

**ORAL HISTORY IN AUSTRALIA:
SOME PROBLEMS DISCUSSED AT THE AUSTRALIAN
FOLKLORISTS' CONFERENCE, SYDNEY
NOVEMBER 17-18, 1973**

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The Australian Folklorists' Conference, which was held at the Fisher Library in the University of Sydney during the weekend of November 17-18, 1973, was conducted under a grant from the Australian Council for the Arts and was directed through the New South Wales Folk Federation in association with the Australian Folklore Unit. This conference should have more than passing interest for readers of *Archives and Manuscripts* since it suggests the growing respectability in this country of oral history programmes. At the present time, archives institutions or manuscript libraries are likely to be those agencies directly concerned with the storage, preservation, and organisation for use of tape recorded interviews, songs and other matter which conveys an understanding of the bases on which our society has developed and evolved. Indeed, the National Library of Australia has now appointed an Oral History Librarian to the staff of the Manuscript Department. This officer is directly responsible both for the administration of an oral history collection within the library and for researching and conducting interviews with individuals who should be represented in a national collection.

The immediate aim of the Sydney conference was to establish the present situation of folk lore and tradition research in Australia and to systematically plan for the future development of such research. Reference must be made here to the obvious specificity of the term folk lore in the conference name and the more general debate which the conference stimulated concerning the questions of equipment, archival quality of tape, transcription and indexing, copyright, promotion, use of tapes in libraries, union listing and financial support for the continuing development of oral history projects. In fact, the conference brought into the open a number of questions which must be asked of any oral history programme whether it be concerned with the specialised fields of folk lore, tradition and popular song or interviews on tape with politicians and public servants or artists and writers.

Representation at the conference was divided between the official delegates, most of them working in the field as collectors of Australian folk lore and song, and the invited representatives of libraries and other interested institutions. Of the delegates present, it was clear that each one more than deserved to be described as a pioneer in his or her special field of interest. Working initially against a good deal of indifference, both from government funding agencies and libraries and as well, in some instances, from the universities, they have each of them travelled extensively around Australia or in specialised areas such as the Hunter Valley region in New South Wales, armed with tape recorders and as many reels of tape as meagre funding would allow, tapping the rich resources of the memories of outback or small town Australians, trade unionists, cattlemen, tradesmen, children and many others. As one of the collectors has suggested, the point about this kind of work is that it develops an understanding of a people's lore and legend – how they sang, what stories they told, how they entertained themselves, what their consolations were and who their heroes were. (1)

Collectors who attended were Shirley Andrews, Ron Edwards, Warren Fahey, Wendy Lowenstein, Colin McJannett, Bob and Irene Mitchell, Alan Scott, Brad Tate and Bill Wannan. Those libraries represented were the National Library, the Mitchell Library, the Oxley Library, the State Library of Victoria and the Menzies Library in the University of New South Wales. Also present were representatives from the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Australian Council for the Arts and the Australian National University.

Although oral history projects of different kinds and for a number of different purposes have been conducted in Australia for some years now, we have not come so far as the Americans. In the United States, there is a national Oral History Association. And, in a recent article in *The American Archivist*, the following observation was made: "From all indications [oral history] is now an established practice being routinely used each year by an ever-increasing number of individuals and institutions." (2) In Australia, however, while there is a long way to go before the above observation could be said to apply, there is every indication of a rapidly developing interest in this field. The Sydney conference proved emphatically that a good deal of work has been done over a long period by a variety of individuals covering a wide range of interests in every state in Australia. One of the positive things coming from the conference was that as comprehensive a list as possible will be made of all work in hand or in progress around the country. It is expected that this list will be published later this year in the Melbourne-based *Tradition* magazine edited by Wendy Lowenstein for the Victorian Folk Music Club and Folk and Lore Society of Victoria.

As far as listing material on a more permanent basis, a good deal of interest was demonstrated in the suggestion that entries describing oral history collections – both in private hands and institutions – might be acceptable to the National Library for inclusion in its *Guide to Manuscript Collections relating to Australia*. While there may well be a case against the listing in this guide of material in private hands, there seems to be no reason why collections of tape recordings as such should not be included in the *Guide to Manuscript Collections*. As time goes on and oral history collections become more widely in demand, the need will probably develop for a separate guide to oral history collections in Australia. It is interesting in this context to note that archivists in the United States are now beginning to question whether, in that country, there might not be a need or justification for a Guide to Oral History Materials in the United States as opposed to the system for listing presently provided by the National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections. (3)

While the conference provided a meeting place for present collectors of oral history to exchange ideas about methodology, equipment, indexing and other questions, it was also the occasion for libraries to demonstrate two things. First, their basic interest in the oral history medium as a valuable primary source as intrinsically interesting as the more conventional unpublished manuscript materials. Secondly, their own potential as collectors, actively engaged in the field, planning and conducting interviews for deposit and future use in their own institutions. In relation to this latter question, the work of the National Library is dealt with in Graeme Powell's article in this issue of *Archives and Manuscripts*. It was noted also that the La Trobe Library in the State Library of Victoria has established an interest in building up a collection of oral history materials.

