

ROBERT G. BURGESS

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QRM 1A

The emphasis in field research conducted by sociologists and social anthropologists is upon the observed present. Certainly, if we turn to basic texts in field research (Lofland, 1971; Wax, 1971; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973), we find no space devoted to a discussion of historical materials. Similarly, if we turn to ethnographic studies, we find that historical data is neglected. Warner's studies of Newburyport in the Yankee City series (for example, Warner and Lunt, 1941; Warner and Low, 1947) have ignored the history of the community as available in documentary sources, with the result that he misrepresents a number of patterns of social life (Thernstrom, 1965). A similar point has been made about Whyte's classic study of *Street Corner Society* (Whyte, 1955). Thernstrom (1968) questions the extent to which Whyte's evidence reflects the historical period in which the data was collected. As Pitt (1972) has argued, the field researcher is in danger of misinterpreting the present if historical sources are ignored.

Here, we might ask what constitutes an historical source? A classic statement is provided by Langlois and Seignobos, who maintain that 'The historian works with documents... For there is no substitute for documents: no documents, no history' (Langlois and Seignobos, 1898, p. 17). Indeed, they go on to remark: 'The search for and the collection of documents is thus a part, logically the first and most important part, of the historian's craft' (Langlois and Seignobos, 1898, p. 18). While the latter statement has much to commend it, in terms of indicating the style of research, the former statement concerning documents is problematic, as they restrict their meaning of the term 'document' to written sources alone. Such a definition can only add strength to the field researcher's argument for omitting historical material, as it can be maintained that many groups with whom field researchers work often do not produce a sufficient range of written documentary materials. But this puts an unduly narrow construction on both field research and documentary evidence.

There are two major questions here. First, what constitutes documentary evidence? Secondly, what constitutes a written document? As far as the writers in this section are concerned, documentary evidence is taken to include both written and oral sources. Mean-

while, the term 'written document' can be taken to include personal documents such as biographies, autobiographies, letters, diaries, sermons, poems, plays and novels. However, field researchers should be aware that historians use a wider range of data sources (census materials, parish registers, wills and inventories) and methodologies. Hobsbawm (1974) has indicated how social history has been influenced, shaped and stimulated by the methods, techniques and questions of other social sciences with the result that quantitative approaches are now used in historical studies (Wrigley, 1972), especially by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. In a discussion on the use of quantitative methods for the study of social data, Schofield (1972) has explained how a sample of historical documents should be drawn and how the results should be evaluated, while Anderson (1972) has discussed how quantitative and non-quantitative descriptive data can be used in historical studies. While a wide range of historical materials, techniques and approaches are available, the emphasis in this section is upon the collection of historical evidence construed in its broadest sense to include personal accounts of situations that are provided through oral and written sources.

The written sources of documentary evidence are varied. As Samuel shows (Chapter 19), there is a standard range of written documents that it is usual to gather in the study of local history. However, the documents that are available influence the perspective that is taken, as Samuel has commented elsewhere:

It is remarkable how much history has been written from the vantage point of those who have had the charge of running - or attempting to run - other people's lives, and how little from the real life experience of people themselves. (Samuel, 1975, p. xiii)

The result, according to Samuel is that we only obtain one perspective on the past, namely, that which is embodied in official documents. However, as Carpenter (1980) has shown, another perspective can be obtained from elite documents by interrogating them from another perspective. Nevertheless, Samuel

(1975) maintains that we need to find out about factory life from informants other than factory inspectors, prison life from informants other than prison reformers and to concentrate more attention on how people lived their lives. He argues that documentary evidence needs to embrace personal experience and oral testimony, if we are to successfully interpret the past.

A similar line of argument, in respect of written documents, has been advanced by Burnett, who claims that accounts of personal experiences need to be gathered from autobiographies and diaries, as

they are direct records of the person involved in the situation from which he or she writes at first hand. There is no intermediate reporter or observer to change the situation. The writer himself and alone selects the facts, incidents and events which are to him most important and in doing so he also unconsciously reveals something about his own attitudes, values and beliefs. (Burnett, 1977, p. 10)

Such accounts, together with those obtained from letters, biographies, speeches, sermons and other personal documents do indicate the way in which the individual perceived situations. However, as Okely (1978) has argued, this range of material often leads to gaps in the literature on women as they have rarely produced such materials.

