

Oral History — Some Thoughts and Experiences

“. . . And for asmyche as it is niedefull and meritorie to bere wittenes to trowth we notyfie to you by this presente That Roger Cholmundeley of Chorley in the Counte of Chestr' gentilmon knolached a fore us abof named then the said Roger beyng of age lxxx yeres . . . that he was at the wedyng of Hugh Cholmundeley the son of Richard Cholmundeley esquier of the forsaide counte and Margarete the Dowghter and Heyre of Jenken Warren of Ightfed' in the Counte of Shrowsbury Esquier And they wer weddyt in the parish Church of Whichchurch in shroppeshir' and then at the saide wedding beyng presente meny worshipfull pepull longyng to the Household of the laydy Dame Bewrtras Talbot and Also of the saide towne of Whichchirche . . .”

(Cholmondeley Mss., Cheshire Record Office, Ref. DCH/X/12/7)

Roger Cholmondeley made his statement in 1493. There were then only two ways in which his words could be recorded for posterity. One was for them to be transmitted by word of mouth from one person to another down through generations. As we all know, this method of communicating thoughts, messages and so on is subject to distortion through mishearing, misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the original words. The other was for his statement to be written down when he made it, certainly a much more reliable medium of communication to succeeding generations. It is reasonable to assume that the formal, written version of Roger's "trowth" was nothing more than a summary of his actual words, disappointing in its brevity. It served a purpose, which was to give evidence of the marriage of Hugh Cholmondeley and Margaret Warren, but it would have been so much more interesting and informative if we could have been told more about the festivities, whether it was a colourful or drab, a joyous or solemn occasion, and how it was celebrated. Now, close on five hundred years later the tape recorder provides us with a comparatively easy way of recording such descriptive details.

Over the past three decades the tape recorder has added a new dimension to historical studies. It is a most useful tool in research on local customs, dialect, living and working conditions, community and family life and activities and so on. The phrase "oral history" is now used to describe the deliberate recording of personal reminiscences for historical or archive purposes. Such recordings can be invaluable in that the information given may not be obtainable from any other source. Local celebrations of Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee last year may be well documented, and some communities will have sound and film archives of their festivities. Archives of local celebrations of Queen Victoria's Golden and Diamond Jubiles are not so plentiful, but there

are still a few people who can remember and describe the events. Their recorded reminiscences can conjure up pictures and convey atmosphere far more vividly than any written account, even if such an account should survive.

Reminiscences, whether written or on tape, should, however, be used and interpreted with caution. They should be considered as illustrations of and supplementary to, rather than as substitutes for more conventional and official sources. The working experiences of one coal miner in the north east should not without other evidence be taken as representative of working experiences of coal miners countrywide, or even of coal miners in the north east. A man of different temperament and viewpoint may give a very different version of working in a coal mine. Reminiscences are by their very nature subjective, and a man's memories of people, places and events are affected by his emotional attitudes to them. Memory recalls things as they were seen or felt, not necessarily as they actually were. It is not unusual for people revisiting childhood haunts to be surprised at how small, insignificant and colourless the places seem in contrast to memories of them. Dates and facts are sometimes mis-remembered, distorted and confused; they need, if possible, to be checked for accuracy. Recently I heard a recording of an old man describing a riot he witnessed as a boy. His account was vivid, including mention of streets and landmarks which could be identified, and he told how "the military" was called out to quell the disturbance. No official record of this event has been found, and one is left wondering what exactly he did see, and when and where he saw it.

Until last year my practical experience of tape recorders had been limited to two uncomfortable encounters, and I remember these two occasions vividly. The first was during my childhood in a tiny village in the north east in the early 1950s. Every year at our Sunday School anniversaries we children, dressed in brand new clothes (last year's "brand new" became "second best", and last year's "second best" was relegated to weekday wear), sang our solos and said our recitations to a crowded chapel. One year the visiting preacher, more a compere in fact, brought a tape recorder, and our usual anxiety and excitement in performance were heightened by the sight of the box on the front pew and the mesmerising slow turn of the spools. The recording was made for the benefit of villagers and friends who were unable to attend, and as oral history was unknown, it was subsequently erased. The second encounter was some ten years ago when a visiting American lady was taping interviews and taking slide pictures so that she could give illustrated talks to "the folks back home" about her genealogical tour of England. The discomfort on this occasion was caused not so much by the machine or even the performance, but by the bustle and commotion as the lady's entourage set up the equipment. Thus when I came last year to involve myself in the field of oral history I set about the business with some trepidation.

