ABORIGINALS
and
SCHOOLING

Essays in Honour of
MAX HART

Edited by,
BILL MENARY

With an introduction by
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Texts in Humanities
CHAPTER SIX

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Oral History: an Aboriginal Perspective on Collection and Documentation

WAYNE ATKINSON lives in Forest Hill, Victoria.

His chapter here is based firmly upon direct experience of collecting oral history from informants whose recollections would otherwise not be accessible in any way to later enquirers.

His account of the patience and tact required for the process to be successful gives a very humane dimension to the subject.

Wayne provides also a number of acute insights into the psychology of data gathering from oral history informants.

I have prepared this contribution from my own experiences in recording and documenting oral history. The main purpose of this paper is to give those who are interested in collecting oral history some background knowledge; firstly, on what oral history is, and then some of the ways we can go about recording and documenting it.

I WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

My personal interpretation of oral history is much the same as historian Wendy Lowenstein's who wrote Weevils in the flour and The Immigrants—that is, 'It's nothing new'. In fact, written history is the new thing because before the pen and paper were introduced, and for the greatest part of man's/woman's existence, history was passed on by oral methods. In past times it was a broader thing, which was called oral tradition: this meant that all knowledge, religious and philosophical
beliefs of the community were handed down to the next generation using stories and songs, and also visual things such as rock and bark paintings and dances. All of these were creative accounts of events that happened in the past, and by recreating them in the form of story, art, song and dance they formed an unbroken link with the past, and were carried on through each following generation.

Oral history today, however, is a more specific thing which is used as a method of recording people's recollections of past events. Since the advent of tape recorders one is able to capture information from people and document it as it's told from personal accounts and experiences. In fact, oral history is one part of the large jigsaw puzzle of history that we are trying to reconstruct.

However, in the past, oral history has largely been ignored by historians, so oral history can help to give the full picture, by filling in the other side of the (written) account. For instance, if Aborigines had been interviewed during the mission and government reserve period, their accounts would have been entirely different from those written by the missionaries to their church societies and by the administrators in their annual reports to the government. They managed always to have a different story from that of the managers.

II EFFECTS OF EUROPEAN INVASION ON ABORIGINAL ORAL TRADITION

Aborigines in the south-eastern part of Australia were the first to be confronted by the invasion of their ancestral homelands by Europeans and their livestock. This period saw tribes pushed out of their traditional areas and eventually gathered onto mission stations and government reserves, to be protected from whites and controlled by missionaries and government officials. This could be seen as the isolation and control policy where Aborigines were deliberately and systematically cut off from their traditional way of life and forced to conform to the European lifestyle. It was during this period in our history that pen and paper were first introduced.

A lot of the oral tradition started to become fragmented then. Traditional customs and practices—such as language, corroborees, ceremonies, religious beliefs and marriage laws—were strongly discouraged and condemned by missionaries and managers. They saw Aboriginal customs and practices as belonging to an undesirable aspect of a heathen culture and they set about trying to change Aboriginal people. When this change was considered to be achieved in south-eastern Australia, both the Victorian and New South Wales Governments in their wisdom introduced new policies of assimilation and assimilation, aimed at replacing the former policy of protection and forcing Aboriginal people away from reserves into the general community.

Ever since those forced movements firstly from traditional areas and then from isolated communities, Aboriginal people have become more dispersed into towns and cities, which has resulted in the further fragmentation of our history and oral tradition. When people were living together in larger and enclosed communities history and tradition were passed on orally by the older ones, and, while the community remained together, the traditions were retained by the people (even after foreign invasion), but population dispersal tends to destroy cultural transmission.

The governments' long term plan was to eventually absorb Aboriginal people into the general community, and thus Aboriginal race and cultures would become extinct. But this plan didn't succeed, and that is another amazing part of our history, namely, the extent to which we've been able to withstand these deliberate forces and intentions aimed at wiping us out as a people. Today we still have a rich tradition of oral history and philosophy, stored particularly by our older people.

So this brings us to the here and now. How do we go about recording and documenting our history, and making sure we lose no more of it? Before we look at the practical side of things, I want to look briefly at the lopsided development of written history in Australia.

III BIASES IN WRITTEN HISTORY

It can be said that the history of any conquest or invasion is in the hands of the victors. This is very true in relation to the Australian frontier period where accounts of this period have been written by white historians using the documents and reports written through the eyes of the colonial invaders; the explorers, squatters, government officials and missionaries.

It has to be recognised that these primary sources were written by people whose values and ideologies were well shaped before they came to Australia from a different homeland to that of Aborigines. The first white peoples that came to Australia and other British colonies were influenced by theories of Darwinism, Christianity and Capitalism, which all together saw indigenous people in the New World as being on a lower scale of humanity; uncivilized and hence unchristian; and of secondary concern to the colonists. The land and its economic resources were their primary concerns.

