

THE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

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The National Library of Australia first became involved in an oral history project in 1960 and it was not until 1970 that it finally commenced its own project. However, the Library's oral history collection had its beginnings in the 1920s and it is necessary at the outset to distinguish between different kinds of oral history. The Library holds about 1700 tapes and almost all of them can be divided into three categories. Firstly, there are the primary recordings, that is, the tapes of actual historical events, such as important announcements and speeches, the proceedings of meetings and conferences and broadcasters' descriptions of ceremonial, political and sporting events. They can be compared with archival records; in fact, in these days of taped conversations their importance as archival records is universally recognised. Secondly, there are the secondary recordings, that is, taped interviews in which people recall the major events of their lives or their association with famous individuals. Like written autobiographies, such recordings must be used very critically by historians, partly because they are based on old memories and partly because most participants in complex or controversial events will, either deliberately or unconsciously, distort their record of the events in their own interests. Finally, the Library has a small collection of tapes which are of both aesthetic and historical interest and which could appropriately be housed in either the music or the oral history collection. This article will be mainly concerned with the secondary recordings but first something should be said about the other two categories of tapes.

For many years the Library's collection of primary recordings was very small. From the 1920s onwards Commonwealth Ministers and Departments were occasionally presented with historic sound recordings and they generally deposited them in the National Library. For example, in 1927 the Library acquired discs of the speeches made at the opening of Parliament House in Canberra, and in the following year it received recordings of the speeches made by Kingsford Smith and Ulm on the completion of the trans-Pacific flight. In 1935 the Federal Cabinet authorised the Library to collect and preserve films and sound recordings of a historical nature. The Library did not have the resources to implement this decision for many years, although a few hundred discs of political speeches and poetry recordings were acquired in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1950s it began protracted negotiations with the Australian Broadcasting Commission concerning the establishment of a sound archives which would preserve a record of the Commission's activities, as well as information about historic events and artistic and cultural trends in Australia.

The development of the tape recorder in the 1940s enabled the Library to build up a fairly large collection of recordings of political speeches. Sir Robert Menzies agreed to the copying of tapes of over a hundred of his speeches and many more have been received from his successors and from other parliamentarians. A large number of tapes of political speeches, ceremonial occasions and sporting events has been presented by several commercial broadcasting stations. They include speeches by Baldwin, Churchill, Attlee, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Krushchev, Hughes, Bruce, Page, Curtin and Evatt. In the last decade or so the Library has received recordings of conferences of political parties, and of seminars and meetings conducted by the Australian Association for Cultural Freedom, the Library Association of Australia, the Women's Electoral Lobby, and numerous other organisations. Sometimes the recordings are actually made by the Library; for instance, members of the staff tape the addresses given at the National Press Club luncheons. At present the collection of primary recordings numbers about 800 tapes and is growing rapidly and unsystematically.

The best examples of tapes that are on the borderline between oral history and general sound recordings are the collections of Australian folk songs. In 1963 the Library purchased 32 tapes of folk songs collected by John Meredith in New South Wales in the 1950s. In the last five years it has received tapes from the Monaro Folk Music Society and it is currently giving financial support to the collecting activities of Warren Fahey of Sydney and Wendy Lowenstein of Melbourne. It has also purchased tapes recorded by J. A. Thomson in the Kimberleys region of Western Australia. All these collectors are interested in the origins and social background of the songs and the tapes contain lengthy reminiscences by the singers. In this respect the Meredith collection is outstanding, as Meredith was able to track down men who remembered the strikes and depression of the 1890s. Thus the tapes are of great value not only to students of Australian folk music but to regional and social historians as well.

Three years before it acquired the Meredith collection, the National Library became involved in the de Berg oral history project. Mrs. Hazel de Berg, of Sydney, who had formerly been a photographer and a radiographer, began her project in 1957 as a hobby. She recorded a number of Australian poets reading from their works, with the intention of subsequently playing the tapes for blind people. The then National Librarian, H. L. White, heard about her work when she sought a Commonwealth Literary Fund grant and, being familiar with Columbia University's oral history project, he encouraged her to record the poets' autobiographies. After a year or two Mrs. de Berg began to interview painters and sculptors and gradually she moved into new fields: composers, actors, academics, publishers, librarians, scientists, anthropologists, public servants, politicians. Recordings were made in every State and Mrs. de Berg also visited London and New York to interview expatriate Australians. As her recording technique developed the interviews became longer, and while the early tapes each contain five or six interviews, it is more usual now for one interview to extend to three or four tapes. By 1973 Mrs. de Berg had made 716 tapes of 787 people.

