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Geoffrey Bolton

Opening Address: 'Retrospect and Prospect'

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After some introductory remarks, Professor Bolton continued his opening address:

On the whole I think we are entitled to indulge in a little sober congratulation. The Branches formed after the first stimulus of our inaugural meeting have persisted. Several of them have held conferences and all have been active. Perhaps the greatest sign of our success is that during the last year or so we have attracted a little gentle criticism. Questions have been asked in the pages of *Quadrant* about the viability of oral history and its respectability as a form of intellectual endeavour.

It would be a great pity if there were thought to be a kind of divide between oral history - seen as popular, democratic and not quite serious history - and academic history - seen as intellectual, print-oriented, serious and the stuff that real historians dealt with. To my mind, it is one of the strengths of this Association that it has bridged any gaps which might exist between the academics and the rest of us outside the ivory towers. There has been a constant filtration - up and down - of ideas from scholarship on the one hand, and the real experience of the past on the other. In the light of this, it is worthwhile looking at the criticisms recently made of oral history to see how they need refutation, if at all.

The first criticism is that oral testimonies, particularly those of the elderly, may be inaccurate, and that what we are given is the construct which memory places on the past, rather than what actually happened in the past. This is undoubtedly a problem with writing all history. I cannot see that an oral testimony is any less trustworthy than what a writer may have chosen to commit to her or his diaries and letters. This applies particularly if - as it usually happens with evidence that survives in history - the person was a politician or a statesman. In any case, the psychologists will tell you that the character of memory in most of us is that it persists better for our earlier experiences than it does for our later experiences. It is a truth universally observed that professors of history are well able to remember data which they learnt thirty years ago, but totally unable to remember where they put their car keys last night!

I first had evidence of this as an oral historian some twenty years ago, when I was working in North Queensland. I was taken to see the oldest living sugar farmer in the Proserpine district who was in hospital, frail, but still very articulate at the age of ninety seven. As a witness about conditions in the early years of the Proserpine sugar industry he was a dead loss,

because that part of the tape had been wiped - he could not remember the fifty or so years when he had been toiling in the cane fields. But take him back to his twenties in the 1880s when he was driving for Cobb's Coaches between Townsville and Hughenden, and he could remember every stop on the road: the names of all the blacksmiths and the publicans on the road; the techniques used for shoeing the horses and looking after the harness; the sort of feed they used; and the problems about getting feed in drought years. It all came out in that frail voice, rather like a very old 78 rpm gramophone record, but it was all there. Wherever you could check it, the memory was dead accurate. We have all had experiences like this, and know that - by a circumstance that is truly blessed for historians - it is people's memories of the more remote past which tend to survive with greater clarity.

So I think we can defend the use of oral history without wasting too much time. What I feel it does behove us to do, however, is to make sure that the collection of oral history is undertaken with some regard for the ethics and standards of historical research, observing the same kind of principles as any other form of history. (There has recently been a case of somebody who has been trying a little lucrative pirating of oral history tapes.) We need to consider as an Association the adoption of a code of conduct to ensure that we have a care for the protection of our sources, and for the proper techniques of interviewing. People attracted to oral history - and it is an attractive and growing enterprise - will then know what is expected of them.

This is going to be particularly important because the areas of growth are very much in the experiences of common people, who have not been told in the past that their experiences were the stuff of history. When you wish to interview somebody for an oral history project, very often the first reaction is 'why me? I'm nobody important - nothing happened to me. All I did was run a dairy farm' or 'All I did was keep a house going during the Depression - what's unusual?' You have to talk to people sometimes quite patiently to let them see the quality and interest of their own experiences. Much of the thrust of oral history in the next few years is going to be in recapturing the experiences of the working classes and in looking at various migrant groups. To do this, we need to be able to assure people of our *bona fides* indicating that we have a well understood system of ethics.

The outgoing Committee leaves the Association in good health, and we commend the hard work and enthusiasm of individuals right through the Branches. In the community generally there seems to be a growing appreciation of what can be done and the media are now proving to be very receptive to the voices of the past. I am living in hope that we may stimulate that interest in Australia

next year by organising a visit from Paul Thompson (though this is still in the realms of conjecture).

I look back, I must confess, with considerable surprise as well as pleasure at the enjoyment and exhilaration which working in this area has given me. I came into it cold, returning from overseas, with wonder about what I had let myself in for. I depart with the feeling that the enterprise has been thoroughly worthwhile and that the papers presented at this Conference will reflect the vigour and health of the oral history movement in this country.