It can be argued that the field researcher who collects personal documents is obtaining firsthand accounts from informants in the past. Certainly, Pons's discussion of contemporary interpretations of Manchester in the 1830s and 1840s (Pons, 1978) relies on participants' accounts (by Engels, Kay, Cooke Taylor, Parkinson, and others) to examine the salient features of Manchester society during the period. In this context, the informants provide observational material on nineteenth-century Manchester through documentary evidence. Several questions can be raised concerning the reliability, accuracy, representativeness and validity of these first-person accounts. The field researcher needs to consider: is the material trustworthy? Is the material atypical? Has the material been edited and refined? Does the autobiographical material only contain highlights of life that are considered interesting? Furthermore, it could be argued that the material is automatically biased as only certain people produce autobiographies and keep diaries; there is self-selectivity involved in the sample of material available; they do not provide a complete historical record. Nevertheless, such material does provide a subjective account of the situation it records; it is a reconstruction of part of life. Furthermore, it provides an account that is based on the author's experience. Angell (1945) has argued that personal documents can be used in a variety of ways: to secure conceptual hunches, to suggest new hypotheses, to provide a series of facts and the formulation of rough hypotheses from the facts. He maintains

that personal documents can also be used to verify hypotheses, to obtain an historical understanding of a person, group, or institution, and to provide an exposition.

However, for some groups with whom the field researcher works there is no written documentation and, in these cases, it is important for the researcher to consider using oral sources. Writing from an anthropological perspective Vansina defines the oral tradition as 'hearsay accounts, that is, testimonies that narrate an event which has not been witnessed and remembered by the informant himself, but which he has learnt about through hearsay' (Vansina, 1973, p. 20). Among African oral traditions, Vansina includes: rituals, lists of place names and personal names, official and private poetry, stories, and legal and other commentaries. He indicates that as these oral traditions were socially important in pre-literate societies, there were specific systems for handing down the testimony from one generation to another. Here, there is a danger of seeing oral testimony as something which is exclusive to pre-literate African societies that are discussed by Vansina. However, every society has topics that are not documented in written records, so that oral sources need to be used to make these topics visible. If we examine the folk tradition in England, we find that oral sources are important. This is clearly evident in the following remarks from Cecil Sharp, concerning the English folk song:

One of the most amazing and puzzling things about the English folk song is the way in which it has hitherto escaped the notice of the educated people resident in the country districts. When I have the good fortune to collect some especially fine songs in a village, I have often called upon the Vicar to tell him of my success. My story has usually been received, at first, with polite incredulity, and, afterwards, when I have displayed the contents of my notebook, with amazement. Naturally, the Vicar finds it difficult to realize that the old men and women of his parish, whom he has known and seen day by day for many a long year, but whom he has never suspected of any musical leanings, should all the while have possessed, secretly and treasured in their old heads, songs of such remarkable interest and loveliness. (Sharp, 1972, p. 131)

This point has been recognised not merely by those interested in rural culture, but also by those researchers who are interested in industrial contexts and the recent past. Indeed, Samuel (Chapter 19) highlights the importance of oral evidence.

Given this diversity of sources, to what use can they be put in field research? Paul Thompson (1978) has claimed that oral sources can provide a new dimension to research. Oral history, it is argued, provides material on individuals from whom or for whom very little

written documentary evidence is available. Secondly, it is argued that through oral history it is possible to obtain an account of everyday life and work. Finally, oral history gives people an opportunity to provide interpretations of their own lives. In these terms, it is considered that oral history can counteract the bias that exists in written historical sources. Above all, Gittins (1979) maintains that oral history provides an opportunity to 'get close' to the data in order that one can see how people interpreted their social relationships in the past. Such claims suggest great strengths for oral history, but against these claims a series of questions can be posed. How reliable is the evidence of oral history? How does it compare with other historical materials? How does it complement other data? Is it inferior to a document? How do you check the reliability of oral evidence? Here, we are confronted with questions concerning the validity, reliability and representativeness of oral sources. One way in which these data can be checked out is by comparing them with other sources. Meanwhile, they can also be checked for their own internal consistency.

Certainly, oral history has been used to bring forward a different perspective of the past. In particular, the work of George Ewart Evans (1970) has provided a unique chronicle of accounts of agricultural life in eastern England, as provided by a variety of country craftsmen: the saddler, the ploughman, and the gardener among many other country people. Similarly, Mary Chamberlain (1975) has provided a portrait of women in Gislea, an isolated village in the Fens. Such studies complement each other, as they provide accounts of another class or gender and give fresh insights into rural life. They complement written accounts about work in rural England. Similarly, accounts by researchers working in industrial and urban situations have filled gaps in our knowledge (for example, Ewart Evans, 1976). Bundy and Healy (1978) have used oral evidence to provide firsthand accounts of what poverty 'felt like' in Manchester, while Thorn (1978) uses oral history to provide insights into the significance of women's work at the Woolwich Arsenal during the First World War. Further accounts have been provided of dockyardmen (Waters, 1977), mining families (Harkell, 1978), and the trawling industry (Edwards and Marshall, 1977), that complement written accounts on work experience. In these circumstances, oral history provides a collection of 'stories' concerning people's lives. However, questions can still be raised concerning the representativeness of the individuals interviewed, their reliability as witnesses and the problem of the accuracy of their memories.

