Into the Mainstream: The Challenge of Oral History in Britain in the 21st Century

Robert Perks*

FORTY YEARS AGO THE COLLECTION and preservation of first-hand personal testimonies – what we have come to call 'oral history' – was not widespread in Britain. As a distinctive approach and methodology, oral history was not taken seriously by the majority of academic historians, archivists, librarians, museum staff, and teachers (Thompson, 2000, chapter 2).

Yet in the intervening four decades oral history has been a radical force for change in all these sectors. It has encouraged a more people-centred approach to the presentation and interpretation of the past and forced essentially paper – and artefact-based professionals to come to terms with new media. This challenge to traditional sources and ways of working has led to a period of intense scrutiny and critique of oral history as a source and technique that is unusual if not to say unparalleled. I can think of no other historical source, whether they be personal diaries or newspapers or film footage, that has been subjected to the same treatment.

From this ferment of debate and self-criticism oral history in Britain has emerged as a mature and mainstream methodology, widely valued and assimilated not only by historians, social scientists and heritage professionals but also by a host of others, notably broadcasters

* Curator of Oral History, British Library National Sound Archive.

and those involved in the care of older people; and embracing specialisms as varied as nursing, folklore, urban regeneration, women's studies, psychology, art conservation, and information science. Oral history has never been more popular, but with this popularity and 'normalisation' comes a question about whether it can retain its distinctive self-identity as a methodology.

Let's start by looking first briefly at the challenge that oral history has posed in Britain in several different 'heritage/public history' sectors, then go on to highlight four key issues it will face in the next decade relating to funding, professionalisation, new technology and the Web.

Archives and Libraries

Traditional archivists in Britain and elsewhere have always been deeply suspicious of the creation of archival material, such as oral history, believing that records should emerge spontaneously and organically in the normal course of time.[1] They have tended to see their role as essentially a passive one, concentrating their efforts and resources on paper archives from the distant past. Oral history seemed to many archivists as wholly contrary to their instincts that documents should be contemporaneous, impartial, fixed and from within, as opposed to created by a third party. Until relatively recently British archives and libraries collected audio-visual material with reluctance or by accident. Few attempted to make any provision for suitable storage, for public playback and listening facilities, or to assist access by cataloguing the material alongside paper-based archives.

Gradually however a number of factors have brought about change. Firstly there was a growing awareness that audio-visual and electronic records would simply *have* to be preserved if modern society was to be understood in the future. And secondly that whole areas of British society were being ignored because no paper records existed. For

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1 Robert Perks (1990) found hardly any articles about oral history had been published in the *Journal of the Society of Archivists*. A film and sound group of the Society of Archivists was only established as recently as 1994 see http://www. archives. org.uk/groups/fas.html

example pressure mounted that Britain's newer communities from Asia and the Caribbean should be better represented in archives, libraries and museums serving these communities. With so few printed and documentary records about migration, the collection of oral testimony suggested itself as an obvious strategy, and a number of ethnic oral history projects sprang up, notably the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit in Yorkshire and the Ethnic Communities Oral History Project in London.[2] Today oral history remains a popular approach to community-based ethnic history as reflected by such projects as the Vietnamese Oral History Project.

This new work encouraged a lively debate amongst librarians and archivists. Was conservation being sacrificed to origination? Had putting people at the centre of collecting led to a neglect of mouldering manuscripts; or for audio-visual archivists, a neglect of older sound carriers such as wax cylinders and discs? There were even some sound archivists who questioned the value of oral archives on the basis of their supposed 'amateur' sound quality.[3] Such concerns were compounded by growing disquiet about poor access to oral history recordings held by archives and libraries, and the consequent low levels of usage. By their very nature oral history recordings are complex and multi-layered documents, and it is certainly true that until the later 1990s insufficient thought had been given to how so many thousands of recordings could be rendered useable. Few of the community-based projects of the 1970s and 1980s, and even fewer academic research projects, had utilised any cataloguing or finding aids. Some had produced transcripts or content summaries but few were machine-readable. As archives and libraries began to amass more and more audio material so they faced the intractable problem of providing access with few resources, little technical expertise and fewer agreed standards of documentation (Bruemmer, 1991).

