Historical Representation and the Postcolonial Imaginary

Historical Representation and the Postcolonial Imaginary: Constructing Travellers and Aborigines

By

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For further information on Paul Harrison's work see:
http://www.c-s-p.org/flyers/Travellers--Friends1-4438-1257-9.htm and
http://www.rte.ie/tv/theafternoonshow/2009/1130/travellerfocusweekpaulharrison.html

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: ORAL HISTORY AND THE "OTHER"

1.1 Introduction

> The quintessential revolution is that of the spirit, born of an intellectual conviction of the need for change in those mental attitudes and values which shape the course of a nation's development…
> —Aung San Suu Kyi

Irish Travellers and Australian Aborigines are the indigenous peoples of their respective countries. The histories of both groups have remained - for the most part – unrecorded and what has been written has not been written by members of either group. The pasts of these neglected social groups has not changed. The history of both groups is constantly changing, however**.**

Oral history is a relatively new field in the realm of historiography. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that its practice became fashionable and more widely-researched. Oral history has the ability to change the focus of traditional history; it can give voices to the voiceless, bring down barriers and give life to communities (See Ritchie (1995, 2003), Shopes (2008), Perks and Thompson (1998, 2003). This continues to be one of the great triumphs of oral history; its ability to give a voice and therefore a history to communities and social groups who are voiceless and occluded from historical representation**.** For socially neglected groups, oral testimony creates the opportunity to recover the past and in turn determine a present and a future. For the historian, the use of oral testimony means that he or she must work closely with others. The purpose of this project is concerned with the historian in his or her work with the 'Other'.

The importance of oral history, particularly with regard to the 'Other', or often-neglected groups in society, lies in the fact that a large percentage of the world's population are non-literate, do not speak English and live in abject poverty. In light of this, oral testimony is vital to the creation of 'Other' world histories. (See Chattopadhyaya and Gupta (1998), Kearney

(2002). The aforementioned social groups, Irish Travellers and Australian Aborigines, are examples of the 'Other', in both history and society. Theirs is a history often known only in the minds of their elders, stored and passed down through generations of storytelling and folklore. These two historically neglected social groups have strikingly common characteristics, both in terms of social standing and history. Oral history is the fundamental component by which both groups can construct their histories. The comparisons between both are many and thus certainly warrant a comparative study such as this, with oral history as the guiding light – that which propels both groups toward a better future. Oral history can help generate a more linear past, one which better suits the written form that defines the present-day**.** Both groups are indigenous and both were victims of colonisation at the hands of the British. Both have had to cope with decades, if not centuries, of stereotypes, negative media representation and poor government treatment. Both have suffered extremely low employment rates, and often as a corollary, high crime rates. According to statistics, both have relatively low life expectancy, due to poorer health and living conditions than settled people. In terms of history, representation has always been for them, rather than by them. Oral history has therefore given these groups the chance to create a cultural identity and a background.

Othering can be loosely defined as a way of depicting and characterising a race or community as intrinsically, (and often-negatively), different. In this 'difference', history has tended to be influenced by hierarchical and stereotypical thinking. Oral history has the potential to break these hierarchical barriers, by giving a voice to the Other, an Other which more often than not has hitherto been constructed in reified or negative prism. (See Broussard: 2003; Nkwi: 2010). The Other in the scope of this project, as mentioned, are the indigenous people of Ireland and Australia, Travellers and Aborigines. Both groups have been ostracised, remaining on the margins of society for the course of their pasts. Theirs is history as created by everyone but themselves. They are the Other, the 'Orient' that Edward Said spoke of in his seminal work *Orientalism*. They are the 'Orient' within the 'Occident'.[1] This project will endeavour to assess and compare the impact of oral history on the "Other".