First I needed to master the techniques of tape recording and to

gain confidence in handling the equipment. I was fortunate in being able to attend a one-day course for novices like myself, which was led by an experienced oral historian. The advice given was invaluable and certainly accelerated the process of learning. For example, I was taught how to hold the microphone with the lead wrapped round my hand to steady it and to eliminate the rattling noise produced by the slightest movement of the microphone. I was warned about extraneous noise such as ticking clocks, striking matches, rustling papers, as all these sounds are magnified on the tape. For practice I shut myself out of public sight and hearing and read parts of Rudyard Kipling's "The Elephant's Child" into the cassette recorder I had borrowed. I found later that it helped the more nervous of my victims to hear part of this practice tape, and it is useful also for trial runs in discussion of a favourite topic or hobby such as gardening.

The worst problems I have encountered so far have been those of extraneous noise. Clocks can be moved, but traffic noise makes itself heard even in the quietest room of a house fronting a main road. One error of judgement I made was to leave the french windows open when interviewing an elderly lady on a very hot summer afternoon. The twittering of the birds was not an unpleasant background but both birds' and human voices were drowned when a large bulldozer began chugging towards us on a nearby building site. We had to stop to close the windows. The interruption temporarily destroyed the easy atmosphere and broke the thread of conversation. We rehearsed a re-start, but when I gave the signal to start my interviewee began with "Are you right?" This at least gave me the opportunity to practise tape editing, and I was able to delete the intrusive words.

Two other problems which I still have to overcome could be classed as personal rather than technical, though they do affect the quality of the recording. One is the difficulty of keeping quiet during an interview. By this I do not mean that I monopolise the conversation, rather that I over-react to it. In normal conversation the listener tends to respond to the talker by uttering some sort of sound, encouraging or discouraging, indicative of agreement or disagreement, and the more interesting the conversation, the more frequent are the responsive "mm"s, yeses and noes. These are intrusive on tape and are to be avoided if at all possible. Response needs to be limited to facial expressions and quiet nods or shakes of the head. The other problem is that of coping with an unpredictable person, for example being able to judge when to switch off because a lengthy and irrelevant story is about to begin or when to switch on quickly to catch some unlooked for gem of information. I interviewed one man who was more experienced in the use of tape recorders than I was. He had a very disconcerting way of signalling at me to switch off, and the interruptions were not, as one might expect, for coughing fits or striking matches, but because he wanted to give me some relevant data which he did not want to be on the tape.

Finding possible candidates for oral history interviews need not be

too difficult. Usually someone who in the course of his work comes into contact with a wide cross-section of a community—a minister, a teacher, a librarian, a publican or a postmaster—can suggest a few names and indicate whether or not a person is likely to react favourably to the idea of being tape recorded. Generally speaking people react positively to interest shown in them and what they have to say, and any reticence stems from their unease about the technicalities of recording. There are, of course, individuals who are reserved by nature or are incredulous that anything they know could be of use or interest to anyone apart from family or friends. Patience and determination are needed to reassure and draw out these people.

A preliminary visit helps both the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewer needs to know in advance whether there are going to be any technical problems in using the equipment, whether the interviewee is likely to be monosyllabic or verbose, whether a short or long “warm up” session will be needed before launching into the interview. A prepared list of questions left for consideration, or a page out of an old directory which might trigger memories about people, places or events, often helps to elicit facts and descriptions which would otherwise have remained locked in the mind of the interviewee. Sometimes a second preliminary visit will be necessary. One lady I interviewed studied the list of questions I gave her, carefully wrote down answers to them, then asked for a rehearsal before I took the tape recorder. Surprisingly the actual recording had the spontaneity of the spoken word rather than the stilted formality of scripted speech, largely because even then additional memories crowded into her mind, and she reminisced rather than read.

During last summer as part of preparatory work for a course on sources for the history of nonconformity I did a series of oral history interviews on chapels in Crewe. Crewe is perhaps best known as a railway town, if only because of the music hall song. Any traveller venturing outside the railway station would find the nearby streets very depressing, with that air of dereliction and decay which precedes re-development. At the turn of the century in a twenty minute walk in the same area you could pass a dozen nonconformist chapels, most of them now closed or demolished. (The two Baptist chapels in Crewe still stand, though their congregations have dwindled over the decades.) The Scots Presbyterian Chapel still stands though now it boasts a signboard giving the name of the greengrocers who use it as a warehouse. There are few formal records (minutes, accounts, etc.) of the chapel, which closed in 1947, but a former member and minister's daughter, now in her eighties, lives in the suburbs of Crewe. She has a particularly good memory and an eye for detail, and though she shared my initial inhibitions about tape recorders, she willingly agreed to tell what she knew about the chapel. She described how as a little girl she had seen the preparations in the chapel for the service for Queen Victoria's funeral and how she shed a few tears thinking that was “the proper thing to do”; the difficulties of the preachers who had