The Australian Manuscripts Collection in this library has now acquired just under 100 recordings of Australian folk lore prepared by Wendy Lowenstein. In addition, the La Trobe Library has acquired Samuel Merrifield's labour history collection of tapes which includes interviews with or speeches by Arthur Calwell, H. V. Evatt, Muriel Heagney and a number of others. This library is now co-operating with the Royal Institute of Public Administration, Victorian Regional Group, in their programme of interviews with retired public servants, politicians and others who may be expected to provide insights into the principles and practice of public administration in Victoria. This project, though still in its formative stages, has nevertheless yielded fourteen recordings to date.

This support notwithstanding however, there was a feeling expressed at the conference that librarians had been reluctant to concern themselves very greatly with the problem of oral history. This despite the fact that the medium is still regarded somewhat suspiciously by more orthodox scholars. In

fact, the quality of work produced so far by oral history collectors still remains to be adequately tested by serious scholarly appraisal. There is no doubt too, that in an era when libraries, generally speaking, still do not receive an adequate measure of financial support from the communities they serve, few libraries have felt able to spare the funds necessary to enter into the development of oral history collections on a large scale. It is obvious that libraries will have to think carefully and to plan well before tape recordings become a regular part of their special collections.

Debate and exchange of views were strong, with good communication between everyone present. Occasionally, there was a tendency for argument to become bogged down in a cross-purposes discussion. This occurred most noticeably in debate on the question concerning copyright of tape-recorded material. Part of the difficulty here was that folklorists who conduct many of their interviews with anonymous informants in outback or rural environments are reluctant to confuse the situation or alienate the informant by raising the complicated question of copyright or later public access to the recording in a library. In any case, so much of the material collected in this way is by its nature in the public domain — yarns, tradition and so on. It is recognized however that in the area of folk songs certain difficulties could well arise, particularly in the case where the same song is independently collected and published by two separate collectors.

In the case of more formal interviews however, it should be noted that the National Library takes a serious view of its responsibilities to persons represented on recordings deposited in that institution. The Library in fact undertakes that it will not, during the lifetime of the person recorded, make the tape recording or a record embodying that recording or material contained in that recording available for research or public use or for public performance or broadcasting except in accordance with the wishes of the person recorded and the person making the recording. It is obvious that in this sensitive area, the National Library has provided a standard of integrity which must be carefully observed by all institutions seeking to extend their collections in the oral history field.

The conference also raised a number of other questions, some of them contentious perhaps in as much as they touch on areas where libraries have yet to formulate specific policies. In particular, one speaker advanced a case for the centralisation of tape collections, preferably within the National Library. Such a scheme envisages the deposit of master tapes in the National Library with distribution of copies being undertaken as required. Inter-library lending was also suggested as a possibility. In addition, the question of co-operative acquisition was raised with the suggestion that libraries could combine to reduce the overall cost of individual tapes or of collections. There was however no agreement about who should provide the machinery to cope with the problems of pricing, distribution, indexing or copying, though a suggestion was made that, in time, the model provided by the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau might be adapted to handle the special medium of tape recordings.

Finally, the conference considered the need for the provision of indexes and transcripts to accompany collections of tape recordings. There was strong agreement that both of these are necessary adjuncts to the effective utilisation of oral history material. Further, most collectors agreed that the responsibility for the preparation of these aids rested with the person making the recording or conducting the interview.

This article does not pretend to offer a comprehensive account of the Australian Folklorists' Conference in Sydney. Rather, it has ranged over a number of key areas, most of them of particular relevance to those working in the area of archive and manuscript keeping. It has sought to give some indication of the problems or implications suggested by the oral history medium. The conference provided no final answers. Rather, it asked many questions and in so doing broke new ground which promises to sustain healthy growth in the years to come.

- (1) Wendy Lowenstein, "A Collection of Oral History, Traditions and Folk Lore in the La Trobe Library" in *La Trobe Library Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 9, April 1972, p. 4.
- (2) Committee on Oral History of the Society of American Archivists, "Oral History and Archivists: Some Questions to Ask" in *The American Archivist* Vol. 36, No. 6, July 1973, p. 361.
- (3) *Ibid.* p. 363.