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2 See for example *Destination Bradford: A Century of Immigration* (1987); Ethnic Communities Oral History Project, *The Motherland Calls: African-Caribbean experiences*, (1989). More generally Alistair Thomson, "Moving stories: oral history and migration studies" (1999).

3 The general issue of audio quality is discussed by Beth Robertson, "Keeping the faith: a discussion of the practical and ethical issues involved in donated oral history collections" (1989).

Museums

Museums were very much in the forefront of community oral history from the early 1980s and for them oral history represented an empowering approach to involving many more people in their own heritage than was typical of the time. The 'political' agenda for change in museums in the 1980s was one of 'outreach' into the community, and of more people-centred (as opposed to object-centred) displays. Oral history was absolutely at the core of challenging the traditional view of museums as treasure houses of cased and sacred objects, made remote from most people by poor presentation or simply lacking relevance to their own lives. At a stroke oral history could engage museum professionals with their community and inject dull exhibits with a real human dimension. It was perhaps no surprise that those museums in the vanguard of oral history were amongst the most popular: Beamish in the North East and the People's Story in Edinburgh were two examples.

But by the 1990s the initial enthusiasm for oral history in museums (which continues today) was tempered by discussions about how to use it in gallery and exhibition contexts: should extracts appear as extended labels or should the emphasis be on audio presentation, and if so what technical delivery system was best? For how long would visitors listen? Could funding be justified for this extra dimension? How should interviewees themselves be involved and acknowledged in exhibitions? Even more controversially a debate began about whether the enthusiasm for oral and social history had distracted museum staff from their essential mission as collectors and guardians of material culture.

Caring Professions

Amidst this atmosphere of change in archives, libraries and museums was an awareness not only that ordinary people's voices have a *political* role in democratising history but also a *social* role in validating individual life experiences. A growing number of gerontologists, social workers and care staff began to see that for older people the act of remembering and telling is life-affirming, enjoyable and in some cases

cathartic and therapeutic. That far from having a negative impact, reminiscence was to be positively encouraged, a conclusion that flew in the face of perceived wisdom about older people at that time.

The key impact of this 'reminiscence movement' on the development of oral history in Britain was that it forced oral historians to think more carefully about the fact that an interview is rarely a straightforward encounter of one-way traffic in which information is gathered. Rather it is a shared experience. This highlighted an unease about the flux between *process* and *product* that still persists in oral history and group reminiscence work: whilst caring professionals are primarily interested in the well-being of older people and the intrinsic value of the oral history process of remembering, for others such as historians it is the outcome of the interview that is paramount, be it as a quoted extract in a book or exhibition, or a tape recording in an archive. Context and intention become an important debating point. But the social role of oral history in a caring context had come to stay.

Education

Oral history was also dragged into controversy over the teaching of history in schools in the late 1980s, between those who stressed the acquisition of historical *knowledge* (i.e. the facts) and those who emphasised historical *skills* (for example the practical evaluation of evidence). Oral evidence was in serious danger of marginalisation in schools until in 1991, following a great deal of political lobbying, the new centralised National Curriculum took the reasonable view that both knowledge and skills were interdependent. The curriculum enshrined both eyewitness testimony as a legitimate form of evidence for study and analysis, and also encouraged oral history fieldwork activity in the creation of evidence. It was a major breakthrough in the recognition of oral sources in the study of British history and in consequence many schools have since launched their own oral history projects, and cross-generational fieldwork is now a common feature of primary and secondary history.

This has further encouraged a broadening of undergraduate history syllabuses which at one time virtually ignored oral sources completely.

By the end of the 1990s many more history courses at tertiary level had embraced oral sources and a survey in 1998 revealed that a growing number of institutions had launched modules or courses devoted to oral history or life stories. Additionally the number of universities involved in postgraduate research and continuing education involving oral history has grown.[4]

Academic and Intellectual Debate

Underpinning the changes that oral history brought to all these sectors has been the maturing intellectual debate amongst academic historians and social scientists. By the 1980s the enthusiasm of the earlier exponents of oral history as simply 'more' history (led by Paul Thompson[5] and Raphael Samuel) began to give way to a more soul-searching debate about the reliability of oral evidence and whether it had earned its place alongside more traditional historical sources and approaches.

