



FRAMING ORAL HISTORIES AS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS
IN *RAJ DAYS TO DOWNUNDER: VOICES FROM ANGLO-INDIA TO
NEW ZEALAND*¹

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INTRODUCTION

In the decade since 1996 I recorded about fifty oral histories with Anglo-Indians, British and a few people from other minority communities who were born and lived in British India (*Anglo-India*), but subsequently immigrated. The oral histories are archived at the Macmillan Brown Library at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, with a number also archived at the Alexander Brown Library in Wellington, New Zealand.² These primary sources have been utilized for several research projects over the last decade, and citations to some of the resultant articles are provided in the footnotes at relevant points in this paper for those interested in the wide use of oral histories. As the focus of the anthology *Raj Days to Downunder* is specifically on migrants to New Zealand (*Downunder*), not all the life stories were included in the book because several interviewees were migrants to England and Australia, only thirty being members of families who became residents in New Zealand.³ Except for one, all the interviewees were old enough to remember the lifestyle prior to the withdrawal of British Colonial rule (*The Raj*) in 1947.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was originally presented at the 8th Biennial Conference of the International Auto/Biography Association 'Framing Lives', at Canberra, Australia, July 2012. The present article is an adapted version of that paper published in *Oral History in New Zealand*, Vol. 24, 2012, pp. 8-12. I wish to acknowledge and thank the National Oral History Association of New Zealand for permission to further adapt and reproduce that article here.

² An award by the National Oral History Association of New Zealand funded ten initial recordings, and the original of these tapes and transcripts are archived at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

³ The anthology was published by the author, *Raj Days to Downunder: Voices from Anglo-India to New Zealand*, Christchurch, 2010, 2nd edition 2011; available upon request to dorothysbookshop@gmail.com

British Colonial India had encompassed most of the subcontinent of India, including what is now Pakistan, Myanmar (formerly Burma) and Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), and several of the people interviewed are Anglo-Indians and people from areas outside what is now Independent India.⁴ Independence and Partition of South Asia in August 1947 resulted in the creation of the new state of West and East Pakistan, partition being on the basis of religion.⁵ During the upheaval and violence associated with Independence and Partition, an estimated one million people were slaughtered and ten million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs displaced from their homelands; interviewees who lived near affected areas recounted their experiences during these tragic times. Surprisingly, the British, Anglo-Indians and members of minority communities interviewed had not been targets of attack and, in fact, were often sought out as havens of safety by people and families at risk.⁶

WHY PUBLISH THE ALREADY ARCHIVED ORAL HISTORIES?

The motives to publish these interesting life stories was, firstly, to provide a heritage volume of the stories as a thank-you to the contributors and to enable them to share each other's stories. Secondly, as a heritage book it would provide future generations with a record about their ancestors who had experienced social life under the *Raj* in *Anglo-India* during the first half of the twentieth century, commonly perceived as an exotic bygone age. Thirdly, my aim was to make the oral history primary sources more readily accessible to individuals and historians working in the field of social history of South Asia by drawing attention to the oral history archive. Fourth, but by no means least, the book identifies a hitherto unrecognised migrant community into New Zealand and describes their resettlement and integration here.

⁴ A brief history of the term Anglo-Indian, the complexity and ambiguity of the legal definition has been described by the author in "Questioning the Stereotype: Anglo-Indians in New Zealand" presented at the Anglo-Indian Conference, Melbourne, Aust., 2002, viewable www.alphalink.com.au/~agilbert/questi~1.html. For further breakdown of the term, see also D. McMenamin, "Identifying Domiciled Europeans in Colonial India: Poor whites or privileged community?" in *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. III, No.1, June 2001, pp.106-127, viewable also at www.alphalink.com.au/~agilbert/cover11.html.

⁵ In 1971, East Pakistan ceded and became Bangladesh.