This volume thus concentrates on the use of oral history in the empowerment of the above-mentioned groups. It begins by tracing the advent of oral history, before assessing its merits and potential drawbacks

[1] The Occident refers to Europe and the Western World. For Said, the Western World encompassed the Occident, while the East was the Orient.

more generally**.** Subsequently, the role of oral history regarding the Other will be discussed. Oral history is, and must be interdisciplinary. In light of this, I will explore the role of anthropology and ethnography in relation to the work of the oral historian. A large element in this project will be the focus on the history, or absence thereof- within the written and the visual spheres -of Irish Travellers and Australian Aborigines. The historical representations of both groups will be examined. Following this, the comparative nature of the histories of both groups will be assessed, in terms of aspects such as colonialism, media representations, and in particular, government attempts to 'fix' the groups.

1.2 Literature Review

For the purpose of this study it was essential to access sources on three key factors. Firstly, it was necessary to consult the main works in the field of oral history, and due to the interdisciplinary nature of the area, it was also necessary to delve into ethnography, sociology and postcolonialism amongst others. Secondly, an in depth study of sources involved with Irish Travellers was involved. The third faction in the search for sources was Australian Aborigines.

There is much and varied literature on and about oral history, testimony and tradition on the market in the present day. However, it is still difficult to look past Paul Thompson as the main practitioner of oral history. *The Voice of the Past*, although over thirty years old still remains one of the core texts in the field. For Thompson, the past is "handed down by oral tradition and written chronicle".[2] A combination of both is necessary for an eminent, whole history. Oral history gives history back to the people through their words. This is the theme of Thompson's teachings and technique. *The Voice of the Past* is vital therefore for both the theoretical perspectives it provides in relation to oral history but also use as regards its consideration of Otherness or the "Other". As Thompson states "it is social history, to which we now turn, that the relevance of oral evidence is most inescapable".[3]

An essential text for any study of oral history is Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson's compendium *The Oral History Reader.* It serves as a primary textbook and reference point for students, scholars and historians alike. Perks and Thomson bring together a collection of essays exploring every aspect of oral history, while offering their own commentary on each

[2] Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past.* (Oxford, 1978) p. 1.
[3] ibid, p. 86.

also. As is stated in the introduction to Part 1, Critical Perspectives, "The most distinctive contribution of oral history has been to include with the historical record the experiences and perspectives of groups of people who might otherwise have been hidden from history, perhaps written about by social observers or in official documents".[4] This statement encompasses the whole essence of this project, the neglected, the occluded, the hidden in history. As Perks and Thomson show in their collection, through oral history the working classes, cultural minorities and indigenous people have inscribed their experiences on the historical record and offered their own interpretations of their own history. *The Oral History Reader*, particularly in its second edition, covers all key aspects and debates that have raged in the oral history field, and the appearance of essays from eminent historians such as Paul Thompson, Alessandro Portelli, Michael Frisch, Linda Shopes and Katherine Borland, amongst others, serve to reinforce it as a primary text for oral history.

In addition, many more texts from the field were consulted for this study. Alessandro Portelli's *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* is a text which is also necessary to confer with in any study of oral history. Portelli is one of the foremost scholars on the interdisciplinary nature of oral history. His uses of the social and cultural facets of his fieldwork make for a more meaningful and rounded portrayal of what life was like for those studied. For Portelli it is not enough to merely give a voice to the voiceless, but also necessary to place these 'voiceless' in their relevant social and cultural surroundings at the time. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes are two of the leading women in the field, and their anthology *Oral History and Public Memories* is also a principal work on oral history and testimony. Published only last year, it contains up to date material from some of the leading experts of the practice. Other texts consulted under the sphere of oral history include Peter Burke's *History and the Historian in the Twentieth Century* and *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* John Tosh's *The Pursuit of History* and *Historians on History* and Ludmilla Jordonova's *History in Practice*, amongst many others. The main journal used to with regard to this project was *Oral History Review.*

As well as investigating the main scholars in the oral history field, it was also necessary to consult various texts regarding post-colonialism, ethnography and Othering. Frantz Fanon, although his work is over four decades old, is still a foremost and worthwhile, reference on post-colonial groups and Othering. His *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks* are still regarded as powerful texts on colonisation and its

[4] Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, *The Oral History Reader*, (London, 1998) p.9.