Oral historians themselves had got used to defending their methodology against those – mainly academic and documentary historians – who pointed out that the whole approach was flawed by partial memory or the nostalgia of old age, or by the inherent bias of the interview itself. The usual defence was that no historical sources are devoid of similar problems of partiality and omission, and that oral history is no more or less reliable as a source. Some oral history practitioners even went as far as adopting methods of 'scientific' sampling and other techniques. But a key shift in thinking occurred when two Italian oral historians, Sandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini, argued that the 'distortions' of memory and the essential subjectivity of oral history could be

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4 Thomson, 1998 (report for 'History 2000' scheme for Higher Education Funding Council of England). The report found 82 undergraduate and 27 postgraduate courses, evenly split between 'new' and 'old' universities and overwhelmingly in history and sociology departments. The vast majority of courses had started up in the last few years.

5 It's interesting to note that Thompson could at first find no suitable archive for his and they have only recently become accessible nationally through the British Library National Sound Archive. NSA reference: C707 Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918. See also Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (1975) and his "Problems of Method in Oral History" (1973).

seen as strengths not weaknesses. They suggested that such things as misremembering, absences, time shifts, repetitions, constructed story-telling and so on might be a resource revealing insights into *why* people relate their memories in the way they do, and *how* people make sense of their past. As Portelli later succinctly noted: "Errors, inventions and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meaning" (Portelli, 1991).

Such debates have had an important impact in Britain elevating oral history beyond merely the empirical and the fact-finding to the more subtle and nuanced: that an oral source might be operating on several levels at once, that the telling might be influenced by the perceived audience of listeners. It has also led to a recognition that oral history is a *co-construction* where both interviewer and interviewee play a part, though this has recently encouraged a rather sterile preoccupation with the purely theoretical aspects of the interview encounter to the detriment of documenting the experience itself.[6]

Of greater value has been the broadening discussion around the 'right way' to conduct oral history interviews. From the white, male, western-dominated approach espoused by the handbooks of the 1970s and 1980s has come a greater awareness in the 1990s that different cultures (whether they be ethnic, gendered or social) need to develop interviewing strategies that are appropriate to them. For example group rather than one-to-one interviews, and known rather than unknown interviewers, might be better (Bozzoli, 1998). Cultural differences might influence the degree of disclosure and the inadequacy of language itself might raise barriers of understanding, for example when interviewing survivors of extreme trauma such as the Holocaust.

Mainstreaming: Issues Facing Oral History

At the end of the 1990s there was a sense that oral history in Britain had emerged from a period of scrutiny and debate more robust and mature than it had ever been. The phrase 'oral history' was widely recognised and understood, thanks partly at least to its enthusiastic

6 Critics of this preoccupation include Clare Wright (1999) and Michael Frisch (1994).

adoption by radio and television broadcasters,[7] From a period when oral history represented a radical and political alternative pursued by the minority it had become a mainstream methodology taken up by many disciplines, organisations and individuals, some, it must be said, lacking the original guiding imperative that oral history can empower and involve. It has become a routinely used tool for retrieving the past by local and family historians, business and corporate historians, industrial archaeologists, city planners, health managers and environmentalists. A well-organised and motivated 'professional' community has grown up with a vibrant centre of expertise at the British Library National Sound Archive (Day, 2001), an Oral History Society of 1000 members, a support network of local representatives (many in full-time jobs involved in oral history), a journal and a set of professional standards (www.oralhistory.org.uk).

After years of being starved of resources oral history is now garnering large amounts of funding from lottery-funded public schemes such as Heritage Lottery Fund, the Millennium Festival Fund and the Local Heritage Initiative. Even bastions of traditional academic historical research such as the Wellcome Trust and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) are funding oral history research.[8] And notably all these funding bodies place a heavy emphasis on access and effective archiving.

However, in the midst of this assimilation and 'normalisation' several issues arise which will need to be debated over the coming decade.