⁶ See D. McMenamin, "Anglo-Indian experiences during Partition violence and its impact upon their lives" in *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, June 2006, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 69-95. An earlier version of this paper "The curious exclusion of Anglo-Indians from mass slaughter during the Partition of India" can be found in *The International Journal of Anglo-Indian Studies*, 6:1 2006, www.alphalink.com.au/~agilbert/jed_16.html.

Over the years the contributors and I had become friends because I too had been raised in the Indian subcontinent, being the fifth generation of families resident in Anglo-India. In 2002 one Christchurch resident asked me to initiate a meeting between the local contributors, some of whom had never met anybody in New Zealand who had been born and raised in British India, since their arrival around the 1950s. We soon held quarterly social gatherings and it became apparent that there was a sense of a need by some of the interviewees and/or spouses that the younger generation should learn more about their heritage, especially as the older generation were disappearing. In fact I had been asked to speak at the funeral of one interviewee about their life in India to the family. Several men had not talked much about their earlier lives, considering it 'irrelevant' in their New Zealand environment, and their spouses became a wonderful spur and encouragement towards fulfilment of my project.

Prior to final editing of the manuscript, I made contact with each of the thirty contributors in New Zealand, or if they had died their families, because I felt an ethical obligation to ensure they would be comfortable with the stories appearing in the public domain. It is one thing for interviewees to consent to their voices being recorded for posterity in some, imagined, dusty archive and quoted in articles occasionally; but quite another to have a fully transcribed version available for scrutiny by extended family and friends. This was later confirmed with some vehemence by several contributors, especially one who decided to withdraw her story. In addition and most importantly, I wished to obtain family photographs to maximise the appeal of the book and add another dimension to the already archived oral history collection.

THE EDITING PROCESS

Due to the perceived urgency to compile the anthology, whilst I was engaged in another large research project, one of the interviewee's wives, my co-editor Sue Birch, volunteered to take over the hugely time-consuming task I had begun. This involved going through the complete typed oral history transcripts I had prepared for the archives, removing all the questions, deleting repetitions which are natural in spoken speech, and re-organising the narratives into chronological order under topic headings used in my original questionnaire. A copy of the draft questionnaire is

appended, although this merely formed a guide for an interview, where in fact important divergences and omissions took place, linked to the responses.⁷ Sue Birch completed this mammoth task over the period 2008-9, following which I edited the first drafts, making small changes to preserve privacy by deleting some named friends, family and other living individuals who might be embarrassed by the details. After deletion of the questions and repetitions, the word count remained around a massive 200,000! The task of proof reading by Sue and me was enormous, and to my dismay I still continue to find small errors. This is a problem born from a labour of love, without any funding or professional editorial assistance.

The book begins with a long introduction describing the overall project, explaining its objectives and unusual style. It also explains to readers unfamiliar with oral history, that the 'autobiographies' were based on answers to a questionnaire rather than being an autobiography of choice, thereby making the stories somewhat repetitious but with critical differences important to a historian. I had hoped to record and include a CD with the book, containing an extract of each voice, but although this did not eventuate, it remains a goal for a future edition. The stories contain many overlapping and repetitive descriptions, including some anomalies about lifestyles in Anglo-India. These repetitions and contradictions are deliberately retained as they form integral evidence for my project, representing important differing views relating to perceptions of life in a hierarchical, multicultural and multi-racial society. As a family heritage and primary historical resource, the book was never intended as a cover-to-cover read, but a book to dip into for insights into different lives.

The title page of each life-story tabulates the interviewee's place and date of birth as well as place and date of the interview, and where applicable, year of death. From this readers can calculate the age of the interviewee, as well as identify how much time had elapsed between events being described and the interview the time period from which past events were being described when interviewed. For example, at the time of interview the contributor might have had only two grandchildren, whereas at

⁷ The questionnaire was not provided to the interviewee before the oral history recording so that their responses were more open ended, not pre-rehearsed nor restricting replies specifically to a question. This encouraged a free and more imaginative engagement with their memories of the past. At the initial meeting prior to the recording, for preparation and to alleviate any anxiety, I would discuss and obtain their agreement to the range of topics to be canvassed.

the time of their death or publication, there might be many more grandchildren. Such details remain unchanged as at interview date.