aftermath. From his works, it is possible to view where much of experts in the area have taken their theories and ideas from. For an understanding of ethnography and particularly ethnocentrism it was essential to consult some textbooks in the area. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson's *Ethnography: Principles in Practice, Third Editon* (2007), was the most up to date work consulted. It gave a basic overview of ethnography, without getting involved with the notion of post-colonialism and the Other. John and Jean Comaroff's *Ethography and the Historical Imagination* did in fact deal with ethnocentrism and postcolonialism in history, as the title may suggest. Other works conferred with included Norman K. Denzin's *Interpretive Ethnography.* Regarding post-colonial thought itself, a useful publication proved to be Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti's *The Post-Colonial Question.*

Primary material used as the basis of the study included various reports, articles and publications on Irish Travellers and Australian Aborigines. Concerning Travellers, *The Irish Folklore Commission 1952 Tinker Questionnaire,* the *1963 Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* and the *1995 Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community*, as well as the *Executive Summary* of the report were the main documents used. Regarding Aborigines, the most comprehensive, and landmark report produced in their history, the 1997 *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* was used. Other excellent sources include Aboriginal testimony in Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan's *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand* and letter transcripts in Henry Reynolds *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders.*

As the majority of this study concerned the historical representations of Irish Travellers and Australian Aborigines, it was necessary to consult the leading historians in both fields. Regarding Irish Travellers, Míchael Ó hAodha's *Irish Travellers: Representations and Realities* is one of the most up to date works, which pays particular attention to Othering and representations in the history of the community, which are key aspects of this study. Other major works consulted with regard to the history of the Irish Travelling community, or least representations of that history, include Jane Helleiner's *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture,* and Aoife Bhreatnach's *Becoming Conspicuous: Irish Travellers, Society and State 1922-1970.* Both works are quite comprehensive in terms of twentieth century representation and legislation regarding Travellers. Hellenier's publication provides an excellent viewpoint into the history and society of the Irish Travelling community. Firstly, she is

Canadian, and thus removed from inherent Irish stereotypes and negativity towards the community, and secondly, she spent nine months living amongst Travellers in Galway in the mid 1980s as part of her ethnographic research. Therefore, she worked closely with the community itself, a point which is central to this study. It synthesises history, politics and ethnography, unlike many other works in the field. Helleiner's work is vital in any study of Irish Travellers. Aoife Bhreatnach's *Being Conspicuous* is also an excellent work regarding Travellers. It concentrates on history and politics concerning Travellers, tracing the circumstances that caused their marginalisation, examining government attempts to 'fix' them, and the implications of both during the twentieth century. *Travellers: Citizens of Ireland*, edited by Erica Sheehan, was another major work used. The importance of this publication lies in the fact that it is made up of testimony from the Travelling community itself. The book, then, is representative of this study, as its attempts to allow Travellers both to be represented historically, and to represent themselves. Other publications consulted included the influential but dated works of the Gmelch's, George and Sharon, namely George Gmelch's *The Irish Tinkers: The Urbanisation of an Itinerant People* and Sharon Gmelch's *Tinkers and Travellers: Ireland's Nomads*. Míchael Ó hAodha's collections *Migrants and Memory: The Forgotten Postcolonials* and *On the Margins of Memory: Recovering the Migrant Voice* were also particularly helpful regarding postcolonialism and Traveller representations. Other sources consulted in reference to this section of the study included journals such as *Anthropological Quarterly* and *Sociology*, and web resources such as *The Patrin Web Journal* and *Pavee Point* home page.

The major works consulted as part of researching the Aboriginal community were, as one would anticipate, from Australian authors. Stuart Macintyre is one of the country's leading academic historian, and a central figure in the 'History Wars' which Australian historians have been embroiled in, in recent years. His works *A Concise History of Australia* and *The History Wars* provided particularly detailed, though sometimes ambivalent constructs of the subject matter. Though the term concise may be seen as curtailing the detailed history of the country in a brief manner, Macintyre certainly does not. *The History Wars* is particularly helpful regarding the politicisation of Australian history, which is documented well by the author. Bain Attwood is another member in the top echelons of Australian academic history. His *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History* is vital to a study of that same history mentioned in the title. His work is largely aimed at discrediting the main critic of the 'true' Aboriginal history, Keith Windschuttle, whose own book, *The Fabrication*

