

Class, Status and Reminiscence: a Research Note

THE ARTICLES in this Symposium bear ample testimony to the growing interest in the social history of New Zealand. They reinforce, moreover, the vital necessity for history and sociology to profit from each other's specialized skills and traditions. The purpose of the present note is not to fulminate on the general implications of the above,¹ but to refer to particular problems encountered during the study of a New Zealand township, Johnsonville, from the 1840s to the present day. More specifically, I wish to comment on the appropriateness of oral history techniques in a society which has frequently placed privacy above understanding and thus, desirably or negligently, destroyed much of the written knowledge accumulated about men and women in past times.

Why Johnsonville? Acknowledging the fact that students of 'community' fall easy prey to their own predilections for rationalization after the event, one can stress a number of local factors which provide an interesting base for investigation. Johnsonville has tended to be dominated by Wellington over the years, economically, politically and socially, yet, at least until comparatively recently, it has managed to retain some semblance of autonomy. Changes in transport from stagecoach to the motorway have been a constant influence, whilst urban decentralization and national housing and land policies continually shaped the destiny of the area. But the rudiments of 'localness' have been preserved by political and religious institutions, the accidents of topography, and the traditions of 'village' life. In a nutshell, local, regional and societal changes can be studied in constant interplay — a relationship frequently missing in localities outside the mainstream of social change or ones immediately destroyed by the latter.²

The juxtaposition of varying social backgrounds in the area also provided illuminating reference points. If, for want of a more precise phrase, we describe Johnsonville as a working-class township and suburb

1 For an interesting discussion of recent inter-disciplinary debates see the symposium on sociology and history in *British Journal of Sociology*, XXVI, 3 (September 1976).

2 See the discussion of the contemporary utility of community studies in Colin Bell and Howard Newby, 'Community, Communism, Class and Community Action: the Social Sources of the New Urban Politics' in D.J. Herbert and R.J. Johnson, eds, *Social Areas in Cities*, London, 1976, pp.189-207.

for much of its history, the same could not be said of its immediate neighbours. Khandallah, to the south, has a far more salubrious visage, whilst Ohariu, to the north, has retained its agricultural function far more consistently than surrounding residential suburbs. Thus, in the space of a few miles, town and country, farming and commerce, high status and low, combine to form an interesting amalgam.

Let us turn to an examination of the methodological difficulties which arise from the latter contrasts between the class and status³ differences portrayed in neighbouring settlements. The distributional facets of life situations and life styles posed difficult but not insuperable problems in the Johnsonville study. The 1884 Freeholders Return, early land deeds, electoral and jury lists, gave an illustration of at least certain forms of property ownership in the nineteenth century. The availability of Town Board rating valuation books for certain years⁴ provided an invaluable source of data, which enabled computation of individual and family holdings, patterns of residential segregation and the division of tenure in subsequent decades. These records were linked to street directories⁵ so that property ownership could be equated with employment status, albeit approximately given the well-known problems of traceability, and the complexities of constructing historically reliable measures of occupation. Further insights into local inequalities were gleaned from the minimal information available on local, provincial and national income statistics which at least allowed certain linkages between occupation, property ownership and level of remuneration to be made.⁶

Marriage registers were used extensively to examine patterns of homogamy and occupational and geographical mobility — sixteen hundred local marriages being recorded between 1883 and 1970.⁷ Once again the difficulties of using such evidence should be familiar. Leaving aside the crucial importance of using occupation as a social indicator over time, there are problems associated with comparisons between groom and groom's father at different points in their careers; of assuming a continuity of residence between birth and time of marriage and the constant influences of geographical movements on social mobility patterns.⁸ One only has to ponder on the notion that moving up also fre-

3 The terms 'class' and 'status' follow classical Weberian definitions in this paper. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 3 vols, edited by G. Roth and C. Wiltich, New York, 1968.

4 Complete valuation books were available for 1905, 1911, 1926, 1938 and 1951.

5 The earliest directory available was the Wise's Directory for 1868, although the size of settlement precluded detailed analysis until the 1880s.

6 Readers will be aware that detailed wage and salary figures (requiring very cautious analysis) are not readily available until the 1926 Census.

7 These included the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian parishes — all marriages were recorded between these dates, rather than a sample.

