

BOOK REVIEWS

Jerome Finster, ed., *The National Archives and Urban Research* (National Archives Conferences). Athens, Ohio University Press, 1974. 164 pp. \$10.00 U.S. ISBN 8214-0154-8

by John Brine

The National Archives and Records Service of the General Services Administration in Washington is the depository for records of the United States Federal Government which are considered to be permanently valuable. These records cover the period from 1774 to the present and include documents for almost every Federal agency, both civil and military. From 1967 a series of conferences has been held in order to acquaint scholars with the wealth of material available in the U.S. National Archives. Usually these conferences are limited in attendance to 200 participants and in order to achieve a wider dissemination of the papers presented, the National Archives has undertaken the editing and publication of papers from the conferences. So far volumes already published include the following titles:

United States Polar Exploration, The National Archives and Statistical Research, and The American Territorial System.

The volume under review is consequently one in an on-going series and contains selected papers from the conference held in Washington in June 1970.

The four-year delay in the publication of this collection of papers may not seem much in historical terms, but seems an unnecessary impediment considering the stated purpose of the book. Indeed, of the ten papers presented in this collection, several rely to some extent on their review of an immediate situation and the implications of archival material to research going ahead in 1970. Urban planners' attitudes towards housing programmes and mass transit have, naturally enough, modified in the last four or five years. Reading this collection of papers today one is reminded of the speed of change and the development of ideas in urban planning.

Readers will appreciate the scholarship and knowledge of his subject which the editor, Jerome Finster, has brought to his work. We are told that Mr Finster has had many years experience with the records of Federal agencies operating in socio-economic fields, particularly labour, transportation and welfare. The conference was structured into four sections as follows: a panel on urban population, a panel on housing, a panel on transportation, and a panel concerned with the impact of Federal activities. In structuring the book, Finster follows the format of the conference and several papers are presented from each panel. In the way the content of this volume is assembled one might almost see the model for future publications attempting to present similar conference material. Perhaps for the length of the volume the design of the contents is a little over-elaborate with a "Foreword" followed by a "Preface", followed by an "Introduction", followed by a printing of the "Welcome" of the scholars at the conference and then a short "Statement" on the new demand for

relevance in American history. Before we begin with the papers representing the various panels there is an additional "Editor's Note" and a couple of pages of "Remarks" by Donald J. Bogue, possibly one of the most distinguished scholars to be present at the conference. Not that we would want to be without Bogue's "Remarks" as they are in many ways a crystallisation of North American attitudes towards the problems of the cities in 1970. Following the papers from the various panels the volume concludes with Notes on Contributors and an Appendix on National Archives Resource Papers. All highly structured 164 pages.

As an urban planner working in the Australian context my preoccupation with the structure of the book under review may seem an unnecessary obsession. For Australian urbanists, however, the value of this volume is in seeing how a conference related to material in a Collection of National Archives can be presented. The technical expertise displayed in this publication is a reminder that the rigorous scholarship and historical research can be helpfully applied in the examination of contemporary urban affairs, and that it is important to get such material published where it may be accessible to many. This is indeed a specialised book and will contain many lessons for people entrusted with working from archival material. There is little here for the general reader, but a good deal for the urban historian with an interest in North American matters. Perhaps the presentation is not quite impeccable as the reviewer came across one or two obvious misprints in dates and data presented. Nevertheless, this volume displays American publishing craftsmanship of a very high order.

The National Archives and Urban Research amply demonstrates for urban researchers that there is material available in the National Archives of the United States of importance to those reviewing past policies and programmes. Planners involved in research aimed at providing the basic information for the development of new strategies for the enhancement of cities will also be pleased to know of historical sources available to them, even if it is likely that practising planners will seldom have the time to make the most of comprehensive source material. Perhaps in the long run, but in a subtle way, it is this latter group of people who will, in fact, gain most from the work of Jerome Finster and his contributors. It is reassuring to be working in a field of human endeavour where documents from the past are cared for.