Once the edited life stories were completed, I personally contacted each contributor to explain my proposed project and request family photographs for professional digital copying, the latter being an expensive but very worthwhile operation. There is no doubt in my mind that the wonderful old photographs are enjoyed immensely and are a major attraction to reading the stories. I travelled to the North Island of New Zealand (where the majority of interviewees were resident) to borrow, digitally copy and return the precious photographs – knowing that elderly people are loath to part with such treasures. Even with this plan and my assurances, two interviewees did not permit me to remove photographs from their albums for copying. One contributor died during the editing process and the only surviving daughter was delighted to learn about the recorded life story, and used quotes and incidents in the eulogy.

Although I had obtained and archived formal consents for public use of each oral history, I provided everyone with the first draft of their edited transcript because consenting to record an interview for a historical archive is rather different to the publication of a full transcript as an autobiography, as opposed to a narrative of personal choice.

For those living in Christchurch, I organised a social gathering to give each contributor the first edited copy of their interviews and asked them to contact me later to let me know their views regarding publication. For those living further afield I posted edited transcripts to the interviewees for their comment. Fortunately most of these people living further away, or a close family member, had email which made the ensuing communication process easier. After a few weeks, if I had not heard from someone, I telephoned to enquire whether they were happy for me proceed with their story. As it turned out, the appearance of their spoken narrative in a text for a public audience, aroused much controversy and, in a few instances, serious dilemmas.

CONTRIBUTORS' RESPONSES TO THE TRANSCRIPTS AND THE DILEMMAS

Of the thirty transcripts edited for publication, at the eleventh hour, one person decided their story should be excluded! I was dismayed, as we had progressed past the final editing stage. Out of respect for the interviewee's wishes I reluctantly succumbed even though the original consent would have allowed me to proceed. The reason given for withdrawal was that of being 'a private person'. Undoubtedly this was true, but herein is an ethical dilemma.

As historical researcher and oral historian, an important aspect of my project involved eliciting descriptions of different cultural attitudes towards others, including mixed-race groups. Because I was from the Indian subcontinent and part of the mixed-race community, the interviewees felt relaxed and able to speak openly about issues which are not so easily discussed these days due to changed ideas about racism and differing cultural values and attitudes, particularly regarding a time prior to politically correct vocabularies. Racial differences of a past era remain a sensitive topic not easily conveyed in a contemporary context. But the topic was an important section in my questionnaire, and the interviewees found it easy to discuss their views with me. It is likely that the contributor who withdrew their story was uneasy about their family situation in Anglo-India being exposed to a New Zealand audience, particularly to extended family and friends. My introductory comments discuss the inclusion of some terms, perhaps now considered politically incorrect because, I argue, these views and experiences offer valuable insights for today's burgeoning multicultural societies. However since the interviewee simply wished to withdraw, not identify areas that could be omitted, I had no alternative other than to accept the decision.

Thus the anthology contains only twenty-nine life stories, of which thirteen interviewees resided in the Christchurch area, fourteen in the North Island and two had moved overseas. Of these contributors, nine had previously died, whilst five were too old or suffering dementia so were unable to comment on the edited drafts. Except for one interviewee who had died in 1999, and whose family I was unable to contact, I provided transcripts to each of the contributors, or their living spouse or a close family member. Of the interviewees who checked the transcripts, only three did not request some change. In principle most people were happy to have their

stories published, but in fact only one interviewee actually told me that the edited transcript was what had originally been said, therefore acceptable in print – a comment that I had wrongly, as it turned out, expected from most interviewees. A few other interviewees pointed out inaccuracies in the transcripts due to ambiguous pronouns, although the main criticism was that the interviewees wished to amend the grammar in their oral testimony.