When E. P. Thompson (1976) reviewed Robert Moore's study of the Methodists in the Deerness Valley (Moore, 1974), he took the opportunity to raise several critical comments concerning oral testimony. Moore had used oral history interviews to gather data about

Wesleyans and Primitive Methodists, who had merged in the 1930s. Thompson, however, considered that the informants had provided evidence of a 'golden past' and date about their own self-image rather than any evidence from the past. Furthermore, he questioned the extent to which these elderly informants could know about the elements of life that were important to their parents and grandparents. In this respect, it is important for cross-checks to be made between oral evidence and documentary sources.

One form of historical data that combines both written and oral evidence is the life history. Life history materials have been widely used by social anthropologists as shown by Langness (1965). In sociology the classic life history was provided by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-20), in their study of the peasant Wladek. Further life histories were collected by members of the Chicago School, among which Shaw's account of Stanley (a jack roller) is probably best known (Shaw, 1930). Despite such studies being based on autobiographies, letters, diaries, court records, newspaper accounts, interviews with the key informant and with others, they are still regarded with some suspicion. Questions are raised concerning reliability, typicality and representativeness. Furthermore, as Faraday and Plummer (1979) indicate, questions can be raised concerning the extent to which life history materials assist sociological understanding. Evidence in favour of the use of life history material has been well documented by Denzin (1970) and by Becker (1966), who argue that life histories can help evaluate theories and provide a subjective assessment of institutional processes. They can also provide participants' accounts and help us to examine social processes and generate new questions. However, further work is required in this area, if we are to assess the utility of life histories. As there are few accounts of how to collect and analyse life history data, the chapter by Mandelbaum (Chapter 20) has been included in this section. He indicates how the field researcher can get beyond a collection of chronological materials when gathering life history data.

The use of documentary sources raises several questions concerning historiographical method. Central to written and oral materials are problems concerning the authenticity of documents, their availability, their selection, the inferences that can be drawn from them, the interpretation of data and the presentation of results. In addition, oral materials also raise ethical questions concerning the rights of the individual, the relationships between the researcher and the researched and the conflicts and obligations involved in data collection (Klockars, 1977; Faraday and Plummer, 1979). As a result of these questions, it would seem that any researcher using documentary evidence would need to know about the document, the informant and the context in which observation and data recording took place.

However, the problems do not end there. As E. P. Thompson demonstrates (Chapter 21), there are further questions to consider concerning the use of historical context, the application of sociological or anthropological concepts and the extent to which it is possible to generalise on the basis of the data that has been gathered. Here, Thompson has identified some of the classic pitfalls involved in using historical materials. However, if these can be avoided, it is evident that historical sources can provide the field researcher with a rich vein of material to complement the ethnographic present and provide deeper sociological insights into the way in which people lived their lives.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

#### METHODOLOGY

- Becker, H. (1966), 'Introduction' (to the Jack Roller), in C. Shaw, *The Jack Roller: a Delinquent Boy's Own Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix edition). A classic statement by a sociologist on life history materials.
- Bloch, M. (1976), *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press). A personal account of historical method in which the author indicates how history should be practised.
- Carr, E. H. (1964), *What Is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin); raises fundamental questions about the relationship between history and the social sciences.
- Faraday, A. and Plummer, K. (1979), 'Doing life histories', *Sociological Review*, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 773-98; examines the problems involved in doing life histories: social science problems, technical problems, ethical and political problems, and personal problems.
- Foster, J. and Sheppard, J. (1980), 'Archives and the history of nursing', in C. Davies (ed.), *Rewriting Nursing History* (London: Croom Helm), pp. 200-14; provides a useful discussion of archives together with appendices on references books, background reading and addresses of archives.
- Gittins, D. (1979), 'Oral history, reliability and recollection', in L. Moss and H. Goldstein (eds), *The Recall Method in Social Surveys* (London: University of London Institute of Education), pp. 82-97; discusses the problems of oral history, the way in which problems may be avoided and an overview of the strengths of the approach.
- Gottschalk, L., Kluckhohn, C. and Angell, R. (1945), *The Use of Personal Documents in History, Anthropology and Sociology* (New York: Social Science Research Council). Three essays on the way in which anthropologists, sociologists and historians utilise personal documents.
- Klockars, C. B. (1977), 'Field ethics for the life history', in R. S. Weppner (ed.), *Street Ethnography* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage), pp. 201-26. An interesting account on the ethics of doing life history based on the author's experiences of working on *The Professional Fence* (Klockars, 1974).
- Langlois, C. V. and Seignobos, C. (1898), *Introduction to the Study of History* (London: Duckworth). A classic statement on historiography.

