

# ORAL HISTORY IN BRITAIN

by

David G. Lance

The following is the revised form of a paper given by the author at the Fall 1973 meeting of the Oral History Association.

In Britain lines of communication between historians and other scholars who are using oral history methods are not yet well developed. For this reason, and my own relative inexperience in the field, it is difficult if not impossible to make a comprehensive statement about oral history in my country. What you are about to hear, therefore, is a mixture of facts and impressions.

The practice of using sound recording equipment as a means of collecting oral evidence goes back quite a few years. The projects which have been the longest established are based on institutions concerned mainly with folklore and linguistics. Pride of place goes just outside our national boundaries to the Irish Folklore Commission, recently reconstituted as the Department of Irish Folklore at University College, Dublin. Here field collectors begun using dictating machines in the 1930s for collecting oral material relating to all aspects of Irish folk tradition. In the 1950s the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University, the School of English at the University of Leeds and the Welsh Folk Museum also established national projects, details of which you will find in the lists I have circulated. There are also a number of smaller centers carrying out similar projects on a more regional basis.

Despite their long experience of using interviewing and recording techniques, the folklore and linguistic specialists have played a surprisingly small part in extending the use of these methods to other disciplines. This is not a derogatory observation for, as I know from my own experience, their doors are always opened to those who knock and within are impressively well

organized programs. But the real impetus behind the oral history movement in Britain during the past three or four years has come from a group of scholars based on university departments of history and social science. This group, whose projects are almost exclusively in the field of social history, has been particularly effective in focusing the attention of historians, and the administrators who hold the purse strings, on the value of oral history.

The endeavours of this group have resulted in two important developments. First, a series of proposals has been submitted to the Social Science Research Council (a major British grant awarding body) for substantial funding of various individual oral history projects, with a central coordinating unit based on the British Institute of Recorded Sound. This unit, as conceived, would act as a sort of clearing house for projects to ensure that there would be a minimum duplication of effort. It would also preserve copies of all recordings and provide a point where research workers could have access to tapes and transcripts. Secondly, the group set up in September this year an Oral History Society. This new society has defined oral history as "the collection and preservation of first-hand historical evidence, often by means of tape recorded interviews" for the purpose of "obtaining hitherto unavailable source material for the study of history and as a medium by which the experience of those now living may be transmitted to our successors." Since the aims of the Society are to "further the practice of oral history in all appropriate fields" we now have in prospect a professional association for all scholars who are using these methods.

The foundations of oral history in Britain were thus laid by the folklore and linguistic specialists, while the growth of a coherent movement is mainly the result of the activities of the social historians. To the extent that there is any difference in emphasis between the two groups it seems to lie mainly in the definition of terms. For example, is folklore a part of the process of historical research and what is the relationship between the interviewing and recording methods of the various specialists? There is also discussion about the validity of the term "oral history."

Some scholars maintain it gives the impression that there are two types of history, written and oral, rather than two types of historical source material. Such questions illustrate the kind of debate which is going on between British exponents.

As you will see from the list I have circulated, by far the largest proportion of British oral history projects have been set up to collect information about working class life and traditions. More than 75 percent of the existing projects have been established in this area. This pattern has been influenced by the very strong oral traditions at this social level and by the need to create oral evidence in fields where documentary records may not exist at all. Thus crafts and work, family and domestic life, local history in urban and rural communities, folklore and dialect dominate the programs which have been set up.

What seems at the moment significantly lacking in Britain are oral history projects aimed at élite respondents. No doubt Professor Nevins would turn in his grave to learn of the opportunities which have been and continue to be lost at this level. Some important work has been done. At the Centre of South Asian Studies in Cambridge people have been recorded who were closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian Independence Movement. In Oxford the Institute of Commonwealth Studies has recorded individuals, including government ministers, with particular experiences at decisive periods of British colonial history. The Science Studies Unit of Edinburgh University has done a good deal of recording with prominent scientists. There seems to be a gathering momentum of work at this level and just recently I heard that a new project is about to begin under the auspices of the Air Historical Branch of the Ministry of Defence, to record the memories of senior air force officers. The limited amount of information about specific élite projects in the list I have given you may simply be a consequence of the lack of communication between British oral historians about which I commented earlier. It is greatly to be hoped that this gap can be filled by the new Oral History Society eventually becoming an effective link between historians working from all perspectives and in all fields.

