

Telling Lives – a shortened version of a talk on oral history given by Helen Lloyd at the Charles Parker Day 2014

On the Library of Birmingham's *Connecting Histories* website Charles Parker is described as "a pioneer of radio broadcasting and oral history". It's certainly true that oral history owes him a debt – for recording people whose lives would otherwise go unrecorded and for doing so in their own environment - but his interviewing techniques were very different from those now recommended by the Oral History Society! In his unedited interview with Alderman Harry Watton - which can be heard in the Charles Parker Archive - he makes clear his disagreement with the Alderman's hostility to Irish tinkers and interrupts him to clarify a point or rephrase it so that it will make sense without the question.

The concerns of some radio producers do overlap with those of oral historians, but their purposes are distinct. *The Travelling People* uses the Alderman's voice to stunning effect – warning us of what happens when we regard anyone as less human than ourselves. But oral history reminds us of people's humanity in a different way – by allowing even disagreeable people to tell their story at length from their own point of view, with minimal intervention.

In 1998, the BBC embarked on the biggest audio oral history project ever undertaken in this country – *The Century Speaks* – a grand public service gesture to celebrate the Millennium. They appointed 40 producers to cover the whole of the UK and I was appointed to cover the West Midlands and Warwickshire. We each recorded the life-stories of up to 150 local people and made 16 half-hour programmes which were broadcast on local radio stations, with highlights repeated on Radio 4. We were trained by Rob Perks of the National Sound Archive to follow the interviewee's agenda rather than our own: if they thought something was important, that very fact was of historical significance! We should listen to their life-stories without interrupting – only offering a prompt if they paused. We were given a theme for each of our 16 programmes – such as food, work, leisure, health, immigration – but we didn't need to steer people to talk about these things, because if you record someone's whole life-story, they cover many subjects naturally.

When you listen to someone at length with total concentration, this is such an unusual experience for them that they often recall things for the first time, as they speak, and that gives what they say a special intensity, even when they're talking about something quite mundane, like a woman from Wales who

enthused about the home-grown vegetables and free range eggs she ate as a child during the First World War.(It's interesting that she talked about 'free range' eggs because all eggs were free range 100 years ago, but even very elderly people are *contemporary* people, who are influenced by modern media and interpret their past in the light of the present.)

When I began the *Century Speaks* project, I was interviewed about my search for interviewees by Nick Owen on the TV programme, *Midlands Today*, and I received 300 phone calls, many recommending people described as "great characters". These "characters" often told anecdotes that they'd clearly repeated many times, but the advantage of a long oral history recording is that you get much more than anecdotes and even people who seem unreflective at first begin to reflect.

Our interviews were recorded on 2-hour MiniDiscs and lasted from 1½ to 2 hours. When the project ended, the Director General, Greg Dyke, gave around 6000 unedited life-story recordings and 640 half-hour programmes to the National Sound Archive – now called the British Library Sound Archive.

After I finished *The Century Speaks*, I set up my own Oral History Consultancy and collected 150 life-stories for Birmingham City Council's quaintly-titled *Millennibrium* project, which are now available in the Birmingham Archives. Over a third of the interviewees were from ethnic minorities and many others liked living in a multi-cultural society, but I felt I must include some people who *didn't* like it, because if at a later time there were riots, or a rise in the popularity of a racist party, an oral history collection should offer some understanding of these developments.

My BBC training told me to look interviewees in the eye and nod and smile encouragingly, but I couldn't do that if I was interviewing someone who expressed racist views. Even with people you like, smiling is fine for 10 minutes, but gets tiring over 1½ hours, for both interviewer and interviewee. So I usually sit *beside* the interviewee – often on a sofa with cushions or pillows between us on which I can rest my arm holding the microphone. You can show you're interested by the quality of your attention, but the historical record is less affected by the interviewee looking for approval.

I've recorded many memories of poverty between the wars, when parents struggled to feed their children – and these recordings now help a younger generation to understand why there was so much support for the creation of a welfare state.

Oral history's also good at challenging over-simplifications of the past by providing exceptions to generalisations. It's well-known that immigrants faced a lot of racism, but I interviewed a man who came from Pakistan in 1960 who found that while people were abusive when he worked as a bus conductor, the very same people were much more friendly when he worked as a postman.

Another over-simplification of the 1960s is represented by the phrase "the permissive society". It may have been permissive in some areas, but it certainly wasn't in others. I recorded a Birmingham woman who was an unmarried mother in 1963 and described the local opposition to her having her baby christened. When the vicar ignored this opposition, two families cancelled christenings that were due to take place at the same time.

Oral history is good at registering slight shifts in social attitudes. It's also good at exploring the aftermath of public events. 40 years ago, in 1974, the IRA planted bombs in two Birmingham pubs. I was living here at the time, but it wasn't until I began recording oral histories that I realised the huge effect the bombings had on the Irish in Birmingham. I've interviewed people who were bullied at school or at work or had bricks thrown through their windows, because they were Irish. When I play these recordings in schools, Muslim pupils recognise the similarities with their families' experiences after 9/11 or the London bombings.

In 2000, I recorded the life-story of a 14-year-old boy, because I thought society was changing so rapidly that even a 14-year-old might be conscious of how different things were in the past. Since he had a Caribbean background, it was suggested that I ask him about racism, but what he most wanted to talk about was his computer and his pay-as-you-go mobile phone. That's the joy of oral history: you go where the interviewee leads. He talked of how mobile phones had transformed his social life – avoiding the need to talk to parents! – and how personal computers had kept all his friends indoors. Like an old man, he lamented that "Winton Green isn't such a community as it used to be."

Helen Lloyd is a Trustee of the Charles Parker Archive and a former BBC radio reporter and producer. She now runs her own independent consultancy, www.oralhistoryconsultancy.co.uk, based in Birmingham, and is a Regional Network Representative for the Oral History Society.