factors at play in the creation of oral testimony, folklorists embrace the whole process as a wonderful example of human creativity at work. This is why their view of oral history accounts as narratives that give an artistic form to human memories is close to the view of literary scholars like Alessandro Portelli.

The Canadian Oral History Association has been grounded, for most of its existence, in federal and provincial archival institutions. In contrast to the transient and sometimes hesitant involvement of academics in oral history, archivists who understand the importance of oral sources have always been ready to actively encourage the development of the association. Unfortunately, government cutbacks of the 1980s and 1990s curtailed the ability of federal and provincial archives to contribute to the COHA. It remains that archivists have been involved in the COHA from the start, and they have been influential in determining the nature of the association. Thus, the *COHA Journal* and its sequel, *the Oral History Forum*, have for the most part published articles presenting the results of oral history projects, as well as articles of a methodological nature. There has been little in-depth analysis of topics related to oral history, and efforts to develop new approaches to the field have been rare. In this way, the COHA has lagged behind organizations in countries such as Great Britain, where the journal *Oral History* is published, or Spain, where the University of Barcelona's Oral History Seminar publishes *Historia y Fuente Oral*.

Perhaps the greatest contribution the Canadian Oral History Association has made over the years has been to permit individuals who take a personal interest in oral research to share the results of their work and to see examples of projects carried out by others. In this way, the COHA continues to serve a useful purpose, even though it may be difficult to obtain a long term commitment from its members.

One of the most important accomplishments of the COHA has been to make people aware of the wealth of oral history collections that have been amassed since the appearance of the tape recorder. The *Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada*, published in 1993, lists 1,816 collections held by 354 institutions in Canada. Nearly all of these are preserved on audio tape cassettes or audio tape reels, both of which are rapidly becoming obsolete in the age of digital technology. The vast majority of these tapes are held by institutions that do not have the resources to duplicate all their collections. While the Canadian government has invested in the creation of on-line cultural resources in recent years, the preservation of audio collections in archives has yet to receive much attention. Our knowledge of life in Canada since

Confederation will be far richer in the future if we not only find ways of preserving the important oral history collections deposited throughout the country, but if we also supply the needed resources to make available the wealth of information they contain.

The Canadian Oral History Association has always been an organization with a predilection for the collection and preservation of oral testimony. Now, more than ever, we need it to lobby for the survival of a precious repository of Canadian heritage: the audio recording. The Smithsonian Institution's "Save our Sounds" project in the United States could serve as a example in determining priorities for such a project. Perhaps the impetus of the COHA's efforts in coming years could shift from the promotion of oral history research in Canada to an explanation of why existing oral history materials should be preserved for the future.

Works Cited

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