Another feature of oral history in Britain is that it has benefitted from the interest and practical support of the British Broadcasting Corporation. In this the BBC has been influenced by enlightened self-interest as it sees oral history recording as a source of broadcast material. However, as I know from my own experience, the support it has given to oral historians comes mainly from a philanthropic interest in seeing its own medium of recorded sound used for serious historical purposes. Also, as the BBC archives contain the biggest collection of oral history recordings in the country, there are many areas in which new projects indirectly build on work which the Corporation has been doing for many years. The BBC's contribution to the oral history movement has included collective and individual instruction in such fields as interviewing technique and the use of equipment; the Corporation has given national and local broadcasting time to oral history which has publicised both the subject and individual projects; and finally it has been an important vehicle by which oral historians have established contact with one another. I have personally found BBC staff a constant source of valuable advice which is freely and willingly given and I am glad to have this opportunity to acknowledge that help on behalf of the many oral historians who have benefitted from it.

### Oral History in the Imperial War Museum

The Imperial War Museum is one of the British national museums. Our field of study is war in the 20th century and we interpret these terms of reference very broadly. We are concerned not only with the campaigns and operations of war but also, for example with its political, economic, social, scientific, literary and artistic emanations. The Museum was set up in 1917 and established by Act of Parliament in 1920. It holds about 10,000 paintings, drawings and sculptures, 140,000 printed books, 7,000 linear feet of documents, 40 million feet of film and 5 million photographs. There are also large collections of equipment, weapons, uniforms and other materials illustrating the development of warfare in the 20th century.

The Department of Sound Records in the Imperial War Museum was established at the beginning of 1972. It

inherited a small collection of recordings from the Museum's Film Department, the most interesting of which were all the interviews which the BBC had recorded in producing its major television series The Great War.

When I was appointed to create and take charge of this new Department I knew very little about sound records and was barely aware of the existence of oral history. However, I had been in the Imperial War Museum for five years and, being familiar with its objectives, concerned myself with working out a programme which would be consistent with the Museum's general policy.

I turned my attention first of all to the process of recording individual memories and tried to locate other institutions in Britain which were competent in this field so that I could benefit from their experience. What I found at this time was quite a lot of interest and enthusiasm but only a little practical experience which seemed relevant to the Imperial War Museum. However, as you have already heard, there were a few centres working mainly in the fields of folklore and linguistics which gave me useful advice and offered working examples with high standards of interviewing, organization and technical methods.

Even with the knowledge gained from the few established projects in my country I still felt insufficiently expert to make recommendations about the purpose, staffing, equipment and budgets for my embryo Department. I therefore turned for further information to the benevolent monopolist of radio broadcasting in Britain, the BBC. From this source I received an enormous amount of help. Engineering staff advised me about equipment and technical facilities; broadcasters about interviewing techniques; the Sound Archives on the preservation and organization of recordings; and the Corporation's legal department with matters of copyright in the material I might acquire.

By this time, which would be about the early summer of 1972, I thought I knew enough to propose a policy for the Department of Sound Records. That policy is broadly the one which we have followed in the last eighteen months. The purpose of my Department is to record

personal experiences which come within our terms of reference; to acquire relevant recordings from other organizations and individuals; and to build up a comprehensive collection of commercial and other published recordings. We also aim to record noises, speeches, lectures, seminars, conferences, ceremonial occasions and military music (this is a particularly interesting field because very little of the music of the British Army has ever been recorded).

At the moment we lack the resources to sustain fully such a comprehensive programme as this. However, in less than two years of existence we have laid some firm foundations. The establishment of the Department at the moment consists of three graduate historians, a technician, a transcription typist and a part time copy typist. We have good resources of portable recording equipment consisting of a mixture of Uhers and Nagras. We also have a range of professional studio equipment which enables us to handle and duplicate most recorded sound formats and a sound proof and acoustically treated recording room is being built this year.

Apart from our own recording activities, we now have arrangements with a number of broadcasting agencies by which we acquire copies of relevant recordings which they hold and produce. Perhaps the most outstanding example of this is that the BBC has agreed to let us copy all of their Second World War archives. Arrangements like this enable us to preserve original sound documents in the Museum as well as the retrospective material we record ourselves.

This general description of the work of my Department should make it clear that the Museum is trying to create a collection which includes all categories of audio records which have a bearing on its field of study. Nonetheless the oral history programme receives a major part of our attention. What we have achieved so far in this field is summarised on the lists I have circulated, so I will spend a few minutes talking about our aims and attitudes to oral history rather than detailing the actual projects.

