



INTERVIEW WITH DONALD A. RITCHIE

At the fall meeting on November 17, OHMAR will present its 1984 Forrest Pogue Award for distinguished and significant service to oral history to Donald A. Ritchie, Associate Historian of the Senate Historical Office. In connection with that award, he was interviewed by Martha Ross on August 13, 1984. Portions of that interview follow:

ROSS: If we might I'd like to get into a bit of your personal background as we begin, to put your life as a historian into a personal context. Can you tell me a little bit about your family background and your early years?

RITCHIE: Well, I come from Geraldine Ferraro's Congressional District in Queens, New York, which I'm glad to see has finally gotten some recognition. My family has lived there for years and years...I went to the same high school that my parents went to, and that my grandfather went to, which is very unusual in New York. I left Newton High School in Queens and, while most of my friends were going to Queens College, I went to C.C.N.Y. [City College of New York] in Manhattan. From my neighborhood you could...see the skyline of Manhattan, and it was always like Oz to me. That was where I wanted to go...

While I was at City College, I came to the conclusion that I liked history. I did well in it, and I had some very good professors. Probably the most influential professor I had as an undergraduate was Fred Israel, who was a very imaginative fellow...He conducted his upper level course as a seminar and sent us out doing projects...One of the things he had us do was go out and interview three people who lived through the Depression. In a sense, this was my first experience with oral history. Like most of the other people in the class, I interviewed my parents and grandmother. That was interesting because I found out that my parents had very different experiences...The whole class discovered that not everybody suffered during the Depression. We just had the image that everybody was in a bread line and everybody was selling apples, and suddenly you began to see the gradations in society.

The most imaginative person in the class...went out and interviewed a bookie and

a priest. He said that the bookie told him he never did better business than he had during the Depression, and the priest remembered that there were a lot more dinners in the church basement, so his social life was more active during the Thirties, so that also gave me an inkling that you had to be as varied as possible with the subjects of your interviews...

Eventually I was looking around for graduate school in 1967, partly to get a master's degree so I could teach in high school, and partly to stay in school so I wouldn't get drafted, because the war and the draft were all going on. Fred Israel strongly recommended the University of Maryland, for a number of reasons. One, he said it was near the Library of Congress...The second was that he knew some of the faculty members, including [Horace Samuel] Sam Merrill [who became my doctoral advisor]...

I discovered, to my surprise, that while I thought a master's degree was about all I was every going to be able to attain that it didn't seem to be all that difficult. It was a strong department with at least 120 teaching assistants on the top floor of Francis Scott Key Hall. There were some really excellent people--people with whom I still associate and who are publishing books and doing interesting things in Washington and around the country. There was just a general fervor of being a graduate student at that time...So I really began to feel at home in that environment, and then began to think, "Well, maybe I should go on for a Ph.D."...I never did go back to New York to teach high school as I had thought...

After being drafted and serving in the Marines for two years, I returned to the University of Maryland. I finished my Ph.D. in April of 1975, and then I was a gypsy teacher for about two years in all the area schools: University of Maryland University College, Northern Virginia Community College, George Mason University--wherever, whenever. I worked also at the AHA [American Historical Association] with Walter Rundell on a bibliography study. And then the Senate in its wisdom decided to create a historical office, and lo and behold, they hired me. I've been there ever since.

ROSS: Well, back a little bit to the selection of your dissertation topic--how did that come about?



RITCHIE: ...When I first got to Maryland I was in a readings seminar and sat next to Carolyn Sung, who worked in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. She kept telling me about this fascinating character whose papers she was cataloging. I picked up bits and pieces here and there, and stored it in the back of my mind with all sorts of other trivial pursuits...Later, when looking for a dissertation subject, I ran into Carolyn Sung, and asked her, "Whatever happened to that fascinating manuscript collection that you were processing?" That was James Landis, and I would up writing about him...

I started in 1972, doing fairly traditional manuscript research--there are some 200 boxes of his papers at the Library of Congress--and I came across a portion of a transcript that was marked pages 650 through 700. It was Landis talking about the last years of his life...but I didn't know where it came from, or where the first 650 pages were.

