

guess I had clasped about a dozen babies in about two minutes. It would be almost two years later at Harvard when Dr Jerome Bruner told me, you were participating in one of the oldest ceremonies of humankind called 'the laying on of hands'; that in their way they were saying to you, 'through this flesh which is us, we are you, and you are us'. There were many, many other things that happened in that village that day, but I was particularly struck with the enormity of the fact that they were dealing with me and seeing me in the perspective of, for them, the symbol of twenty-five millions of us black people in this country whom they never had seen. They took me into their mosque. They prayed in Arabic which I couldn't understand. Later the crux of the prayer was translated, 'Praise be to Allah for one long lost from us whom Allah has returned.' And that was the way they saw that.

When it was possible to leave, since we'd come by water, I wanted to go out over the land. My five senses had become muted, truncated. They didn't work right. If I wanted to feel something I would have to squeeze to register the sense of feeling. Things were misty. I didn't hear well. I would become aware the driver sitting right by me was almost shouting something and I just hadn't heard him up to that point. I began now, as we drove out over the back country road, with drums distantly heard around, to see in my mind's eye, as if it were being projected somehow on a film, a screen almost, rough, ragged, out of focus, almost a portrayal of what I had studied so, so much about: the background of us as a people, the way that ancestrally we who are in this country were brought out of Africa. [...]

## NOTE

- 1 J. Vansina, *De la Tradition Orale: Essai de Methode Historique*, Belgique, Tervuren, 1961. Translated as *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, Chicago, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965.

## Oral history

Paul Thompson

Paul Thompson is Research Professor at the University of Essex. © Paul Thompson 1978, 1988. Extracted from P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988 (second edition) by permission of Oxford University Press.

All history depends ultimately upon its social purpose. This is why in the past it has been handed down by oral tradition and written chronicle, and why today professional historians are supported from public funds, children are taught history in schools, amateur history societies blossom, and popular history books rank among the strongest bestsellers. Sometimes the social purpose of history is obscure. There are academics who pursue fact-finding research on remote problems, avoiding any entanglement with wider interpretations or contemporary issues, insisting only on the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. They have one thing in common with the bland contemporary tourism which exploits the past as if it were another foreign country to escape to: a heritage of buildings and landscape so lovingly cared for that it is almost inhumanly comfortable, purged of social suffering, cruelty, and conflict to the point that a slavery plantation becomes a positive pleasure. Both look to their incomes free from interference, and in return stir no challenge to the social system. At the other extreme the social purpose of history can be quite blatant: used to provide justification for war and conquest, territorial seizure, revolution and counter-revolution, the rule of one class or race over another. Where no history is readily at hand, it will be created. South Africa's white rulers divide their urban blacks between tribes and 'homelands'; Welsh nationalists gather at bardic eisteddfods; the Chinese of the cultural revolution were urged to construct the new 'four histories' of grass-roots struggle; radical feminists looked to the history of wet-nursing in their search for mothers without maternal instinct. Between these two extremes are many other purposes, more or less obvious. For politicians the past is a quarry for supportive symbols: imperial victories, martyrs, Victorian values, hunger marches. And almost equally telling are the gaps in the public presentation of history: the silences in Russia on Trotsky, in West Germany on the Nazi era, in France on the Algerian war.

Through history ordinary people seek to understand the upheavals and changes which they experience in their own lives: wars, social transformations



like the changing position of youth, technological changes like the end of steam power, or personal migration to a new community. Family history especially can give an individual a strong sense of a much longer personal lifespan, which will even survive their own death. Through local history a village or town seeks meaning for its own changing character and newcomers can gain a sense of roots in personal historical knowledge. Through political and social history taught in schools children are helped to understand, and accept, how the political and social system under which they live came about, and how force and conflict have played, and continue to play, their part in that evolution.

The challenge of oral history lies partly in relation to this essential social purpose of history. This is a major reason why it has so excited some historians, and so frightened others. In fact, fear of oral history as such is groundless. We shall see later that the use of interviews as a source by professional historians is long-standing and perfectly compatible with scholarly standards. American experience shows clearly enough that the oral history method can be regularly used in a socially and politically conservative manner; or indeed pushed as far as sympathy with Fascism in John Toland's portrait of *Adolf Hitler* (New York, 1976).

Oral history is not necessarily an instrument for change; it depends upon the spirit in which it is used. Nevertheless, oral history certainly can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside; and in the writing of history – whether in books, or museums, or radio and film – it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.