The oral history programme has two main purposes. First, it is designed to complement the Museum's other

collections, so that in addition to the film, photographic, printed and documentary records, and the works of art and other artefacts, we can preserve the particular qualities of personal experiences in the spoken word. Secondly, the programme aims to fill some of the gaps which exist in our subject field and the present collections which reflect it. The need for this work is demonstrable for our coverage of the period between the world wars and of developments following the Second World War is deficient. Moreover, in a survey we carried out three years ago among high ranking officers and civilians we found that in a sample of five hundred only about ten per cent had any personal papers relating to the great events and decisions with which they were associated. It is clear therefore that in our field of study an oral history programme can be of great value in compensating for the inadequacies of the traditional historical sources.

While the need to create oral evidence is an important influence on our work it is by no means the only criterion which affects it. As a museum we have a research function and a scholarly clientèle, but we also serve a very much wider audience. Therefore the product from my work is not judged solely by academic considerations. It is valuable and valid to record the voice of, say, a general talking about the planning and conduct of a particular campaign, or a housewife's experiences during the German Blitz on London, even if their comments add no factual information to our knowledge of those events. The actual voice of someone who took part in a significant historical event saying "this happened to me" can be one step closer to the original experience and add another dimension to a historian's secondary account. For a museum this kind of record is therefore a primary exhibit. It can illustrate dramatically that history is about people, a fact that military historians in particular often manage to obscure by making campaign accounts sound more like a game of chess.

It will be clear by now that, in the Imperial War Museum, we attach great importance to the spoken work itself and for this reason we are carrying out our work to something approaching the highest standards which are technically possible. Although the transcript

is undeniably an important facility for research workers it is not a complete substitute for the recording itself. It may be that posterity will judge that the preserved voices of people, who but for our efforts may not have been recorded at all, are of greater value than the transcripts. But whatever that judgement of the future it is clear that the recording is a different kind of document with nuances that cannot be transferred to a printed format.

In the Imperial War Museum we are therefore cataloguing and indexing all our recordings but only transcribing selectively. This will have the result of making our users refer to the original medium if they want to gain access to the information we have collected. It is also our intention to use the recordings in a creative fashion so that their undoubted educational value can be fully exploited. What I envisage for the future is a production unit within the Department of Sound Records which will produce a circulation library of recorded tapes designed to meet actual teaching requirements in schools and universities.

We also recognize that by our oral history projects we are creating sound archives. We have therefore associated ourselves not only with the Oral History Association but also with the International Association of Sound Archives. For sound archives throughout the world are not only collectors and creators of oral history material but they are also fundamentally concerned with the permanent preservation of recorded sound. Within their professional association we find a degree of technical expertise and advice which complements the scholarly benefits we derive from our membership of the Oral History Association.



# ORAL HISTORY CENTRES IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

by

David G. Lance

This is a list of all the centres known to the compiler which are either carrying out oral history projects or where projects are at an advanced planning stage. The details given about the centres marked with an asterisk are between one and three years out of date. Otherwise the information given represents the situation in October 1973 when the list was compiled.

\*ABBOT HALL ART GALLERY, Kendal.

Miss M. E. Burkett

Interviews have been carried out with rural craftsmen of the Lake District. Five interviews have been recorded.

AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH, Ministry of Defence, Queen Anne's Chambers, Tothill Street, London S.W. 1.

Group Captain E. B. Haslam

A project has been recently established to record the memories of senior airforce officers.

CARDINGANSHIRE JOINT LIBRARY, Aberystwyth, Wales.

Alun R. Edwards

A project was set up in 1968 to record local history material, including public lectures and addresses. One hundred and seventy hours have been recorded, catalogued and indexed.

CASTLE MUSEUM, Department of Social History, Norwich.

Bridget Yates

A project has been set up to record information about craftsmen and agricultural workers in the Norwich area. There is also a special interest in the history of the Norfolk iron foundaries. Approximately thirty hours have been recorded and are gradually being catalogued, indexed and transcribed.

CENTRE OF SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES, University of Cambridge,  
Laundress Lane, Cambridge.

Mary Thatcher

Since 1968 a series of recordings has been made with Indians who knew Mahatma Gandhi or were prominent in the Indian Independence movement and the rise of the Congress Party. Some recording has also been carried out with Pakistanis who were involved on either side of the recent Indo-Pakistan War. One hundred and fourteen recordings have been made, transcribed and indexed.

CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE, Oxford.

Brian Harrison

A project was set up in 1968 relating to the history of Oxford University, with special reference to domestic service in the colleges. Approximately twenty hours were recorded and selectively transcribed. Some recollections about Neville Chamberlain (1924-1929) and the Girls' Friendly Society have also been recorded.

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY, Department of History, Edinburgh.