Another area that has been covered over during the contact period was the resistance struggle. One of the main reasons for this was that it served the interests of the early settlers to define Australia as being peacefully settled rather than invaded and violently stolen from the Aboriginal people. For if it were regarded as stolen and not peacefully settled then there is a stronger case for Aboriginal people to claim compensation and recognition for dispossession and prior ownership (the Land Rights issue).

Overall we can say that written history in Australia has been a history told from the invaders' side of the story, and the side of those invaded has been badly neglected, so it's time now for Aboriginal people to right that imbalance.

IV THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The most important part of a project is its focus—choosing the area of interest you have and then focusing in on that area. This doesn't mean that once you've decided on an area of interest you immediately set about interviewing people and collecting information. There has to be some groundwork done first in organising your project so that you have a good picture of the area, and know what type of information you are seeking. The process of organisation through to the end result of writing up your project can be broken up into four sections: to use as a model or a guideline.
V RESEARCH

Once the area is chosen it's vitally important to gain an historical picture or background knowledge of the area. For instance if you're looking at the history of a particular reserve or mission station then you would need to do some research into the government documents and annual reports pertaining to that particular place. It must be remembered also when reading from these sources that the reports given by administrators are very frequently inaccurate and conflict with Aboriginal statements about certain events and incidents. However the information provides important information about decisions, policies, dates, names and a picture of what was happening at the time.

There are also lots of other written sources documented by missionaries, squatters and officials which provide a general picture of early settlement and attitudes of the time. This information is available in State Libraries and Archives, and can be gained with the assistance of library and archive staff. Don't hesitate to ask. That's what they're there for!

Once the background work is done and you have a picture of the area, the next thing is to make contact with the community and talk about your project.

VI CONTACT

Making contact with the community is one of the most important things. It's even wise to make contact before you start so that the people are aware of what you are planning to do. It must also be recognised that Aboriginal people and communities are tired of being studied and researched. This is mainly because in the past a lot of researchers have taken information away from communities and never returned it. People have seen no good come of their generosity. So through these errors of past researchers there is a certain amount of scepticism and there are barriers to people coming in and wanting information.

This means you have to develop a relationship with the people of mutual trust and honesty. Clearly define what you want to do and make a commitment to the people as to what's in the project for the community. Can they benefit? Will they learn anything from it? Will they have a copy of the project when it's finished? These are all important questions that have to be discussed and worked out.

People are going to give you valuable information which includes their own personal feelings and emotions about certain events and incidents that happened, so it's up to the person who is collecting that information to make some sort of contribution back to the community. It has to be a two-way thing. Once a clear understanding and a good relationship is established and the project is approved, the next step is to work towards recording information.

VII RECORDING

When someone agrees to let you tape record information there needs to be some preparation work done first. A list of points or questions taken from your research is necessary to be used as a guideline for the interview. There is no single special technique in interviewing. The main skill is to have a clear picture in your mind about what you want to talk about, and then sit down with the person as if you're having a normal everyday yarn. You can only learn from your own experience as you progress. Some useful hints from my own experiences in the field are given below.

Interviewing skills

1. Get to know the tape recorder by practising with it. Interview other people to develop skill. Try and regard the tape recorder as just another object or piece of furniture when you're interviewing. Its only purpose is to record what you're taking about.

2. The main objective when recording information is to have a starting point that you can work forward from. For example, during my experience I used to start off by asking people to go back as far as they could remember to their earliest growing up days, and then work forward from there. I would then try and cover their experiences of life on the reserve up until they moved away.

3. During the interview I would try and cover all the areas of reserve life, such as early growing up days, going to school, work, general conditions on reserve, administration, managers, police, rations, rules and regulations, white employers, life outside and movement away.

The interview itself

Before going into the interview I feel it's important to put a lot of time preparing by just having a day-to-day yarn, and working to a point where you feel it's comfortable. It's vital to the interview that you both feel comfortable and that communication is open and easy. The most essential thing is that the person who is giving you the information is relaxed and feels free in your company—no barriers!

Extra aids to use during interviews

Old photos are very useful.

Also taking people back to symbolic places has a big impact on stimulating memory of things from the past.

After the interview

Once an interview is completed it means you have a tape with confidential information that's been given to you in trust. The first thing to do is to index it and keep it in a safe place. The tape may also be made available later on in agreement with consultant for relatives or genuinely interested people.

Referencing the tapes

An example might be as follows:
This should also be spoken onto the tape before interview, followed by a brief introduction or background to the area of discussion on the tape for future reference.