Firstly voices of doubt have been raised that funders and funding organisations (both public and private) themselves have agendas which do not always mesh with the aims of local groups, some of which have concerns that their independence and integrity might be undermined by the demands placed upon them by funding bodies. The majority of such funding is short term and insufficient regard is being paid to issues of sustainability beyond the funded period. Furthermore

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7 An example is the successful BBC/British Library radio project *The Century Speaks: Millennium Oral History Project*, the largest oral project ever mounted in Britain involving 6000 interviews.

8 The first fruits of Wellcome Trust support for oral history-based research were published in Joanna Bornat, Robert Perks, Paul Thompson and Jan Walmsley (eds), *Oral History, Health and Welfare* (2000).

current central government-oriented funding in Britain is very much geared around oral history as a vehicle to grapple with the wider issues of social exclusion and community involvement. Whilst there is absolutely nothing wrong with such an agenda there is a danger of creating an imbalance where projects focussing on the majority community might simply not get funding. Equally, corporate and business funding rarely guarantees freedom of movement. Even where editorial independence is agreed, control can be exercised through subtle influences such as access to key figures. The overwhelming question being asked about funding is: is oral history-based research being skewed and driven by forces outside its control?

Secondly, there has been a debate around professionalisation and standards. Oral history in Britain emerged in a very patchy and *ad hoc* manner with, until recently, limited continuity. Its roots as a radical alternative to traditional 'establishment' history has always attracted those who are by nature suspicious of hierarchies and structures, and who tend to resist fixed standards and solutions. These people fear that the 'professionalisation' oral history will undermine its intrinsic democracy of purpose and lead to suggestions that only certain people can do it. In other words make oral history into the kind of professional bastion that it set out to overturn. Might oral history be subsumed within the more general area of 'public history' and thereby lose its distinctive self-identity? (Liddington, 2002)

Recently however, with an escalating demand by funders for measurable standards and by new groups for reliable and high quality training, the oral history movement has been forced to reconsider its stance. Without jeopardising flexibility of approach there are now a broadly accepted set of guiding principles for interview techniques, documentation and permanent preservation.[9] The challenge will be to forge these into something that doesn't create precisely the kind of proscriptive structure that oral history has striven against.

Thirdly, although audio-visual technology is absolutely central to what we do as oral historians, we need to embrace new technologies but not be seduced by them. The much-predicted shift from audio to

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9 This has been led by the British Library National Sound Archive and the Oral History Society through their joint training programme.

video simply has not happened in the oral history world, largely (so far) for reasons of cost and the degree of difficulty involved, but there are indications that the new generation of compact digital video cameras will make video oral history more prevalent. Yet because so few oral historians are using video there has been very little thought given to the methodological differences between audio and visual evidence: about video's impact on the interview relationship; and about how the visual record will add a new dimension of required understanding and analysis. More worryingly a jump into video might create more problems for the future owing to the complete chaos that prevails in the market with no industry-agreed digital standards, and a multiplicity of formats, most of them unlikely to last more than a few years.

In fact the most serious technological problem facing oral historians in the next decade will be the obsolescence of the recording media on which we archive our interviews. With analogue audio cassettes being gradually phased out, digital audio tape (DAT) almost gone, and MiniDisc offering perhaps a maximum ten-year lifespan, oral historians are driven towards the uncertainty of computer-based or solid-state systems, with their associated problems of data compression, manipulation and incompatibility. As we are creating documents that must last forever we need to be extremely cautious about the technology we use and ensure we retain copies on multiple formats. And we should add our voices to those demanding continuity and industry-agreed standards.[10]

Equally however we should not be afraid to utilise technologies developed by the leisure industry to present audio material in a more lively and compelling way, for example through digital walkabout 'wands' and interactive displays in museum and gallery contexts. The general quality of audio presentation in museum and gallery spaces sometimes leaves a lot to be desired and there is room for innovative improve-

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10 The British Library is a lead partner of the newly-launched Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC) looking at digital obsolescence and the need for collaborative approaches to safeguarding digital data for the future. In 1986 the BBC celebrated the 900th anniversary of the original Domesday Book by gathering huge amounts of comparative data about Britain. Sixteen years later the laser discs holding this data are now inaccessible as they are an obsolete format. The original manuscript meanwhile is still going strong!

ment. Interestingly artists are now using sound in a variety of highly innovative ways, such as buried soundtracks in public parks and public sound works in disused shopping malls, and the Hayward Gallery in London recently mounted a major exhibition of sound art. There is enormous scope here for collaborative work with oral historians.