of Australian History attempts aims to discredit Aboriginal claims of atrocities and genocide at the hands of British colonisers. In this manner, Attwood's publication is imperative in attempts to construct an Aboriginal history, and studies in the representation of such. Another work of Attwood's, which he edited with Fiona MacGowan, also proved beneficial. *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand* brings together a collection of essays on indigenous history and oral testimony. The book included excellent primary material in the form of this oral testimony of Aboriginal victims of the Stolen Generations. Henry Reynolds is another historian who has gained minor celebrity status in Australia due to the nature of the 'History Wars', which has been played out in the general Australian media. Reynolds collaboration with Aborigines led to ground-breaking events in Aboriginal history, such as the granting of land rights to Aborigine Eddie Mabo in 1992. Reynolds' *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders* provided tremendous source material in the form of many letter transcripts from the nineteenth century. Reynolds' authority as one of the foremost and eminent Australian historians makes his *Dispossession* and *Frontier: Reports from the Edge of White Settlement* key texts in the area. Ann McGrath's edited collection, *Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines under the British Crown* was useful regarding colonisation. Malcolm Prentis' *A Study in Black and White: The Aborigines in Australian* History was helpful regarding background material but was outdated, having been published in 1975. Other helpful publications included Geoffrey Partington's *The Australian History of Henry Reynolds* and Michael Meadows' *Voices in the Wilderness: Images of Aboriginal People in the Australian Media*. Web sources used in the area included transcripts of speeches by former Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating, found at the *Online Opinion* web site. Online reports from leading Australian newspaper *The Australian* also provided excellent insight.

CHAPTER TWO

ORAL HISTORY AND THE OCCLUDED PEOPLES

E.H. Carr asked "What is history?" What was his answer? Is history the past, or is it the study of the past? If so, is historiography the study of history? If both these are true, where does oral history fit? Is it a practice in its own right; is it a facet of 'history', or a mode of historiography? John Tosh simply defines it as "what actually happened in the past and the representation of that past in the work of historians"[1]. Ludmilla Jordanova defines history as having,

> a number of meanings, and a wide range of connotations, some of which are charged with intense emotion. We use it invoke the authority of precedents, to refer to what is no longer relevant, to endow objects with value and status, and to mobilise longings for a better world.[2]

The last part of Jordanova's description states "to mobilise longings for a better world". If this is accurate, has history in the last century or so, mobilised these "longings"? Perhaps it has, but for the most part, it has 'mobilised' them from the perspective of the winners, from the top-down. Where is the history of the losers? Where are the histories from 'below'? They are in the process of being told, documented and stored in the annals of history, but this is only a very recent phenomenon. The following chapter will concentrate on oral history, its history, development, uses and especially its ability to bring the 'losers', the 'below' and the 'Other' into historical scribe.

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[1] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History (4th Ed.)* (Harlow, 2006) xvix.
[2] Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice (2nd Ed.)* (New York, 2006) p. 13.

2.1 The Early History and Development of Oral History

"Tete ke asom ene Kayere"[3]

So the above Ghanaian proverb translates, "Ancient things remain in the ear". It was not until the nineteenth century that history became academic. Before this, all history had to rely on oral testimony. The past was passed from generation to generation through word of mouth. Perks and Thomson assert that oral evidence has been used since ancient times, where history relied on eye-witness accounts of significant events. Donald P. Ritchie travels as far back as the Spanish conquests of the Americas in his *Doing Oral History;* "the Spanish chroniclers relied on oral sources to reconstruct the history of the indigenous people, from the Aztecs to the Incas".[4] It was in the nineteenth century that the development of an academic history discipline led to a primacy of archival research and documentary sources, and a marginalisation of oral evidence.[5] Oral history became initially popular as a practice in the 1960s, a time when many marginalised groups were seeking to be heard. The 1960s played host to the Feminist movement and the Civil Right movement, to name but two, movements which oral history was utterly representative of, and partly responsible for the empowerment of. Therefore, while oral history and testimony have been practiced since ancient times, oral history itself as a practice is relatively in its infancy, only becoming popular in the mid-twentieth century, arguably in the aftermath of World War II, with oral history became vital in the testimonies of Holocaust victims.