VIII DOCUMENTATION
Once tapes have been collected there is no easy way out of transcribing. Some use the method of summary transcription which only takes out certain points. The most valuable in the long term is word for word, because then you have all of the information which can be edited later. There are also certain issues and points that come out of the first interviews that you want to follow up, so you can extract them from the transcript for follow up later.

IX EDITING
There are no set criteria for editing. However, here are some points from my experience. The main thing is to retain the natural content and make the transcript readable with the necessary punctuations and deletions of repetition, and by rearranging the order of stories to make the account clearer. The transcripts can then be interwoven with written sources as background information and evidence relating to the focus of the project. This provides a picture of the event from both sides—from the written documents and as the people saw it.

Phillip Pepper's book You are what you make yourself to be is a good example of how to weave together the written and the oral. Another example is this extract from the work I've done which looks at the experience of Aboriginal people who lived on reserves:

**RUMBALAR TRANSITIONAL HOUSING ESTATE**

*Written source* ‘Rumbalara was established as a transitional housing project by the Victorian Aborigines Welfare Board in 1958. It was constructed by the Housing Commission on 5 acres of Crown Land excised from a forestry area. The Board's intention with Rumbalara was that it would provide proper accommodation for the people who were living on The Flat (river bank), and would be a half-way preparation period for people before they moved into Housing Commission homes in the town.’

*(Victorian Aborigines Welfare Board Annual Report, 1958–9)*

*Oral source* ‘When we came to Rumbalara after they took us off the river bank they put a supervisor over us, and he used to come around and tell us what to do. I said to him “Look we’re not living in a compound”.

He said “Oh, you don’t know what a compound is!” “Don’t be funny”, I said “I was on a compound at Lake Tyers Mission before I came here”. There was a group of us who stood up to him and I said to him “You can do what you like”, I said “I’m not going to be here tied down by you. You brought us up here to live like white people. Then give us our rights! We fought for freedom when we left the missions.” And he said “Oh, I’m your supervisor”. I said “You seem more like a manager to me”. I said “We came from freedom down on the river bank and we’re not going to sit back and be told what to do—we’re sick of that!” So he brought the police and people from the Welfare Board up. And I stood up to them. I said “You can keep your house, I’ll go back to the river bank where there is more FREEDOM”.

*(Transcript of tape from Aboriginal consultant, Mrs. Harrison, Shepparton, 1978)*

X FINISHING THE PROJECT
Once the project is finished then there is an obligation the writer has to the people the information was collected from. A copy of the manuscript should be made available to the people for their reactions and comments. This enables the collector to gain feedback on the project as to whether their contributions have been interpreted rightly or wrongly, giving both parties the opportunity to correct any discrepancies that might have occurred.

Acknowledgment should also be given in the final document to all those who made contributions, and when quoting from its content.

SUMMARY OF GUIDELINES FOR ORAL HISTORY GATHERERS

A. RESEARCH

1. Plan your project, choosing an area of interest to yourself and to others.
2. Research into area, background knowledge e.g. Government documents and records, protectors, missionaries, squatters, books, etc.
3. Acquire a clear overview of the area before proceeding to collect information from the people in question (the informants).

B. MAKING CONTACT

1. Contact the community or the individuals the project is focused on.
2. Talk to people about it. Seek their opinions. Outline project—what you want to achieve, what’s to happen to the finished product.
3. Develop relationship. Follow-up visits are almost certainly needed.
4. Work towards an agreement to make tape recordings.

C. RECORDING

1. Have guidelines for questions to be asked (for yourself, for informants).
2. Think about your interviewing skills; tape recorder operation (gain practice before using it with informants).
3. Old photos or taking people back to a place can stimulate events from long term memory.
4. Index tapes. Write notes on interview, follow up relevant points. Go back and discuss using tape or taking notes.

D. DOCUMENTATION

1. Transcription: word for word is best.
2. Use headings in transcriptions. Give it shape.
3. Retain natural content, grammar, humour, philosophies, feelings, expressions.
4. Edit, omit mere repetitions, punctuate adequately.
5. Write up using the written sources for comparison and as background material. Important to take it back to the people and check with them for any misinterpretations.
6. You need feedback on the project before completing it.
7. Provide a copy of the project for the people involved, acknowledging their contributions.
SUGGESTED READINGS

Atkinson, W. R.  

Barwick, D.  

Mace, M. and Stannage, T.  

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Relevant to those teachers in urban areas interested in beginning an oral history project.

Matthews, J.  

Pepper, P.  

Read, J. & P. (eds)  

Read, P.  
A view of the past: Aboriginal accounts of Northern Territory History. In press.

Simon, E.  

Thompson, P.  