Until the present century, the focus of history was essentially political: a documentation of the struggle for power, in which the lives of ordinary people, or the workings of the economy or religion, were given little attention except in times of crisis such as the Reformation, the English Civil War, or the French Revolution. Historical time was divided up by reigns and dynasties. Even local history was concerned with the administration of the hundred and parish rather than the day-to-day life of the community and the street. This was partly because historians, who themselves then belonged to the administering and governing classes, thought that this was what mattered most. They had developed no interest in the point of view of the labourer, unless he was specifically troublesome; nor – being men – would they have wished to inquire into the changing life experiences of women. But even if they had wished to write a different kind of history, it would have been far from easy, for the raw material from which history was written, the documents, had been kept or destroyed by people with the same priorities. The more personal, local, and unofficial a document, the less likely it was to survive. The very power structure worked as a great recording machine shaping the past in its own image.

This has remained true even after the establishment of local record offices. Registers of births and marriages, minutes of councils and the administration of poor relief and welfare, national and local newspapers, schoolteachers' log books – legal records of all kinds are kept in quantity; very often there are also church archives and accounts and other books from large private firms and landed estates, and even private correspondence from the ruling landowner class. But of the innumerable postcards, letters, diaries, and ephemera of working-class men and women, or the papers of small businesses like corner shops or hill farmers, for example, very little has been preserved anywhere.

Consequently, even as the scope of history has widened, the original political and administrative focus has remained. Where ordinary people have been brought in, it has been generally as statistical aggregates derived from some earlier administrative investigation. Thus economic history is constructed around three types of source: aggregate rates of wages, prices, and unemployment; national and international political interventions into the economy and the information which arises from these; and studies of particular trades and industries, depending on the bigger and more successful firms for records of individual enterprises. Similarly, labour history for long consisted of studies on the one hand of the relationship between the working classes and the state in general, and on the other of particular but essentially institutional accounts of trade unions and working-class political organizations; and, inevitably, it is the larger and more successful organizations which normally leave records or commission their own histories. Social history has remained especially concerned with legislative and administrative developments like the rise of the welfare state; or with aggregate data such as population size, birth rates, age at marriage, household and family structure. And among more recent historical specialisms, demography has been almost exclusively concerned with aggregates; the history of the family, despite some ambitious but ill-judged attempts to break through to a history of emotion and feeling, has tended to follow the lines of conventional social history; while at least until quite recently women's history has to a remarkable extent focused on the political struggle for civil equality, and above all for the vote.

There are, of course, important exceptions in each of these fields, which show that different approaches are possible even with the existing sources. And there is a remarkable amount of unexploited personal and ordinary information even in official records – such as court documents – which can be used in new ways. The continuing pattern of historical writing probably reflects the priorities of the majority of the profession – even if no longer of the ruling class itself – in an age of bureaucracy, state power, science, and statistics. Nevertheless, it remains true that to write any other kind of history from documentary sources remains a very difficult task, requiring special ingenuity. It is indicative of the situation that E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and James Hinton's *The First Show*



*Steward's Movement* (1973) each depended to a large extent on reports by paid government informers, in the early nineteenth century and First World War respectively. When socialist historians are reduced to writing history from the records of government spies, the constraints imposed are clearly extreme. We cannot, alas, interview tombstones, but at least for the First World War period and back into the late nineteenth century, the use of oral history immediately provides a rich and varied source for the creative historian.

In the most general sense, once the life experience of people of all kinds can be used as its raw material, a new dimension is given to history. Oral history provides a source quite similar in character to published autobiography, but much wider in scope. The overwhelming majority of published autobiographies are from a restricted group of political, social, and intellectual leaders, and even when the historian is lucky enough to find an autobiography from the particular place, time, and social group which he happens to need, it may well give little or no attention to the point at issue. Oral historians, by contrast, may choose precisely whom to interview and what to ask about. The interview will provide, too, a means of discovering written documents and photographs which would not have otherwise been traced. The confines of the scholar's world are no longer the well-thumbed volumes of the old catalogue. Oral historians can think now as if they themselves were publishers: imagine what evidence is needed, seek it out and capture it.

For most existing kinds of history, probably the critical effect of this new approach is to allow evidence from a new direction. The historian of working-class politics can juxtapose the statements of the government or the trade union headquarters with the voice of the rank and file – both apathetic and militant. There can be no doubt that this should make for a more realistic reconstruction of the past. Reality is complex and many-sided; and it is a primary merit of oral history that to a much greater extent than most sources it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated. But this advantage is important not just for the writing of history. Most historians make implicit or explicit judgements – quite properly, since the social purpose of history demands an understanding of the past which relates directly or indirectly to the present. Modern professional historians are less open with their social message than Macaulay or Marx, since scholarly standards are seen to conflict with declared bias. But the social message is usually present, however obscured. It is quite easy for a historian to give most of his attention and quotations to those social leaders whom he admires, without giving any direct opinion of his own. Since the nature of most existing records is to reflect the standpoint of authority, it is not surprising that the judgement of history has more often than not vindicated the wisdom of the powers that be. Oral history by contrast makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated. It provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to

the established account. In so doing, oral history has radical implications for the social message of history as a whole.