Fortunately there was a person at the University of Maryland in the History Department who was teaching oral history. Walter Rundell said, "Talk to Martha Ross. She'll tell you what this is all about..." I described it to Martha Ross, who told me it sounded like something that Columbia might have done and that I should get in touch with Elizabeth Mason at Columbia University. The complete interview was there, but those were the days before they had microfilmed the Landis interview...and for various reasons they refused to allow you to photocopy it. So I sat there, from Monday through Friday, copying on little white note cards in pencil, 700 pages worth of oral history transcript, because I wanted everything...I was so absorbed at one point on a Friday afternoon, trying desperately to finish what I was doing, that I didn't notice I was the last person there...Then Betty Mason came out in a big winter coat and hat and boots, and said, "Aren't you leaving?" I said, "Well, it's only four o'clock. Aren't you open until five?" And she said, "Yes, but there's a blizzard outside! There's 14 inches of snow!" I didn't know anything about it...

The oral history that Landis did really changed and opened everything up for me at that stage, because that with his papers really gave me a solid base to do a biography from. And that got me interested enough to

want to begin to interview people who knew Landis and get their impressions. Also he had only talked about his public life...I wanted to know about his marriage...and about his children, and about his second wife, and so these were the people that I sought out for interviews. I spent quite a lot of time doing that, and weaving it into the manuscript. I hope that the biography gives a flavor of that, both the scholarly apparatus and also the first-person immediacy. Landis' interview--which was a superbly done interview--was done by a fellow named Neil Gold. He also did an interview with Ferdinand Pecora, about whom I had written an article. I thought both of them were really outstanding jobs, and I've always used them as models for my own interviews...

ROSS: In your position as Associate Historian in the Senate, you're also doing interviews, and I gather that the types of interviews you're doing are more what we would call archival interviews. Can you tell me a little bit about that work and how you approach it?

RITCHIE: We wanted to do oral histories with longtime staff members of the Senate who were recently retired. A lot of them had come when the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 had created the first professional staff. They had spent their careers with the Senate since the 1940s...It struck us that these were the people who had observed what was going on, had written the background papers and the speeches, and who had helped to draft the legislation. They knew all the foibles of the famous senators, and yet they were professionally anonymous...So they would not leave a record for history...It seemed like this was a service we could do, and that since we were part of the institution we could establish rapport, we could identify these people, we could interview them, and they could feel comfortable giving us an interview...The interviews have worked out very nicely. It is an archival project; we deposit copies in the Library of Congress and the National Archives, and at related senatorial collections. We have a microfilm edition as well.

ROSS: Chita Fry has addressed the different approach of the person who is interviewing somebody for an archival collection...and the person who is usually working on a scholarly

study...You have done both kinds of interviews, although not for the same individual. Do you have a sense of there being things that, if you were actually doing a biography of this individual...that perhaps you would ask different questions or would probe maybe more deeply?

RITCHIE: I think they're very different types of projects. When I did my bibliography for Landis, I listed "Oral Histories and Interviews," and I really saw them as different. I'm conscious when I'm doing my interviews of a future researcher coming to use them, and I think about my use of the Landis interview that Neil Gold did, and how useful that was to me, and also how frustrating it was. On one hand, Gold was a very good follow-up person. There were lots of unexpected things that popped up during the interview, and he would say, "Oh, I didn't know anything about that. Tell me about it." And Landis would tell him about it.

But then there were other points when I would be reading along saying, "Now ask him about this," or, "Ask him about that." And, of course, he didn't; he would go on to something else and I never got the answer to my question.

Every interviewer, every person writing a dissertation or a book, every biographer will have their own set of questions they'll want to ask, but they won't have the opportunity to ask those questions. Landis died ten years before I started working on him, and I was thankful for what I got. But I would like researchers in the future who use my interviews to be thankful for what they got from me and not to be pulling their hair out because I didn't ask the right questions.

The interviews that I conducted for the biography were narrow and directed. I had this person; he fit into Landis' life in this way; and that was all I was interested in asking about...Now I'm doing these large archival interviews, and I realize that I can't be as specific. I can't anticipate all the questions future researchers are going to want to ask. But I try to approach it as if I was the researcher: what would I like to know from this person?...

[Many questions and answers later]. ROSS: Well, that sort of discussion seems to bring us to a graceful closing. Is there anything in terms of a reflective nature that you'd

like to add?