Oral history thus only became academic in the twentieth century. As Rebecca Sharpless states in "The History of Oral History", "In the twentieth century, the methodology rose from several directions"[6]. Methodology had never been a term used in relation to oral history, and perhaps is still not accepted by some traditional historians. Oral history arguably was not accepted as a necessary practice by many until much later, and conceivably is still not. Many traditional historians, who advocate a 'top-down', elitist history, have never accepted the need for oral testimony, particularly of marginalised, hidden groups. Sharpless states that it was in the 1940s that oral history became unified in the Western academic world, particularly in the post-war era. One of the first

[3] Rebecca Sharpless, "The History of Oral History", in Charlton et al, *Handbook of Oral History*, (Plymouth,2006) p.19.
[4] Donald P. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (*2nd ed.)* (New York, 2006).
[5] Perks and Thomson, p.1.
[6] Sharpless, p.19.

institutionalised oral history projects was created by Allan Nevins at Columbia University in 1948.[7] Nevin's project was designed to "collect the reminiscences of major figures in contemporary public life, and it served as kind of an oral appendix to the published memoirs of many of these people".[8] However, Nevins' advocacy of oral history, but also his efforts to encourage historians to aim for a more popular audience were greeted with scepticism at the time by many professional historians. His criticism of what he described as "dry-as-dust" academics alienated some of them.[9] Also in 1948, the first American-made tape recordings were recorded. The first Oral History Office opened in 1954 at the University of California.[10] It is widely recognised that the oral history 'boom' took place in the 1960s, when research in the practice expanded dramatically. The availability of portable cassette recorders, invented by Philips in 1963, had much to do with this.[11] Ritchie goes back somewhat further, stating that the Works Progress Administration's hiring of unemployed writers to chronicle the lives of ordinary people during the Depression in the 1930s, was perhaps closer to the advent of oral history as a practice.[12] More so to do with this 'boom' though was the increase of socialist and minority movements of the age. The Feminist movement, the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War and the various student "revolts" of the late 1960s all involved activist activities on the part of ordinary people, not kings or great leaders or statesmen. As Hamilton and Shopes attest "Oral history emerged as a widespread practice in relation to the democratising of history in the 1960s, fuelled by decolonisation and the feminist and civil rights movements".[13] Oral history documented the lives of these 'ordinary' people, in the way traditional, elitist history never had, or would. As stated previously, it gave that 'voice' to the voiceless and in doing this historians of the field hoped they could foster social change. Jordanova states that the term 'academic discipline' implies elaborate institutional, professional and communications structures.[14] By the end of the 1960s, oral history

[7] Ibid, p.22.
[8] Mark Feldstein, "Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History", in *Oral History Review*, Spring 2004.
[9] Jerrold Hirsh, "Before Columbia: The FWP and American Oral History Research", in *Oral History Review*, Summer 2007, p.8.
[10] Sharpless, p.23.
[11] Ibid, p.23.
[12] Ritchie, p.21.
[13] Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, *Oral History and Public Memories*, (Philadelphia, 2008) p.9.
[14] Jordanova, p.59.

certainly had become an academic discipline in its own right. The practice continued to grow, and in 1968, the Oral History Association drew up a code of Ethics for interviewers. These maintained that the interviews "wishes must govern the conduct of an interview".[15] The growing importance of these various social and ethnic groups which arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s fuelled the subsequent interest in documenting their histories. The challenge for oral historians to overcome at the onset of the movement as a practice was the defence of the reliability and validity of interviews,[16] the reliability being the consistency with which the interviewees tell their story, and the validity being the agreement between the interview itself and other sources in a historical context. In 1971, the Oral History Society of England published its first journal and in January 1973, the Oral History Review, one of the foremost oral history publications in the present day, released its first publication.[17] As the century wore on, more and more oral history societies were born, and many more journals have been set up. Oral history is therefore very much an academic practice in its own right in the present day. In later years, the focus of oral history and memory studies have shifted from the empowerment of the individual to that of societies at large, groups of individuals testimonies, rather than the singular. As Sharpless states, "the internet changes everything, but the basic dynamic of two people sitting and talking about the past has remained largely unchanged".[18]