At the same time oral history implies for most kinds of history some shift of focus. Thus the educational historian becomes concerned with the experiences of children and students as well as the problems of teachers and administrators. The military and naval historian can look beyond command level strategy and equipment to the conditions, recreations, and morale of other ranks and the lower deck. The social historian can turn from bureaucrats and politicians to poverty itself, and learn how the poor saw the relieving officer and how they survived his refusals. The political historian can approach the voter at home and at work; and can hope to understand even the working-class conservative, who produced no newspapers or organizations for investigation. The economist can watch both employer and worker as social beings and at their ordinary work, and so come closer to understanding the typical economic process, and its successes and contradictions.

In some fields, oral history can result not merely in a shift in focus, but also in the opening up of important new areas of inquiry. Labour historians, for example, are enabled for the first time to undertake effective studies of the ill-unionized majority of male workers, of women workers, and of the normal experience of work and its impact on the family and the community. They are no longer confined to those trades which were unionized, or those which gained contemporary publicity and investigation because of strikes or extreme poverty. Urban historians similarly can turn from well-explored problem areas like the slums to look at other typical forms of urban social life; the small industrial or market town, for example, or the middle-class suburb, constructing the local patterns of social distinctions, mutual help between neighbours and kin, leisure and work. They can even approach from the inside the history of immigrant groups – a kind of history which is certain to become more important in Britain, and is mainly documented only from outside as a social problem. These opportunities – and many others – are shared by social historians: the study of working-class leisure and culture, for example; or of crime from the point of view of the ordinary, often undetected and socially semi-tolerated poacher, shoplifter, or work-pilferer.

Perhaps the most striking feature of all, however, is the transforming impact of oral history upon the history of the family. Without its evidence, the historian can discover very little indeed about either the ordinary family's contacts with neighbours and kin, or its internal relationships. The roles of husband and wife, the upbringing of girls and boys, emotional and material conflicts and dependence, the struggle of youth for independence, courtship, sexual behaviour within and outside marriage, contraception and abortion – all these were effectively secret areas. The only clues were to be gleaned from aggregate statistics, and from a few – usually partial – observers. The historical paucity which results is well summed up in Michael Anderson's brilliant, speculative, but abstract study of *Family Structure in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (1971): a lop-sided, empty frame. With the use of interviewing, it



is now possible to develop a much fuller history of the family over the last ninety years, and to establish its main patterns and changes over time, and from place to place, during the life cycle and between the sexes. The history of childhood as a whole becomes practicable for the first time. And given the dominance of the family through housework, domestic service, and motherhood in the lives of most women, an almost equivalent broadening of scope is brought to the history of women.

In all these fields of history, by introducing new evidence from the underside, by shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgements of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored, a cumulative process of transformation is set in motion. The scope of historical writing itself is enlarged and enriched; and at the same time its social message changes. History becomes, to put it simply, more democratic. The chronicle of kings has taken into its concern the life experience of ordinary people. But there is another dimension to this change, of equal importance. The process of writing history changes along with the content. The use of oral evidence breaks through the barriers between the chroniclers and their audience; between the educational institution and the outside world.

This change springs from the essentially creative and co-operative nature of the oral history method. Of course oral evidence once recorded can be used by lone scholars in libraries just like any other type of documentary source. But to be content with this is to lose a key advantage of the method: its flexibility, the ability to pin down evidence just where it is needed. Once historians start to interview they find themselves inevitably working with others – at the least, with their informants. And to be a successful interviewer a new set of skills is needed, including an understanding of human relationships. Some people can find these skills almost immediately, others need to learn them; but in contrast to the cumulative process of learning and amassing information which gives such advantage in documentary analysis and interpretation to the professional historian well on in life, it is possible to learn quite quickly to become an effective interviewer. Hence historians as field-workers, while in important respects retaining the advantages of professional knowledge, also find themselves off their desk, sharing experience on a human level. [...]

The co-operative nature of the oral history approach has led to a radical questioning of the fundamental relationship between history and the community. Historical information need not be taken away from the community for interpretation and presentation by the professional historian. Through oral history the community can, and should, be given the confidence to write its own history.

[...] oral historians have travelled a long way from their original aim – and there is, undoubtedly, some danger of conflict between the two. On the level of the interview itself, for example, there have been telling criticisms of a relationship with informants in which a middle-class professional determines

who is to be interviewed and what is to be discussed and then disappears with a tape of somebody's life which they never hear about again – and if they did, might be indignant at the unintended meanings imposed on their words. There are clear social advantages in the contrasting ideal of a self-selected group, or an open public meeting, which focuses on equal discussion and encourages local publication of its results; and of individual recording sessions which are conversations rather than directed interviews. But there are also drawbacks in the alternative.