The vast majority wanted to have changes and/or corrections incorporated because they had subsequently realised they had either originally made errors, or disliked their spoken words used as a text. They wished to incorporate grammatical amendments to the expression in conformity with how they might have written their own stories. Three reported being ‘horrified’ at seeing their spoken expression in print, because as one said, they would ‘never have written like that!’ Another felt that the spoken language in print made them, in their opinion, appear foolish. Despite assurances that it was the spoken style of their oral recordings that I wished to preserve in the text, rather than how they would have chosen to write an autobiography, these contributors remained anxious to amend their stories. Three others wished to amend errors which they had made at the time of the interview, relating to genealogies or details of past events, and wanted the record corrected.

Initially I had intended the anthology to remain true to the original oral histories, reflecting the truths perceived at that time irrespective of fallible memories. However after discussion with the people who wished to incorporate corrections, I decided that the changes would add an extra dimension to the archives and by allowing the contributors to suggest their own amendments, I thereby somewhat retained their individual voices. After a few telephone conversations, contributors who lived out of Christchurch mailed the hard copies back with their annotated corrections, or I made the changes requested during telephone discussions. Even if I was unhappy with some of the passages marked for omission, I accepted their decisions, and in many other instances was more than pleased to have the corrections. The original recordings and transcripts remain intact in the archives, whilst the edited versions in the anthology reflect important sensitivities, as well as correcting unintended errors in the originals.

More problematically for me, three of the interviewees insisted that large extracts be omitted from their published stories. One deletion was a detailed description of a sibling who had been a controversial figure in New Zealand politics. The interviewee did not wish to ignite a dormant controversy as it was felt a larger time-gap was appropriate before further publicity opened this again. Another contributor unfortunately deleted all polemics from the draft text in which cultural differences had been described between communities in India, particularly with reference to Muslims. I assumed this was due to fear of criticism or even persecution, although nothing controversial had been recorded. The third instance was of a contributor who insisted that the strong opinions voiced about Hindu caste divisions should be omitted because it was causing serious family disharmony and, furthermore, these views were considered irrelevant in a New Zealand context. In the latter case, negotiations to delete the 'offending' passages involved long phone conversations in which the interviewee explained the changes required to be made by me, because the person did not have sufficient keyboard skills to make the necessary amendments. Email attachments with draft changes were exchanged, followed by phone conversations, until final agreement was reached. Although I tried to persuade the interviewees to retain the information originally elicited, when I could see this was in vain, I acquiesced to their wishes.

I was disappointed by the latter two deletions because they comprised important and fascinating personal perspectives; but fortunately the original archival material survives. Conversely, another interviewee decided to supplement their family history, and asked for an addendum to be recorded in the second edition of the anthology (2011), which detailed a spicy story of murder and intrigue rumoured to have occurred in relation to a paternal grandparent. If the rumour was true, it meant that the person always assumed to be the grandfather was in fact a surrogate, not the biological ancestor! The story had not been told in the original interview because it was based on rumour, not confirmed as factual, although several older family members believed it to be the truth. Following discussion with family members, it had been decided it was important to include the details which might become a salient genealogical factor for future generations.

RECEPTION OF THE PUBLICATION

The first short-run of one hundred copies of the self-published anthology was produced in late 2010 and I provided each contributor, or their family, with a complimentary copy of the book in appreciation of their participation in the project. I was well rewarded by comments from contributors' family members, many of whom purchased multiple copies for their children and/or siblings. A few typographical errors were picked up, which have been corrected in the second issue produced in 2011.

I subsequently discovered that in some cases, surviving family members had either regrets or disagreements about the interviewee's memoirs, which became controversial issues within their families. However, such controversies should not be unexpected, as only few siblings agree on all details of common memories! The fact that the stories are recorded and have been made accessible for discussion and debate by extended family members, is part of the on-going process in memory-making and relevance of past lives into the present, and future.

Of particular pleasure was a comment made by an avid reader, a New Zealander who had never visited India, who read the book cover-to-cover and told me it had been "like having a conversation with twenty-nine different people". Such is the appeal of the spoken word, which I was delighted to know, had successfully been retained despite the editing process.