2.2 The Use and Benefits of Oral History

> "Every old man that dies is a library that burns".[19]

Oral history is dependent on this "old man". It is dependent on the person who is interviewing this old man, and it is dependent on the relationship between these two. This is essence of oral history; the ability to retrieve seemingly forgotten information from oral testimonies and creating a historical fit and social construct, to use the information garnered to create history. As Paul Thompson, arguably the chief authority in the field, states "Past is handed down by oral tradition and written chronicle",[20] meaning testimony and documentation is necessary for an empirical history. Oral

[15] Sharpless, p.27.
[16] Ibid, p.30.
[17] Ibid, p.32.
[18] Ibid, p.38.
[19] Perks and Thomson, viii.
[20] Thompson, p.1.

history is often more precise than traditional, establishment history. Most accounts of the past are through the spoken word, and so historians must use oral techniques to document events which have not been recorded in history. So to define oral history, again using the words of Paul Thompson, one could perhaps call it "the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction".[21] Thompson defended oral history against its critics, those who claimed it to be an unreliable historical source, and was determined to prove its legitimacy. In terms of the reverence afforded to his work today, he certainly succeeded in this regard.

Oral history makes for a history which is not just richer, more vivid and heart-rending, but truer.[22] Oral history functions to allow the story of "what really happened" to be told. Traditional, and so-called establishment history, portrayed, and perhaps still does, a 'top-down' history of 'great men', kings, political leaders and people in positions of power. Oral history allows "heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people".[23] It is the people's history. It offers a radical transformation of the social meaning of history. Oral history offers a form of cultural and national identity for the masses. Essentially it offers a route into history to those who have been 'hidden', deprived in the historical wilderness for the course of their pasts. This provides the platform for this study, a study of oral history in the empowerment of groups who have been hidden and neglected by history.

2.3 Oral History and the Creation of Histories of Neglected Groups

> "Oral history gives history back to the people in their own words. And in giving a past it also helps them towards a future of their own making".[24]

As previously stated, in the modern age, oral history has played, and must continue to play, a vital, intrinsic role in history and historiography. The study of history has been changing constantly over the last fifty or so years. As the study of history changes, so then does history itself, in a sense. Traditional history is a history of the 'winners', a 'top-down' history. Conventional modern day history must be much more than that. It must be a multi-faceted study of the past, including sociology, geography,

[21] Perks and Thomson, p.9.
[22] Thompson, p.99.
[23] Ibid, p.21.
[24] Ibid, p.1.

politics, anthropology and economics, amongst others. As society has progressed in the modern era, so has history. Histories of the 'other' have become more and more mainstream towards the end of the twentieth, and start of the twenty-first centuries. To conduct a study of the 'other' in history, oral testimony is the historian's most indispensable tool. Therefore, oral history has provided historians, in recent years, the ability oral history working classes, cultural minorities and indigenous peoples, to attempt to establish studies of otherwise neglected social groupings. Through amongst others, have "inscribed their experiences on the historical record, and offered their own interpretations of history".[25] To create a history of any neglected group is generally to create a 'history from below'. Jim Sharpe, in his essay "History from Below", describes it as "an exploration of the historical experiences of those men and women whose existence is often ignored, taken for granted or mentioned in passing in mainstream history".[26] It can both restore history to groups who thought they had lost it, or to groups who never had it all.

Perks and Thomson, in their introduction to the "Critical Developments" section of *The Oral History Reader*, state,

> The most distinctive contribution of oral history has been to include within the historical record the experiences and perspectives of groups of people who might otherwise have been hidden from history, perhaps written about by social observers in official documents.[27]

This statement engenders the entire essence of 'history from below', and the empowerment of neglected social groups in history. The groups concentrated on for this study, Irish Travellers and Australian Aborigines, represent those "hidden from history", those for whom oral testimony has been, and is, necessary to document their lives and pasts. Paul Thompson even names Aboriginals as an example of such in *The Voice of the Past*, particularly in relation to colonialism,

Other minorities are the survivors of conquest, or traditional social outcasts. American Indians, Australian Aborigines and gypsies of Europe are all persecuted minorities, misleadingly documented by a hostile majority, but preserving their strong oral traditions, to which a more understanding approach to their past becomes possible.[28]

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[25] Perks and Thompson, p.9.
[26] Jim Sharpe, "History from Below", in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing (2nd Ed.)*, (Oxford, 2001) p.26.
[27] Perks and Thomson, p.9.
[28] Thompson, p.97.