Recordings have been made with senior military officers and civil servants who worked in India between the two world wars. Recollections of the suffragette movement, domestic service and the European "colony" in Morocco before 1912 have also been recorded.

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY, Science Studies Unit, 34 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh.

Dr. David Edge

Recording began in 1969 and the Unit has carried out biographical interviews with prominent scientists. A main aim was to provide information on the mode of development of scientific discovery. Special projects include a sociological history of radio astronomy, a study of the development of X-ray protein crystallography and the history of the Institute of Animal Genetics. Approximately one hundred and fifteen hours have been recorded and partly transcribed.

• ESSEX UNIVERSITY, Department of Sociology, Colchester, Essex.

Dr. Paul Thompson

A project was set up in 1968(?) to conduct an interview survey into family life and work experience in Britain before 1918. A quota sample of five hundred respondents is being interviewed and all tapes are being transcribed. The project is supported by the Social Science Research Council.

HIGH WYCOMBE PUBLIC LIBRARY, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire.  
I. G. Sparkes

A recording project was set up in the 1950s to preserve some of the history and associations of local trades and personalities. Special attention has been given to the local chair industry. The present collection amounts to twenty-five recorded hours.

HULL UNIVERSITY, Department of Economic and Social History, Hull.

Professor John Saville

Recording of personalities connected with the labour movement has been carried out to supplement written records and the material will be used for a projected Dictionary of Labour Biography. Some of the tapes have been transcribed.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM, Department of Sound Records, Lambeth Road, London S.E.1.

David Lance

Set up in 1972 the Department creates and collects recordings relating to war in the 20th century. Projects have been carried out concerning early military and naval aviation, life and operations on the Western Front during the First World War and the planning and conduct of the First Libyan Campaign (1940-41). Interviews and other spoken word recordings are being acquired from various agencies associated with broadcasting. The collection amounts to approximately nine hundred recorded hours which are being catalogued, indexed and selectively transcribed.

INSTITUTE OF COMMONWEALTH STUDIES, Colonial Records Project, 20-21 St Giles, Oxford.

A project was set up in 1967 to record individuals with particular experiences at decisive periods of British Colonial History. Interviews have been carried out with a variety of people ranging from former Ministers to professional and commercial men to social workers. Fifty interviews have been recorded, catalogued and transcribed. The programme has now been concluded and the resultant material deposited in the Rhodes House Library, Oxford. Technical advice to this project was given by Professor Nevins.

INSTITUTE OF CORNISH STUDIES, Trevenson House, Poole, Redruth, Cornwall.

Professor Charles Thomas

The Institute was set up in January 1973 to promote studies of man in the regional setting of Cornwall and the Scilly Isles. An extensive recording programme concerned with personal reminiscences, dialect and place names is planned.

KENT UNIVERSITY, Faculty of Social Sciences, Canterbury, Kent.

Professor Theo Barker

Interviewing for memories of before 1900, with particular reference to food, clothes, the home, school, shopping, health, leisure and parental attitudes. Eighteen tapes have been recorded and a few transcribed.

LANCASTER UNIVERSITY, Department of History, Furness College, Bailrigg, Lancaster.

J. D. Marshall

A recording project was set up in 1972. The work is in the field of local and social history, with special interest in family life and labour movements in the industrial towns of Barrow and Lancaster. Approximately one hundred and fifty hours have been recorded and transcribed. Systematic interviewing is carried out using an inventory of questions.

LANCHESTER POLYTECHNIC, Department of Social and Economic History, Priory Street, Coventry.

Dr. Kenneth Richardson

Recordings have been made relating to the 20th

century history of Coventry to aid the writing of a book on this subject. Topics covered include local industry, apprenticeship and economic development. The rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral, the pioneer flights of Sir Alan Cobham and the foundation of Warwick University are among the special projects included in the programme. About sixty hours have been recorded.

LEEDS UNIVERSITY, Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies, Leeds.

Stewart Sanderson

A Folk Life Survey was instituted in 1960 to provide "a corpus of material in oral, material culture and social traditions". The collection amounts to about three hundred recorded hours which have been catalogued, indexed and largely transcribed. Recording is mainly carried out by graduate and undergraduate students.

LEEDS UNIVERSITY, School of English, Leeds.

Stanley Ellis

The School began a Survey of English Dialects in 1950 and the bulk of its recorded material was collected up to 1960. Although the recordings contain a significant amount of information about the occupations and work of the English countryman the main purpose of the collection is to provide examples of English dialect speech. The recordings have been catalogued and partly transcribed.