Another observation I would like to share with oral historians who may consider publishing transcripts of a specific oral history project, are comments received from a New Zealand PhD candidate embarking on a topic located in Colonial India. Jane McCabe wrote that *Raj Days to Downunder* was an "amazing example of what can be achieved by ... taking oral histories of a specific period of history and lay them beside each other". She went on to say that these stories were educating her "about the subtleties of the Anglo-Indian experience in a way that other texts could never do".⁸ Publishing the primary resource of oral histories as a text thus not only has the

⁸ Personal email from Jane McCabe dated 16 August 2011.

value of accessibility, but adds the value of subtle details being easily compared, critiqued, and cited.

This and various other feed-back have affirmed the fact that oral histories are an extremely powerful means of communicating specific historical understandings and contexts, especially from one generation to another. Furthermore, publicity from the publication serves to point researchers and anyone interested, towards the original archive where, very importantly, the actual voices convey their unique personal resonances and other person-to-person interactions and social dimensions.

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APPENDIX

Als and Domiciled Europeans in NZ: Questionnaire: 24/7/00 amended 9/12/08 Ensure Release Form and Personal details Sheet completed.

Pre-introduction before recording: Assurances

- asking general questions which have no right or wrong answers
- Often I know the answers, but still need to ask and have reply on tape
- Deviate as much as you like to add information as and when
- No obligation to answer all questions; simply refuse

CHECK MACHINE SWITCHED ON AND WORKING!

Personal family background:

1. Would you kindly tell me full name, date and place of birth?
2. Roughly how long was your family in India?
3. Do you know who the first members of our family to go to India?

4. Do you know why and when other grandparents went to India?
5. What did your original ancestors to India do? Subsequent people?
6. Have you looked into your family tree?
7. What did you parents do in India? Mother/father? Others of interest?
8. Do you have brothers and sisters? Details.
9. Where did you all grow up?

Education in India:

10. Where did you and siblings go to school?
11. What type of school was that? School uniform and standard of education?
12. What did you and siblings do when you left school? At what age?
13. Was anyone allowed to attend that school (Indians?)
14. Tell me about your jobs in India.
15. Are any of our family still in India?
16. Did you think schooling was expensive?
17. Do you consider this education in India to be a good standard?

Accommodation:

18. Did you/your family own or rent your home?
19. What sort of accommodation did you live in? (Child/later/etc.)
20. Describe the accommodation. Materials, furnishings?
21. Describe home garden, servants/quarters, cooking?

Dress/Culture:

22. What type of dress did you wear (adult/child) Indian or western style?
23. What sort of meals would you eat? Breakfast, snacks, lunch, tea, dinner/supper?
24. Did you eat with your fingers or use cutlery?
25. Eat at table? How was the table set?
26. Who prepared the meals? Did you eat out much?
27. Could you describe a typical day in your childhood in India?

Language:

28. What language did you speak at home?

29. What language did you speak at school/work?
30. Can you speak any Indian languages?
31. If speak Urdu/Hindi, what form of grammar? *Tum or arp? ka naam kya hy?*

Servants:

32. Did you have servants? As a child, how many? Adult, how many?
33. What was the normal sort of contact between you and your servants?
34. What language did you communicate with them?

Marriage (in India):

35. Who did you marry? Nationality?
36. What did your spouse do? (work/job?)
37. How did you meet?
38. Did you go out alone before married, or with chaperone/friends?
39. Have you read books such as Bhowani Junction?
40. Would you agree it correctly reflect the lifestyle and morality amongst AIs?
41. Any further comments on such ideas and standards?
42. It has frequently been suggested that morality was 'slack' do you agree? Then?
43. Did you know of illegitimate children born in the AI community?
44. How were they perceived, treated by others?
45. Do you have any children?