Joan Campbell, ed., *Oral history 74: papers presented at the first oral history conference, 1st March, 1974*. La Trobe University, 1974. 116 + iv pp. Processed. Paperback.

by B. S. Baldwin

To most of the speakers at this Conference oral history is not some new concept comparable to a talking book. It means for most of the time what it meant to Herodotus and what it has always meant — historical information gleaned by hearing someone speak. The participants make use of it either *faute de mieux*, there being no adequate written records to go on (Dr David Wetherell "The value of

oral history in research into missionary activities and culture contact in Papua”, Dr Tom Spear “Oral tradition and the development of oral history in Africa”, Dr Edgar Waters “Oral history research at the University of Papua and New Guinea”); or as part of a deliberate policy of supplementing written records with oral accounts and reminiscences on the grounds that significant information or a revealing attitude is forthcoming from people either unable or unwilling to commit it to paper (Joan Campbell “The contribution of oral history to Australian historical research”, Jean Holmes “An oral history project in conjunction with the Royal Institute of Public Administration”, Dr Bill Breen “Oral history in the United States”, Richard Haese “Oral history and Australian art and artists, 1937-1947”, Shirley Andrews “Social dancing in nineteenth century Australia”, Wendy Lowenstein “Oral history and the depression of the thirties”, Baiba Irving “The value of oral history in recording the history of a community or region”).

The possibility in recent years of reproducing a person’s actual voice has focussed attention on the special advantages of oral communication and the techniques for getting the most out of it (Dr Graham Little “On interviewing and the training of interviewers”, Peter Kerr “Problems of interviewing and related ethical issues”, Susanne Walker “The National Library’s oral history project” — this latter talk being a slightly potted restatement of Graeme Powell’s article in *A & M* Vol. 5, No. 6).

For most historians the important thing is to get the oral record accurately transcribed. (“Transcribed” is used throughout the work in the sense of “put into writing”, not — as in “BBC Transcription Service” — “reproduction in sound from a master recording”). For historians in general the fact that a voice was originally used to convey the meaning is neither here nor there. A letter dictated or a letter drafted amounts to the same thing considered as historical evidence. The fact that in minute books and in Hansard it is oral communication that is recorded is not of major relevance when assessing their value.

Questions arising at the present time are whether oral records are worth keeping in oral form and whether they should be deliberately proliferated. The fact of actually hearing a historical personage, perhaps long since dead, opens a new dimension in communication. Ross Cooper (“Oral-Visual history: the dynamism and efficiency of the videotape”) voices his vibrant enthusiasm for this new facet. He tells of work on an *ADB* article on the actress Nellie Stewart:

“Someone told me, oh, they’ve got some discs in the Mitchell of her speaking . . . So I asked for them . . . and the librarians at the Mitchell could not easily find them. You can imagine, they’re set up for the printed word . . . After making it clear that I wanted to hear the discs, as well as look at them, they went away and returned with some tapes, taped copies . . . As I sat there . . . I was staggered by the youthfulness of the voice of this then ageing actress. And if you don’t believe me, you can go and listen to it yourself, because it is preserved there forever, thank God!” (p. 85-86).

Ross Cooper is the only contributor to see oral history not merely as history gathered orally but history presented orally under the direction of the historian. At Monash, he tells us, “We’re used to oral history, and we’re prepared to use it. Last year we accepted students putting in tapes as their form of an essay . . . Now we accept visual

history, and we allowed students last year to produce a videotape on the depression" (p. 89).

The proliferation of tapes raises some doubts. A representative of the ABC took part in the discussions, in the course of which Peter Kerr broaches the pertinent question of whether interviewing is best left to broadcasters:

"It seems to me there is a case for worrying less about what historians and Ph.D. students are doing in the field. The vital thing is keeping a check on the media, as things occur, and keeping the tapes" (p. 24).

When Malcolm Muggeridge spoke of "the darkest of Dark Ages [being] surely upon us, not owing to a paucity of documentation, but to a superabundance" and lamented that "so many eye-witnesses have had their say, often at unconscionable length", he was thinking purely of print. The possibility of a parallel plethora of documentation on tape occurs to Dr Breen:

". . . to judge from this conference, there is obviously a vast amount of material that has been carefully taped, labelled and shelved—and will probably never see the light of day again . . . One wonders just how much of this material will be worth listening to in 30 to 50 years even if one could locate it, which would be a major problem" (p. 16).

He sees "a pressing need for some adequate guide or catalogue".

Some pertinent problems are exemplified in the production of the Conference proceedings, which were transcribed from tapes. On p. 80 we read, "Some comments that follow were hard to pick up"; and in the case of four of the talks a reconstruction was made from notes because "technical problems prevented a transcript being made". A certain amount of revision was made for publication. Probably not enough. One could quibble that in the latter half, in the discussions, one is sometimes left in doubt as to whether the speaker is anonymous or one previously named.

Joan Campbell has certainly produced a stimulating brochure, with much discussion of practical considerations and some useful theorising, for example from Dr Spear. The final paper by Dr John Lawry — "Oral history projects in Australian educational research" — has excellent general coverage and would repay reading first.