to contend with the rattling of the goods trains on the railway not far from the chapel; the boredom of the long prayers. She mentioned sheltering the pork butchers who were persecuted during the First World War because they were German, and she described the congregation as she remembered it, including the sanitary inspector whose thumbless hand fascinated all the children when he handed round the collection plate. She was able to turn the greengrocers' warehouse back into a living chapel, and although one must remember that she could recall only those features and people which imprinted themselves on her mind and that there must have been others less conspicuous and less noteworthy, her reminiscences are a valuable addition to otherwise scant sources of information.

The Primitive Methodist Chapel in Ramsbottom Street was an imposing building, even in the derelict state in which it stood in the last few months of its existence before being demolished this year. Fortunately the chapel records have survived as the main source of information on its history. Two former members of the Society were able to supplement these, one a man who had been associated with the chapel practically all his life until its closure, the other a lady who had particularly happy memories of the Sunday School there when she was a child, before she moved elsewhere. Both remembered certain occurrences, such as the fact that the doors had to be taken off at Sunday School anniversaries because the chapel was so crowded. The musically inclined member recalled the installation of a new pipe organ which cost £300. She could not remember the date, but the facts could easily be checked in the chapel records. The other recalled a "faith tea", and as he pointed out, as it was a "faith" tea no committee was formed. There could thus be no committee minutes. Members apparently brought whatever food they wanted to bring, and there was more to eat, as he remembered, than at a properly planned and organized "do". The fish and chip shop owners brought a clothes basket filled with fish and chips, certainly not the usual menu for a chapel tea, and certainly not recorded in any of the minutes.

It is ten years since the closure of Wedgwood Chapel, at one time the head of Crewe Primitive Methodist Circuit and well known locally for its music, especially its Choir Festivals at which world famous artistes sometimes performed. Where the chapel stood there is now an empty plot of land. The members moved to other Societies, and there are still several of them who remember Wedgwood in its heyday. I adopted a different approach in talking to two couples who were regular attenders, and instead of interviewing each separately I recorded a conversation with all four. The results of the experiment were very satisfying, not only because of the wealth of information given, particularly on the social activities of the Society, but also because of the obvious enjoyment the members derived from talking over old times. So relaxed were they that I was able to introduce the subject of the chapel closure. This I had found to be a sensitive and controversial subject in discussions on any chapel, and most people I spoke to were

reluctant to comment. The recorded conversation on this subject conveys far more vividly than any succinctly minuted resolution the depth of feeling of those involved in making such a momentous decision.

Archivists, librarians and historians now recognise that oral history recordings, together with other sound recordings such as steam trains, industrial and agricultural machinery, ceremonies and events, all have a valid place in the field of archives and that these sound archives deserve to be preserved as well as the more conventional manuscript and printed archives. The B.B.C. Sound Archives are perhaps the best known national collection. In the north west of England negotiations are in progress for the formal establishment and development of a North West Sound Archive, which will collect, record and store tapes in permanent archive conditions and make them available for use by researchers. A basic collection of recordings of such items as interviews with craftsmen and elderly residents, folksongs, children's songs and games already exists and this will form the nucleus of the Archive. Until and even when there are sufficient official "Sound Archives" local history societies and individuals have a valuable contribution to make. Some are already busily collecting recordings for their own use and interest, and their collections could well become a major source of information on the locality and its people in the past. Time in this as in many activities is against us and there is some urgency if reminiscences of elderly people are to be recorded before it is too late. Those who have already involved themselves in the field of oral history will know how enjoyable it is and what a wealth of fascinating detail can be elicited. Those who have not yet considered oral history either as a source of information or as an activity should be encouraged to do so, for as well as being enjoyable it is, to use the words of Roger Cholmondeley's witnesses, "niedefull and meritorie".

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Reviews

The Ontology of Paul Tillich. Adrian Thatcher. O.U.P., 1978. 196 pp. £8.50.

This book is basically material presented for a research degree. It should be said that it is a valuable and encouraging example of a somewhat suspect genre. It does a job that needed doing and it does it with crystal clarity. Dr. Thatcher examines Tillich's ontology with care and seeks to lay bare at key points its historical roots. Being, Non-Being, New Being, Essence, Existence—all these key terms are subjected to scrutiny and their meaning(s) in the Tillichian system plotted. A brief closing discussion stakes out a necessary place for ontology within both the philosophical and the theological enterprises.