8 There is a considerable literature on these problems but the most useful text proved to be Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West*, Harvard, 1975. But see the symposium edited by Stephen Thernstrom in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, VII, 2 (Autumn 1976).

quently meant moving out for many individuals, to appreciate the difficulties of measuring the influence of *both* types of fluidity on local mores. Irrespective of these pitfalls, in a situation where virtually nothing beyond mere conjecture is known about occupational mobility in New Zealand (and therefore its relation to patterns of class closure) even partial indications of the type that marriage registers provide are invaluable.

But how is one to examine the nuances of class and status *relationships* in the locality? That is to say, those often subtle expressions of authority in work and community situations and the blend of language, gesture and habit which potentially separate distinctive life styles. The nature of class imagery and status consciousness, moreover, remains largely uninvestigated in New Zealand, at least within a historical vein, although it represents a vital aspect of any study of local stratification and its connection to wider societal contradictions. The meanings attached, for example, to inequality and egalitarianism⁹ or the presence of deference patterns¹⁰ lie at the heart of questions related to class consciousness and status differentiation. The limited evidence on these topics available to date tends to be drawn from fragments of literary evidence or more simply from political rhetoric.¹¹ As in many other societies the histories of most working people, not to speak of the more fortunate in New Zealand, remain unrecorded and thus any reconstruction of their past has to be inferred from such letters, diaries, and newspapers as still remain. One further area of discovery, however, is available, at least in terms of the more immediate past: namely the memories or reminiscences of those still living.

Oral history is currently mildly fashionable in Britain and the United States and there are signs that it may become so in New Zealand.¹² There is already a firm tradition within Maori scholarship¹³ and some specific forays into 'pakeha culture' have been made.¹⁴ My experience from the Johnsonville study suggests that oral history techniques should be fully utilized by students of New Zealand history, but some cautionary comments are certainly necessary. The strengths of the oral history approach as a source of data became immediately visible soon after fieldwork commenced. Throughout a two year period over one hundred interviews were conducted with residents, old and new, in the Johnsonville area, some tape-recorded, others extensively noted following discussion. These

9 H.G. Oxley, *Mateship in Local Organisation*, Brisbane, 1973.

10 Howard Newby, *The Deferential Worker*, London, 1977.

11 Erik Olssen, 'The "Working Class" in New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History*, VIII, 1 (April 1974), 44.

12 Note, for example, the recent conferences in Hamilton and Wellington specifically on the subject and the on-going debates in *Oral History*, University of Essex, England. For the most useful and readable recent appraisal, see Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, London, 1978.

13 The most recent being Michael King, *Te Puea*, Wellington, 1977.

14 A.J. Simpson, *The Sugarbag Years*, Wellington, 1974.

interviews were loosely structured but certain central topics were focused upon: the individual's autobiography; their perceptions of major social changes in the locality, including political personalities and events; and, most important, their verbalizations of the meanings attached to 'class' and 'status' relationships and imagery. This material provided a wealth of information which posed many methodological questions encountered in overseas studies.¹⁵ These ranged from the technical problems related to recording and transcription to the shortcomings of small, non-random sampling frames, and the 'distortions' introduced by the rose-coloured or heavily shaded spectacles donned by numerous informants.¹⁶ However, certain continuities between 'hard' and 'soft' data soon emerged which seemed to support the usefulness of oral techniques. For example, specific accounts of events, changes and personalities appeared consistently enough to warrant cautious acceptance of their validity. In particular, the links between wealth and political control soon became evident.

The same names frequently recurred in connection with people's accounts of local wealth and spheres of influence. Qualitative descriptions could be cross-checked against the quantified measures of inequality previously alluded to and evidence available from local newspapers and voluntary association records. Certain checks on memory were also introduced so that overall reliability could be assessed. A list of important local dates was drawn up and referred to when transcripts were finally analyzed. One could not expect every person to remember the precise timing of past events but a consistent approximation suggested reliability, whilst frequent confusions or omissions invited caution if not rejection. As valuation records and local maps allow residential reconstructions to be made at various points in time, all informants were asked to describe the layout of 'the village' during particular periods in some detail. Cross-referencing of the two sets of data provided a further guide to the general accuracy of reminiscences.