RITCHIE: The only thing I guess we haven't talked about is that, in addition to the historical training that went into my interest in oral history, and the accidental approach to oral history, and the on-the-job use of oral history, I've also gotten a tremendous amount of reinforcement from OHMAR and the OHA. You are also responsible in part for that because I remember being invited to the luncheon that you and Mary Jo Deering had at George Washington University...I was there when the call went out for people to participate in setting up a regional organization, not anticipating getting very deeply involved...And then all of a sudden I found myself knee deep in OHMAR from the beginning, and enjoying the company of the people who are here. I pick up a lot from the meetings and gatherings and social events that OHMAR has.

At the same time, Dick Baker at the Senate Historical Office thought it would be a good idea for me to go to an Oral History Association meeting. That year [1976] they were meeting at the Chateau Montebello in Quebec, and so that was a wonderful trip for me. I thought, "These people know how to put on a conference!" I've been to every colloquium since then, and we have been getting just as much on a national level in terms of the good fellowship and constant exposure to new ideas, and of the excitement about what's happening in the field of oral history. It's all been professionally reinforcing as well as personally satisfying.

ROSS: Of course, you make a tremendous contribution to these organizations as well.

RITCHIE: Thank you. I won't comment on that.

ROSS: I'd like to thank you very much for a most enjoyable, stimulating, and rewarding evening.

RITCHIE: Well, it's certainly interesting to see what it looks like from the other side of the tracks.

The State of the Art column will resume with the next issue, featuring Linda Shopes' "Beyond Trivia and Nostalgia: Collaborating in the Construction of a Local History."

FALL MEETING AT GALLAUDET COLLEGE

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 17

OHMAR's fall meeting will be held at the Learning Resources Center at Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C. on Saturday, November 17. Registration will begin at 9:30, the program at 10 a.m. The morning session will feature the presentation of the Forrest Pogue Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Field of Oral History to Donald Ritchie, Associate Historian, United States Senate Historical Office. The afternoon session, "UNESCO: Oral History and Oral Reputation," will address the variety of issues confronting the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization in its work in oral history. Thomas Forstener of UNESCO will discuss "UNESCO's Oral History Program Around the World," and Joseph Mehan, also of UNESCO, will speak on "UNESCO: Journalistic Folklore and Operational Reality."

OHMAR's spring meeting for 1985 will be held in New Jersey on Saturday, March 30 at the Social Sciences Building at Rutgers University, Camden. It will seek to offer a self-critical perspective on oral history by displaying the efforts of a wide variety of community history projects.

For further details on either of these programs, please contact: in the Washington area, Mary Jo Deering (301) 654-8073; in the Baltimore area, Linda Shopes (301) 455-2319; and in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, Perry Blatz (609) 292-6062.

New Officers for 1984/85

Chairman Pete Daniel reports that the Nominating Committee will put forward the following slate of candidates for OHMAR officers at the fall meeting:

President: **Linda Shopes** is an instructor in American Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in Catonsville, Md. She has been involved in numerous community oral history projects, including the NEH-funded Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project. She is currently at work on a documentary on cannery workers in Baltimore.

Vice President: **Fern Ingersoll** is currently working on a book based on oral histories and ethnographic participant-observation in a Thai village. She has conducted interviews with government officials, congressmen, women suffragists, and managers of the national forests.

Treasurer: **David Seaman** is professor of foreign language at Davis and Elkins College, where he teaches a course on "Local and Oral History." His oral history projects include research on Italian immigrants in the coal fields and work with oral and visual (video) histories of artists.

Secretary: **Marie Allen** works at the National Archives where she is currently on detail with the Archives Technological Assessment Office, examining archival applications of new information technology. Between 1975 and 1984 she served as Director of the White House Liaison Office, for the Office of Presidential Libraries, and administered oral history programs with White House staff during the Carter and Reagan Administrations.

At-Large Board Member: **Barry Lanman** teaches at Millford Mill High School in Baltimore. He received his Ph.D. from Temple University in May 1984, with a dissertation on "An Analysis of Traditional and Oral History Teaching Methods in High School Immigration and Black History Curriculum." In April 1984 he was named educator/historian of the year by the U.S. Capitol Historical Society.