The de Berg collection is by far the largest and the most important oral history collection in Australia and can be ranked with the great collections in America. It is particularly impressive in that for many years Mrs. de Berg built up the collection with almost no assistance and even today it remains a very personal collection. The National Library has, since 1960, transcribed all the tapes and, in return, Mrs. de Berg has placed a complete set in the Library. The Library has also supplied Mrs. de Berg with new tapes and has helped with accommodation, transport and office facilities when she travelled interstate or overseas. But it was Mrs. de Berg who financed the project (although she did receive two C.L.F. grants), who selected the people to be interviewed, made all the arrangements, and undertook the necessary background research. In 1972 the Library engaged Mrs. de Berg under contract, thereby taking over most of the financing of the project, but Mrs. de Berg continues to select the interviewees and to do the research.

Mrs. de Berg is a woman of great charm whose enthusiasm for oral history is undiminished after seventeen years of interviewing. She is also exceptionally determined and patient and her persuasive powers have finally overcome the hesitancy of a number of men whose shyness or irascibility was notorious. A majority of the people who have been interviewed have been artists and writers. It is difficult to think of any notable Australian artist who has not been recorded and many young and avante garde painters and sculptors have been included in Mrs. de Berg's programme. The coverage has not been quite so comprehensive in the literary field, but most of the leading poets have made at least brief recordings and in recent years several outstanding novelists and playwrights have agreed to be interviewed. Apart from the artists and the writers, the range of the project can best be indicated by listing some of the interviewees: Peter Sculthorpe, Tim Burstall, Robin Boyd, Sir Robert Helpmann, Zoe Caldwell, Manning Clark, Andrew Fabinyi, Lord Florey, Sir Lawrence Bragg, Sir Phillip Baxter, Vincent Serventy, A. P. Elkin, Andrew Osborn, Sir John Ferguson,

Cardinal Gilroy, Jack Lang, Sir Percy Spender, H. C. Coombs and Sir Charles Moses.

The recordings of such a diverse group of men and women must vary greatly, both in length and form. However, in interviewing artists and writers, Mrs de Berg has evolved a standard approach. A typical interview begins with a short autobiography and Mrs. de Berg is particularly interested in childhood influences and the reasons why people take up painting or writing. The interviewee then describes his general method of work, including his use of set plans, the relation between characters and scenes and his own experiences, and the need for revision and rewriting. He discusses in detail a particular book or painting, the inspiration ideas or experiences behind it, and the problems that had to be overcome before it was completed. Finally, the interviewee may talk about his general philosophy or the state of the arts in Australia. The de Berg tapes are distinctive in that they are all in the form of monologues. Mrs. de Berg edits, very skilfully, all the tapes so that the listener has the impression, not of an interview, but of man's solitary and uninterrupted reflections, with no questions, pauses, broken sentences or repetitions.

Some of the de Berg tapes contain statements which are extremely frank, insulting and possibly libellous. Access to both the tapes and the transcripts has therefore been restricted and historians and biographers have not yet been able to make much use of them. The Library will be consulting each of the interviewees during 1974 and it is expected that many of them will allow the access restrictions to be lifted. A few historians have been permitted to read some of the transcripts and have obtained information which has not been available from other sources. In particular, biographers have relied heavily on the tapes for details about the childhood and early life of their subjects, for that is the period in men's lives for which there is usually a great dearth of written records. Inevitably, some of the tapes are disappointing and are of almost no research value. Nevertheless, one can state definitely that almost all of Mrs. de Berg's interviewees have been people of some importance, most of them are exceptionally articulate, some of them are very outspoken, and hardly any of them have written autobiographies. Consequently, many of the tapes contain information that has not been recorded in any other form, and that will be of interest to scholars working in several fields, particularly cultural history.

In the 1960s the National Library's involvement in oral history was virtually restricted to its support for the de Berg project. The Library occasionally received tapes that had been made by thesis writers and other individuals on their own initiative. For instance, tapes are held in which people recall life in towns such as Broken Hill, Moonta and Canberra fifty years ago. Other tapes contain reminiscences of the poets Christopher Brennan and Seafort Mackenzie. The largest collection acquired from a thesis writer was created by Miss D. Hickey of Macquarie University, who interviewed many artists and architects of the 1930s. Her tapes form a useful supplement to the de Berg collection. On one occasion, in 1964, the Library undertook a small oral history project of its own: staff visited the old town of Jindabyne, which was about to disappear under the waters of Lake Jindabyne, and taped interviews with 15 elderly residents, who described life in the Snowy Mountains in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But while the oral history collection did grow in the 1960s, it was not until 1970 that the Library decided to commence a full-scale oral history project. In that year Mel Pratt, an experienced journalist, who had just retired from the Australian News and Information Bureau, was appointed under contract to interview men and women who had been prominent in Australian public life.