The "hostile majority" here represents those who have attempted to write histories of those same neglected groups, members of the media industry and often the general, settled, population itself. History in this way brings the social classes together; it joins the Aborigine and Traveller with the historian, enabling their pasts to be documented in a way that it most likely never has before, i.e. positively. Traditional history was, as the main practitioners of oral history will assert, concentrated on, and was made up of, "reigns and dynasties".[29] Reigns and dynasties mean very little, if anything, to neglected social groups, or ethnically rejected groups. In this regard, oral historians have addressed this gaping hole in history. What is world history, if not just that, a history of the world? Traditional history generally documented a history of the 'first world'. This is not an empirical world history. This is establishment, 'top-down' history. Donald Ritchie states that history is the verdict of "those who weren't there on those who were".[30] Whether Aborigines or Travellers were "there" or not is generally irrelevant in history, because the groups have either been unable to record it due to high illiteracy levels, or simply had no interest in it, again due to low levels of education. It is arguably the duty then of the oral and social historian to document a history of groups such as these, history which is necessary for their empowerment and future. Most traditional historical work that has been carried out on neglected groups has usually been without any involvement from any member of said groups, and if there has been involvement it often has been recorded negatively. The "History Wars" in Australia are an example. Social historians have argued on the side of Aborigines regarding the atrocities of the past, whereas, for the most part, traditional historians have argued that there is no evidence that such atrocities happened. John Tosh argues that oral history is "the raw material of social memory"[31]. This is a prime example of the need and use of oral testimony. While the Aboriginal people may not have literal, linear documentation of the past, work with oral and social historians regarding memory has enabled their story to at least be heard. Similarly, Travellers have had to wait until the later decades of the twentieth century to begin to have their story told and recorded. This will be concentrated on further in later chapters.

[29] Ibid, p.2
[30] Donald P. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, (New York, 1995) p. 8
[31] Tosh, p.323

2.4 Ethnocentrism and the Other

Why have traditional historians chosen not to focus on groups of lower social standing in their work since history became academic? The straightforward answer would be that it is simply easier to document a history of the victors. Where oral history is not overly necessary, where the result, in history, is plain for all to see, the historians position is extremely tenable. However, is that historian doing his/her job by ignoring the 'losers'?

Ethnography can be defined as a descriptive account of a community or culture, usually one located outside the West.[32] Ethnocentrism then can be defined as the inclination to view one's own culture as better than others, by viewing the others as strange and different. Ethnographic scholars Ross Hammond and Robert Axelrod, in "The Evolution of Ethnocentrism", characterize it as

> a nearly universal syndrome of attitudes and behaviours, typically including in-group favouritism. Empirical evidence suggests that a predisposition to favour in groups can be easily triggered by even arbitrary group distinctions and that preferential cooperation within groups occurs even when it is individually costly.[33]

Ethnocentrism is central to the study of Aboriginal and Traveller people, as it is the fundamental principle of Othering in history. Othering lies at the very heart of this study. Any study of neglected social groups in history encompasses a study of the 'Other'. Travellers are the 'Other', and 'Aborigines' are the 'Other'. Said's *Orientalism,* as mentioned previously, displays how the 'Orient' was 'Othered' by Western society because they wanted to control it. Similarly, Aborigines and Travellers have been 'Othered' in history, because they were misunderstood, mistreated and generally unwanted. Othering constitutes almost the dehumanisation of social groups. This Othering then creates a distrust and separateness, which is clearly evident in the case studies used here. The divide between the indigenous and settled populations of both Australia and Ireland is still extremely wide. Oral history has been the 'carrot' which has enabled less of the 'stick' approach in recent years, as settled society begins to learn more about the indigenous 'Other'.