The self-selected group will rarely be fully representative of a community. It is much more likely to be composed from its central groups – people from a skilled working-class or lower middle-class background. The local upper class will rarely be there, nor will the very poor, the less confident especially among women, or the immigrant from its racial minority. A truer and socially more valuable form of local oral history will be created when these other groups are drawn in. Its publications will be much more telling if they can juxtapose, for example, the mistress with the domestic servant, or a millowner with the millworkers. It will then reveal the variety of social experience in the community, the groups which had the better or the worse of it – and perhaps lead to a reconsideration of what might be done about it. Local history drawn from a more restricted social stratum tends to be more complacent, a re-enactment of community myth. This certainly needs to be recorded and a self-sufficient local group which can do this is undoubtedly helping many others besides itself. But for the radical historian it is hardly sufficient. History should not merely comfort; it should provide a challenge, and understanding which helps towards change. For this the myth needs to become dynamic. It has to encompass the complexities of conflict. And for the historian who wishes to work and write as a socialist, the task must be not simply to celebrate the working class as it is, but to raise its consciousness. There is no point in replacing a conservative myth of upper-class wisdom with a lower-class one. A history is required which leads to action: not to confirm, but to change the world.

In principle there is no reason why local projects should not have such an object, while at the same time continuing to encourage self-confidence and the writing of history from within the community. Most groups will normally contain some members with more historical experience. They certainly need to use tact; to undervalue rather than emphasize their advantage. But it is everybody's loss in the long run if they disown it: their contribution should be to help the group towards a wider perspective. Similar observations apply in the recording session where the essential need is mutual respect. A superior, dominating attitude does not make for a good interview anyway. The oral historian has to be a good listener, the informant an active helper. As George Ewart Evans puts it – 'although the old survivors were walking books, I could not just leaf them over. They were persons.'<sup>1</sup> And so are historians. They have come for a purpose, to get information, and if ultimately ashamed of this they should not have come at all. A historian who just engages in haphazard



reminiscence will collect interesting pieces of information, but will throw away the chance of winning the critical evidence for the structure of historical argument and interpretation.

The relationship between history and the community should not be one-sided in either direction: but rather a series of exchanges, a dialectic, between information and interpretation, between educationists and their localities, between classes and generations. There will be room for many kinds of oral history and it will have many different social consequences. But at bottom they are all related.

Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow-workers. It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact – and thence understanding – between social classes, and between generations. And to individual historians and others, with shared meanings, it can give a sense of belonging to a place or in time. In short it makes for fuller human beings. Equally, oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for radical transformation of the social meaning of history.

#### NOTE

1 *Oral History*, 1973, vol. 1, no. 4, p. 57.

### 3 Oral history and *Hard Times*

#### A review essay

*Michael Frisch*

Michael Frisch lectures in History and American Studies at the State University of New York, Buffalo. Reprinted from *Oral History Review*, 1979, vol. 7, pp. 1-10. By permission of the Oral History Association. Originally published in *Review of American Studies*, 1972, vol. 1, nos. 2/3.

Studs Terkel's book, *Hard Times*, is subtitled *An Oral History of the Depression*, and it offers a good base for exploring a number of features inherent in doing, reading, and thinking about oral history, and for standing why these problems matter. It is, perhaps, appropriate to the book with some comments about this paper's own genesis and history.

*Hard Times* is a massive compilation of more than 150 self-portraits of American lives – culled from hundreds more – centred on the experience of the 1930s. The interviews were conducted, edited, and arranged by Studs Terkel, the remarkable Chicago radio personality whose special gift is getting all sorts of people to talk about themselves as so prominently demonstrated in *Division Street: America*. The people of *Hard Times* are widely, from New Deal officials and famous businessmen and anonymous farmers, workers, and plain people. Terkel also includes a number of interviews with young people who can, of course, only talk about the Depression in terms of what they have read or been told, and who enable us to see the book's topic in terms of received memory as given. To read through the enormous range of personality and experience presented in the book is to encounter, in a sort of multimedia exposition, the depth and drama of life in the Depression. As has virtually every reader, I found it moving, poignant, intense, human, and instructive.

Shortly after a first reading, I noticed that the cover of my paperback edition said, in a blurb from *Newsweek*, 'It will resurrect your faith in us to read this book.' The inside front cover, quoting *Saturday Evening Post*, called the book 'A huge anthem in praise of the American Spirit that intrigued me considerably, because I found the book more depressing than anything else in its overall implications. It had all the moving force of a religion, which is why it could so profoundly suggest the Depression's deep impact on the lives people lived, the personalities that emerged, and the abilities individuals retained to understand what was happening. Rather than 'resurrecting my faith in all of us', the book seemed to tell why Americans find it so hard to examine their culture and institutions.