The project which has been carried out by Pratt over the last three years differs in several respects from the de Berg project. Pratt's role is much more limited than that of Mrs. de Berg. He confines himself to the actual interviews, while the Library staff select the people to be interviewed, make the necessary arrangements, prepare the briefing notes which are sent to the interviewees, and arrange the transcription of the tapes. Pratt's interviews are less numerous and more lengthy than those of Mrs. de Berg. He has interviewed about 50 people

and while a few spoke for only an hour or two, a large number of the recordings are over 10 hours long and one has exceeded 50 hours. Some interviews have been recorded at sessions stretching over several months. Unlike Mrs. de Berg, Pratt does not edit his tapes in any way.

The great majority of the people who have been interviewed by Pratt have had some association with the Commonwealth Government and include ministers, politicians, public servants, members of Government instrumentalities and tribunals and journalists. Among those who have made recordings are Arthur Calwell, Frank Forde, Dame Enid Lyon, Sir Peter Heydon, Sir Kenneth Bailey, Sir William Dunk, Sir John McCauley, Sir Richard Williams, Jack Kelly, Irvine Douglas, Alan Reid and Frank Chamberlain. Men in public life are generally more cautious than writers and artists and most of the Pratt tapes will be closed for many years. However, when the tapes are eventually opened, historians will find some exciting material. Almost all the tapes contain far more biographical details than are available elsewhere, together with reflections on subjects ranging from defence to religion and from censorship to tariffs. In addition, the better tapes include frank assessments of important public figures, information about the personal and power relationships which existed between different politicians and public servants, and accounts of political intrigue, pressures and wheeler-dealing.

In 1973 the Library's oral history activities were further expanded. The oral history collection has always been held in the Manuscript Section of the Library and two librarians in that Section are now responsible for co-ordinating the work of the various interviewers and for preparing briefing notes. One of the librarians does some interviewing as well. Four more interviewers were appointed under contract in 1973 and they will concentrate on leaders in the field of politics, business, science and religion. They each have subject expertise and do most of their own research. Although the specialist interviewers have only been working for a brief period some interesting people have already been taped, such as the economist Sir Leslie Melville, the businessman Sir Albert Jennings, the trade unionist Lloyd Ross, Archbishop Sir Philip Strong and the journalist Mungo MacCallum. With seven interviewers now available it has become possible to include a few younger men in the oral history programme. Priority has always been given to elderly people whose careers have virtually ended and who can look back, with some detachment, on 60 or 70 years of history. Without changing the priorities, a start was made in 1973 in interviewing outstanding politicians who are still in their 30s or 40s, with the intention of resuming the interviews at 10 or 15-year intervals. It is hoped that, as a result, the tapes will provide a more accurate and detailed record of recent events, as well as showing the changes in men's ideas, hopes and personalities over a period of 30 or 40 years.

The recordings made by the specialist interviewers are similar to those of Pratt: they are lengthy (averaging about 10 hours), they are not edited, and many of them will be closed or restricted for some years. Like the de Berg and the Pratt tapes, the recordings are transcribed as quickly as possible, for two reasons. Firstly, there is the danger that the tapes could be accidentally "wiped"; in fact, there have been instances overseas where a fluorescent light or a floor cleaner has caused a whole tape collection to be "wiped". Secondly, despite their modernity, tapes are far inferior to books when it comes to retrieving information. A biographer may welcome the chance to listen to a tape, to hear the accent, the intonation, the fluency and the laughter of his subject, but a historian hoping to obtain certain information from a long interview will always use the transcript rather than the tape.