Such public representations are of course to do with making oral history accessible and this is an issue which needs to be addressed with urgency. Given what I've suggested about the fragility of audio-visual formats, and with the holy grail of voice recognition software sophisticated enough to transcribe any spoken word into accurate text is still somewhere in the future, oral historians, archivists and librarians must in the short-term take a lead and agree not only documentation standards but also some practical, affordable, applied software packages to gather content data which can be downloaded into catalogues electronically. Some headway has been made by the Society of American Archivists and others with standard descriptors and the British Library recently rolled out a catalogue input template based on MSAccess to over forty local fieldworkers as part of the Millennium Oral History Project. But collecting textual data about our oral testimonies is, of course, only half the story: we need to explore ways of linking text to the sound itself, and not merely for short-term soundbite applications (such as CD-Rom or DVD publications or websites) but for the long-term preservation of whole archives so everyone can share our work in the future.

Which brings me to the fourth and final issue facing oral history in the next decade: the explosion of the internet and electronic mass media, and the real danger that people's stories are being commodified and taken out of their control, copied, used and abused without their knowledge or consent. The Web is a marvellous place to shop-window oral history in an exciting and easily-accessible way, reaching out to new communities of interest, but it is also a transitory place where the copyright and consent safeguards that many archivists and oral historians use have no value. Mounting original audio recordings on the Web is currently an extremely risky exercise from an ethical point of view, and in any event tends to encourage the soundbite culture which takes isolated nuggets of people's lives out of context, or makes exaggerated claims on the basic of exceptions. In welcoming the popularisation of

history through these new media we should remain vigilant to ensure people's lives are conveyed sensitively in all their complexity, and with their consent, ensuring that individual lives retain a role at the centre of the study of history. Ultimately the question is: might increased electronic access to the fine detail of all our lives at the touch of a button breed boredom and disinterest, but also perhaps decontextualisation, distrust and lack of engagement? And if so what will the consequences be for civil society if our informants won't talk openly to us about their lives?

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Abstract: Forty years ago the collection and preservation of first-hand personal testimonies – what we have come to call "oral history" – was not widespread in Britain. As a distinctive approach and methodology, oral history was not taken seriously by the majority of academic historians, archivists, librarians, museum staff, and teachers. Yet in the intervening four decades oral history has become a radical force for change in Britain in a variety of heritage and non-heritage sectors. It has encouraged a more people-centered approach to the presentation and interpretation of the past and forced essentially paper – and artifact – based professionals to come to terms with new media. This challenge to traditional sources and ways of working has led to a period of intense scrutiny and critique of oral history as a source and technique that is unusual if not to say unparalleled. This paper assesses the challenge that oral history represents and speculates about the issues that it will face in the first decade of the 21st century.

Key words: oral history; archives; museums; education.

O DESAFIO DA HISTÓRIA ORAL NA INGLATERRA NO SÉCULO XXI

Quarenta anos atrás, o recolhimento e preservação de testemunhos pessoais de primeira mão – o que veio a ser chamado "história oral" – não era comum na Inglaterra.Como uma abordagem e metodologia distintas, a história oral não era levada a sério pela maioria dos historiadores acadêmicos, arquivistas, bibliotecários, museólogos e professores. Não obstante, nas quatro décadas seguintes a história oral tornou-se uma força radical de mudança entre profissionais de história na Inglaterra. Encorajou, na apresentação e interpretação do passado, uma abordagem centrada na pessoa, e forçou profissionais acostumados com papéis e artefatos a conhecer a nova mídia. Esse desafio às fon-

tes e formas de trabalho tradicionais levou a um incomum período de intensa análise da história oral como fonte e como técnica. Este artigo avalia o desafio que a história oral representa e especula sobre os temas que irá encarar na primeira década do século XXI.

Palavras-chave: história oral; arquivos; museus; educação.