°LYMM AND DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY, Lymm, Cheshire.  
R. J. Holt

Interviews have been recorded with workers, craftsmen and other local inhabitants about their work and village social life. Thirty interviews have been conducted and all transcribed, but only nine are preserved on tape.

MUSEUM OF ENGLISH RURAL LIFE, University of Reading, Whitenights, Reading.

Andrew Jewell

The Museum has carried out interviews to obtain information associated with the objects and records which it has acquired. Recording has also been carried out in connection with field work on rural crafts.

NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, Greenwich, London S.E. 10.  
Campbell MacMurray

The Museum's programme was set up in 1968 to record a representative cross-section of former seamen. The subjects covered include family background and tradition, recruitment, ship's layout and equipment, division of tasks, hierarchy and discipline. The interviews concentrate particularly on the first voyage. Five hundred hours have been recorded and are being transcribed. Transcripts will be deposited in the Museum's Department of Manuscripts.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES OF SCOTLAND, Scottish Country Life Section, Queen Street, Edinburgh.  
Alexander Fenton

First recordings were made in 1960 in the field of Scottish rural life and work. Eight interviews have been recorded.

°NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY, Department of Economics, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Dr. Norman McCord

Interviews relating to the Labour Movement in the North East of England have been recorded. Respondents include party agents and early Independent Labour Party workers.

°RUSKIN COLLEGE, Oxford.

Raphael Samuel

Interviews have been recorded mainly with old inhabitants of Headington Quarry, giving a picture of social life in this labouring community. Thirty-five interviews have been taped and transcribed.

SCHOOL OF SCOTTISH STUDIES (Edinburgh University),  
27 George Street, Edinburgh.

Professor John MacQueen

The project began in 1951 to record oral evidence relating to Scottish historical traditions, place names, stories, music, songs and traditional lore about custom and belief. The School has a collection of more than 3,000 tapes. Most of the material has been catalogued and indexed but only some four years of recording work has been transcribed. Interviewing is carried out by the School's research staff

and post graduate students. There is a publication programme producing books, articles, gramophone records and films, and the collection of recordings is used both for individual research and teaching purposes.

SHEFFIELD UNIVERSITY, Survey of Language and Folklore, Sheffield.

John Widdowson

The survey was inaugurated in 1964 and aims to be a national study of language and tradition (language forms the focal point of the research work). The present collection amounts to one hundred and eighty recorded hours and has been partially catalogued, indexed and transcribed. Recording is undertaken by University staff and some graduate students.

SUNDERLAND POLYTECHNIC, Department of Education, Sunderland.

Peter Liddle

The project began in 1967 to record material relating to the history of the First World War. Special attention has been given to operations in Gallipoli, but there are recordings relating to the other theatres of war and the Home Front. One thousand interviews have been carried out and the recordings are catalogued, indexed and partly transcribed.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, Department of Irish Folklore, Belfield, Dublin 4.

Professor Bo Almqvist

Formerly the Irish Folklore Commission, the Department has been using dictating machines since the 1930s for collecting oral material relating to all aspects of Irish folk tradition. Recordings on disc and tape relate particularly to traditional material such as folk tales and other folk narrative, songs and music. The collection of recordings amounts to the equivalent of ten thousand 12" 78 r.p.m. discs and has been catalogued, indexed and transcribed. Recording is undertaken by five full time field collectors and some graduate students.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA, (University of Wales), Department of History, Singleton Park, Swansea.

Merfyn Jones

An oral history programme was set up in 1972 to collect material relating to the history of the South Wales coalfield. Approximately two hundred and twelve hours have been recorded, catalogued and transcribed. Four full time research workers are responsible for interviewing and there are two transcription typists. The programme has been financed by the Social Science Research Council.

WELSH FOLK MUSEUM, Department of Oral Traditions and Dialects, St Fagans, Cardiff.

Vincent Phillips

Recording began in 1957 and covers the whole field of folk life research. Special attention is given to agriculture, crafts, domestic life, folklore and dialect vocabularies. The collection consists of more than 4,500 tapes and also includes films, photographs and manuscripts. There are eight field-workers engaged in recording activities. Little cataloguing and indexing has been carried out, but one fifth of the tapes have been transcribed.

YORK UNIVERSITY, Department of Economics and Related Studies, Heslington, York.

Christopher Storm-Clark

Recording began in 1969 to collect material on the social history of coal mining since 1890. In 1971 the project obtained financial support from the Nuffield Foundation. Fifty interviews yielding one hundred and fifty recorded hours have been carried out and the tapes catalogued, indexed and selectively transcribed. It is proposed to make York the Regional Centre for the practice of oral history.