Society:

46. What kind of people made up your usual social circle in India?
47. Did you have Indian friends? Did they visit your home?
48. Did you or family belong to any clubs?
49. What kinds of activities were available at those clubs?
50. Was anyone entitled to join any club they wished?
51. Was there a dress code for clubs? Suit/tie? Stockings?
52. Could males or females attend the clubs alone?
53. Was membership expensive? (Blackballing exist?)
54. Any class distinctions between people at the clubs?

55. What difference did such distinctions make/mean?
56. Was club life the centre of your social life?
57. Was there equal membership for everyone? Brits, DEs, Als, Indians?

Religion:

58. What religion was your family?
59. Did they attend church regularly?
60. Was religion an important part of your life?
61. Did people dress up for church?
62. Did church form part of your social life?
63. Did you know, and what did you think of the local religions around you?

Anglo-Indian:

64. Who do you consider was an Anglo-Indian? Describe.
65. Who were Eurasians?
66. Who were Domiciled Europeans?
67. 1918 legal category considered all above Anglo-Indians, do you agree?
68. Could you try and describe the differences between British, Als, Des, Eurasians and Indian Christians? Were there other groups? Goans?
69. Was there inter-marriage between these groups?
70. Did Des or Als marry local Indians? i.e. Muslims and Hindus?
71. How did people in your own social group usually prefer to marry?

Nationality:

72. In terms of nationality how do you describe yourself?
73. Is that the same nationality you would have said when in India?
74. How and why have your ideas of nationality changed?

Political:

75. Have you heard of Frank Anthony? Lawyer, and past leader of AI community?
76. Heard of his predecessors, Gidney?
77. Know of any other AI or DE community leaders?

78. Frank Anthony suggested in his book *Britain's Betrayal in India* that Als and Des should consider themselves Indians, natives. Do you agree?
79. Did you or would you have felt part of Anthony's AI community?
80. Would you have joined the All India AI Association pre and post Independence?
81. Did/Do you belong to any AI or British Indian Clubs after leaving India?

Partition/Leaving India:

82. How did you/your family feel when realized British withdrawing from India?
83. Did the fact that partition would occur make any difference to where you lived?
84. Where were you living at the time of Partition.
85. How did partition/independence affect you/your family?
86. Did it cause any people you know to lose their jobs?
87. Did it make any difference to children's schooling?
88. What are your most vivid memories regarding partition?
89. Did you know much about the riots and violence around you/elsewhere?
90. How did these riots affect your everyday life?
91. How did the withdrawal of British Govt. and local takeover affect you?
92. Did you stay/leave?
93. Did you experience any particular problems saying-on/leaving?
94. Did the British Govt help you to stay/leave? Your family?
95. Was your subsequent entry to UK/Aus/NZ/US etc. assisted by British or local governments?
96. Do you see yourself/family having played a part in historical picture of Indo/Pak? How?

Looking back:

97. How do you feel about having grown up in India? Regrets?
98. Did it help or hinder you settling into your new life?
99. Have you ever been back to India or Pakistan?
100. How did you find it/why not?
101. Do you still identify yourself with India? In what way?
102. How did you cope with poverty in India, beggars and bazaars?

103. Did you experience food shortages?
104. Did you/your family experience bad health/disease in India?
105. What other areas of interest would you like to mention re life in India?
106. Where did you/your family go after leaving India? (Details)
107. How, why and when did you get to New Zealand? (Details/settling in/etc.)

New Zealand:

108. What made you/your family decide to come to NZ?
109. What are your first memories about arriving in New Zealand?
110. What transitional/settling in experiences do you recall?
111. What was the most difficult aspect of changing country/home
112. Have you felt 'foreign'? When, where and why?
113. What school/jobs did you first obtain out of India?
114. Do you, or have you ever, considered yourself Indian? (Anglo-I?) or other?
115. How would you describe your socio-economic position in NZ? Changes?
116. Do you own your own home? Other properties?
117. Have you or your family ever been on the 'dole' social security in NZ?
118. What would you like to say about your life in NZ?

Prepared by Dorothy McMenam

Anglo-Indian oral history questionnaire.