Despite these safeguards, most verbal reconstructions of the past *do* remain within a highly subjective frame of reference often rightly scorned by adherents to more 'traditional' sociological and historical methods.¹⁷ Memories and images of past times are often incoherent and always susceptible to the promptings of the listener, or, more commonly, spurious distillation of the evidence after the event.¹⁸ Paradoxically, the most extreme hazards of the oral history tradition rest on the polarities of unquestioning acceptance or outright rejection of verbal evidence. On the one hand the utterances of informants can be treated as sacred and

15 See discussions in *Oral History*, particularly Paul Thompson, 'Problems of Method in Oral History', 1, 1.

16 What Vansina has eloquently termed 'the testimony as a mirage of reality'. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, London, 1965.

17 See the comments of E.P. Thompson in *British Journal of Sociology*, 1976.

18 Howard Newby, 'The Dangers of Reminiscence', lecture delivered to conference on 'Folk-Lore and Local History', Standing Conference for Local History, London, 1973.

therefore seemingly unworthy of the rigorous strictures applied to other forms of textual analysis. Conversely, completely to reject the validity of oral transcripts denies the vital importance of reminiscences as social influences in their own right.

It is somewhat of a cliché to argue that individuals continually use recollections of their past to explain the present and make some attempt to shape their future. Yet, if this is accepted, the value of oral history should be evident. Firstly, as a valuable source of descriptive background material *per se*; that is as a *supplement* to more orthodox historical reconstructions. Secondly, and perhaps more crucially, as often the *only* available measure of social relationships and imagery which must be adduced if analyses of, for example, class and social stratification, are to rise above purely external impressionistic *a priori* assumptions about the workings of past society. In essence, therefore, the greatest dangers arise from over-reliance on reminiscences to bolster our own theoretical preconceptions of what society was and should be like, or glib denials of the utility of using a potentially vital source of information where other forms of evidence are totally lacking. Incoherence and idiosyncrasy, moreover, are labels which frequently disguise a misplaced view of society as uniform and orderly. Numerous studies of class imagery, for example, have shown that most people do not carry around neatly framed mental 'models' of class so beloved by social scientists.¹⁹ In the Johnsonville study, a wide range of perceptions was discovered which related to individual work and community situations. Recollections of discrete housing areas, levels of property ownership and income, often coincided with distributions drawn from archival material. But reconstructions of past life styles and the symbols attached to such concepts as 'egalitarianism', 'deference' or 'mateship' displayed a complexity and richness of detail totally missed by other forms of data acquisition. Quite simply, an incongruity between objective conditions and subjective impressions of personal relationships was often the norm. Rather than treating the latter as false or epiphenomenal my own persuasion was to view such ambiguities as central to any pronouncements about, for example, current *embourgeoisement* or class hegemony debates in New Zealand.²⁰

Remembrances of individual mobility patterns and how these are viewed by others, the subtleties or otherwise of residential segregation, the place of leisure and political association in forming or obscuring social cleavages,²¹ all take on a richer tone from personal reminiscence and enable one to draw generalized conclusions about their connection to wider regional and societal perspectives. Much of this richness of detail

19 See, for example, Martin Bulmer, *Working-Class Images of Society*, London, 1976.

20 David Bedgood, 'Class Consciousness in New Zealand' in David Pitt, ed., *Social Class in New Zealand*, Auckland, 1977, pp.113-29.

21 See Erik Olssen, 'Social Class in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand', in Pitt, pp.22-41.

can only be gleaned from local studies²² that are prepared to pay credence to the full range of techniques available to the social scientist, including oral history. This is not to replace a vital concern with national and international frames of reference with parish pump trivia, but to argue for the continued profitability of studying the interplay between local and extra-local settings as an exploratory method.

However, to end on a cautionary note. We are not at the point where remembrances of past times have taken on the stature of the A to J's but there is a danger that the indiscriminate use of the taperecorder could prove even more personally intrusive than the social survey — and possibly as academically dubious, if cited as 'the method' by some researchers. In contrast, those dyed-in-the-wool historians or sociologists who narrowly assert that 'hard' data are all that is acceptable should re-appraise their thinking in the light of the available written evidence in New Zealand. If excesses in transparent acceptance or dogmatic rejection of oral history techniques are curbed, those techniques should play a valuable part in the already encouraging upsurge in local social history and may even provide a much needed stimulus for the inter-disciplinary exchange of ideas in this country and elsewhere.

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²² For a salutary comment see R.Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh*, Oxford, 1976, pp.7-8.