The background research is another essential aspect of oral history and one which is easily overlooked. In the National Library project, interviewers or librarians spend up to 40 hours preparing lists of topics and questions for a single interview. The lists, which may include hundreds of questions, are given to the interviewee, usually a week or so before his first meeting with the interviewer. They serve three functions. They enable the interviewee to prepare for the

interview, by giving him a much clearer idea of the purpose of the project and the subjects which will be covered. He realises that the interview will be much longer than he expected. Moreover, he will probably be flattered that he has been the subject of so much work and will feel obliged to give up a comparable amount of time for the interview. The references to half-forgotten names and events will often stimulate old memories, he may decide to check his papers or to talk to former associates, and he will have plenty of subjects to think about in the days before the interview. He may then be in a position, not merely to tell a few anecdotes, but to record his considered reflections on the events of the past. The interviewer is still free to slip in one or two unexpected or difficult questions if he wishes to get a spontaneous opinion on a controversial subject. But on the whole the recordings are leisurely affairs, with the interviewer only occasionally intruding. A few interviewees have been intimidated by the pages of questions and, to avoid such a reaction, some people are only sent a few general questions.

The second function of the notes concerns the structure of the interview. In a lengthy recording, extending over several sessions, it is important that both participants are aware of the broad subjects which will be discussed and the order in which they will be considered. Otherwise, there will be unnecessary repetition and explanatory digressions and major subjects could be forgotten. In addition, as the interview proceeds it is easy for a person to start making alarming jumps from subject to subject, and from decade to decade, and the confused reader working through hundreds of pages of transcripts will become completely lost. Thus, although some interviewees ignore the notes, they are an attempt to introduce some logic into a lengthy interview.

Finally, through the notes the Library seeks to influence the substance of the interview. Oral history is an expensive undertaking and it is not justified if the information in the tapes simply duplicates that contained in printed works. The librarians who compile the notes therefore check debates, government reports, newspapers and other primary sources to see if certain events have been adequately covered. They note down the names of people associated with the events, on the assumption that memories of people tend to last longer than memories of events. They also check books and articles, and speak to historians and other authorities, to find out the large questions, often about motives, purposes and ideas, which both contemporary commentators and later historians have raised and which have never been conclusively answered. The final notes will include questions about the actual events if it appears that they have not been recorded in written form, but otherwise the emphasis will be on motives, ideas, beliefs, and impressions and opinions of people. Obviously, the interviewees cannot be forced to answer the questions but many of them do, in fact, discuss most of the subjects which have been suggested. Even if they sidestep the really important questions, historians will at least know that the questions were asked and will be able to draw some conclusions of a negative kind.

Librarians can prepare the background notes but it is still necessary, and difficult, to find good interviewers. Subject specialists do not always have personal qualities, such as tact and patience, which are essential. On the other hand, interviewers who do not have a good knowledge of the subject usually fail to detect the evasiveness or weaknesses in an answer and do not follow up with the necessary supplementary questions. They also fail to help the interviewees by prompting with names or dates or by querying doubtful statements which may have simply been verbal mistakes. Although the National Library has some specialist interviewers, it has to rely on its general interviewers if it decides to record men who have been leaders in such fields as primary industry, the armed services, law or education. Consequently it is always ready to encourage subject specialists to try their hands at oral history. At present it is co-operating with the Australian Association of Social Workers in a small project in which pioneer social workers are being recorded. The Association selects the interviewees, one of its officers conducts the interviewers, the Library provides a recorder and

tapes and does the transcripts, and copies of the tapes are added to the Library's collection. A similar arrangement has been made with two men who are recording interviews with soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War. It is hoped that in the near future a great deal of work will be done in co-operation with the Australian National University, which is considering the establishment of an oral history unit.

The staff associated with the Library's oral history projects sometimes wish that no publicity was given to their activities. The number of requests to use the tapes has increased considerably in the last two years, yet the simple fact is that for some time to come most of the tapes will not be available for use. A more difficult problem concerns the very large number of Australians who ideally should be interviewed. Oral history is still a novel idea and it arouses a great deal of interest. Most people can readily suggest 10 or 20 octogenarians who should be interviewed "before it is too late". Not many people flatly refuse to be recorded and in the course of each interview several more names are usually put forward as potential interviewees. Yet oral history is expensive and time-consuming and the Library must be rather selective in its recording programme. Outside the Canberra region it has to neglect the representative people whose recollections are valuable sources for social historians. If such people are to be recorded, many organisations will have to start their own oral history projects: State and public libraries, universities, historical societies, professional organisations and learned societies. There are probably ways in which the National Library could assist other organisations, particularly by preparing a union list of oral history projects in Australia. But in its own projects the Library is forced to confine itself largely to recording the autobiographies of a small elite — men and women who have achieved leadership and national standing in their different careers.