- Langness, L. L. (1965), *The Life History in Anthropological Science* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston). An overview of life history material from an anthropological perspective.
- Lipset, S. M. and Hofstadter, R. (1968) (eds), *Sociology and History: Methods* (New York: Basic Books). A series of essays on history and sociology in America - contains several useful essays on concepts and methods.
- Platt, J. (1981), 'Evidence and proof in documentary research: some specific problems of documentary research', *Sociological Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 31-52.
- Platt, J. (1981), 'Evidence and proof in documentary research: some shared problems of documentary research', *Sociological Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 53-66. Two related articles that provide a useful discussion of documentary materials. These articles synthesise a range of sources and provide critical commentary and a personal account.
- Samuel, R. (1981) (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul); brings different types of historical work (for instance, local history, oral history, labour history and feminist history) into dialogue with one another.
- Thompson, E. P. (1976), 'On history, sociology and historical relevance', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 387-402. A review article concerning *Pit-Men, Preachers and Politics* (Moore, 1974). Thompson provides a critical discussion on the use of historical sources and a critique of oral history.
- Thompson, P. (1978), *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (London: OUP). A basic text on oral history that provides a very detailed bibliography and suggestions for further reading.
- Vansina, J. (1973), *Oral Tradition* (Harmondsworth: Penguin). A detailed discussion of oral tradition as a means of reconstructing the past.
- Wrigley, E. A. (1972) (ed.), *Nineteenth Century Society* (Cambridge: CUP). A series of papers on the use of quantitative methods for the study of social data.

#### EMPIRICAL STUDIES

There are many studies that now utilise historical sources; the following have been selected as they highlight the use of particular approaches.

##### *Written documents*

A collection of personal accounts or studies based on personal accounts:

- Bulmer, M. (1978) (ed.), *Mining and Social Change* (London: Croom Helm) (especially part 2, containing personal accounts by Benney, 1978; Chaplin, 1978; and Williamson, 1978).
- Burnett, J. (1977), *Useful Toil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- Pons, V. (1978), 'Contemporary interpretations of Manchester in the 1830s and 1840s', *Stanford Journal of International Studies*, vol. 13, pp. 51-76.
- Samuel, R. (1975) (ed.), *Village Life and Labour* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Samuel, R. (1977) (ed.), *Miners, Quarrymen and Saltworkers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).

*Oral history*

*On rural situations.* A series of accounts that all relate to rural life in eastern England. Some are based entirely on oral sources, some use oral material alongside other historical sources:

- Blythe, R. (1969), *Akenfield* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).  
 Chamberlain, M. (1975), *Fenwomen* (London: Virago).  
 Ewart Evans, G. (1970), *Where Beards Wag All: the Relevance of the Oral Tradition* (London: Faber).  
 Newby, H. (1977), *The Deferential Worker* (London: Allen Lane) (see chapter 1).

*On industrial situations.* A series of accounts that have been published in the journal, *Oral History*:

- Edwards, P. J. and Marshall, J. (1977), 'Sources of conflict and community in the trawling industries of Hull and Grimsby between the wars', *Oral History*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 97-121.  
 Frank, P. (1976), 'Women's work in the Yorkshire inshore fishing industry', *Oral History*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 57-72.  
 Harkell, G. (1978), 'The migration of mining families to the Kent coalfield between the wars', *Oral History*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 98-113.

- Hay, R. and McLauchlan, J. (1974), 'The oral history of Upper Clyde shipbuilders', *Oral History*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 45-58.  
 Thorn, D. (1978), 'Women at the Woolwich Arsenal, 1915-1919', *Oral History*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 58-73.  
 Waters, M. (1977), 'Craft consciousness in a government enterprise: Medway dockyardmen, 1860-1906', *Oral History*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 51-62.

*Life histories*

A series of studies that utilise life history materials:

- Bogdan, R. (1974), *Being Different: the Autobiography of Jane Fry* (New York: Wiley).  
 Jacobs, J. (1974) (ed.), *Deviance: Field Studies and Self-Disclosures* (Palo Alto, Calif.: National Press Books) (see part 2).  
 Klockars, C. (1974), *The Professional Fence* (London: Tavistock).  
 Plotnicov, L. (1967), *Strangers to the City* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press).  
 Shaw, C. (1930), *The Jack Roller: a Delinquent Boy's Own Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).  
 Thomas, W. I. and Znaniecki, F. (1918-20), *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (2nd edn) (New York: Dover), pp. 1831-2244.