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[32] Paul Atkinson and Martin Hammersley, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice (3rd Ed.)* (New York, 2007), p.1.

[33] Ross A. Hammond and Robert Axelrod, "The Evolution of Ethnocentrism", in *Journal of Conflict Resolution, Vol.50.* (2006) p.926.

Inherent in many cases of Othering in society is post-colonialism. In the case of both Australian Aborigines and Irish Travellers, this is inextricably the case. This is another of the close comparisons between the groups; they are both indigenous groups of post-colonial nations, conquered by the British, and still in search of identity and acceptance in their own countries. In this regard, both groups were marginalised within imperial discourse. Post-colonialism has witnessed the break-up of empires, decolonisation, the formation of new states and power blocs and the destruction of old nations. Catherine Hall asserts that such shifts have, in many ways, had a destabilising effect on the world, creating contradictory tendencies- globalism alongside localism, new nationalisms and ethnic identities alongside the international communication highways.[34] In light of this, it is the function of oral historians and associated ethnographers to rescue "localism" and the "ethnic identities" that are inherent there. Globalism and globalisation do not account for the documentation of histories and empowerment of neglected social groups. Oral history certainly does. Therefore, oral history is intrinsic to the past and present of post-colonial nations, social groups and indigenous and cultural 'others'. Othering can thus be described, in terms of historical approach, as a means of comparing oneself but at the same time distancing oneself from others, in this case, the Other. As is evident in the works of Said, Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha, amongst others, post-colonialism is central to the creation of this Other. 'Otherness', for Fanon, is the search for identity, the quest for meaning for the "wretched of the Earth".[35] In these terms, the groups used in the scope of this study most certainly embody "the wretched of the earth". Fanon asserts that the central idea of colonialism is "that the confrontation of 'civilised' and 'primitive' men creates a special situation- and brings about the emergence of a mass of illusions and misunderstandings that only a psychological analysis can place and define".[36] If Fanon is correct, and this is true, then this psychological analysis is necessary for the empowerment of post-colonial peoples both mentally and physically. The fact that it very rarely, if ever, happened means that the "mass of illusions and misunderstandings" inherent in neglected post-colonial groups is still present in the modern

[34] Catherine Hall, "Histories, Empires and the Post-Colonial Moment", in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London, 1996) p.65

[35] *The Wretched of the Earth* is the title of Fanon's 1963 work, called "the greatest masterpiece of anti-colonial struggle" by John-Paul Sartre

[36] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London, 1986) p. 85

day, a fact which is entrenched in the situations of both Australian Aborigines and Irish Travellers.

Oral history endeavours to provide a platform for historically neglected, post-colonial groups, such as Australian Aborigines and Irish Travellers, to overcome these very real and very obvious barriers, a platform for which to create a past and envision a future. However, can history ever really be objective? Despite the historian's best attempts, it is impossible to rid oneself entirely of the ethnocentrism that dogs our desire to know others.[37] The problem for the historian then is representation. Oral history must, by its very nature, be interdisciplinary. History itself is eclectic, hence the range of its debts and the complexity of its relations with other disciplines.[38] Therein lies an ethnographic problem. Representation "involves the assumption that much, if not all, qualitative and ethnographic writing is a narrative production, structured by a logic that separates writer, text and subject matter".[39] The historian must validate what he/she has been told, which becomes problematic when a linear, documented history is not available. The historian must, for that reason, take as many of these "narratives" as possible to try to discern historical fact. The historian, when dealing with the Other, must be historian, socialist, anthropologist and ethnographer, amongst many other. They must "cast the bourgeois subject out of the anthropological fold".[40] Representation is the primary focus of the oral historian in this regard, and he/she must be multi-faceted and interdisciplinary to do so. The history of neglected social and post-colonial groupings - (See Bhreatnach: 2006; Court: 1985; Lanters: 2009) must be considered through the same prism also. The following chapter will provide an overview of the history and historiography, of two such groups i.e. the Irish Travellers and the Australian Aborigines.

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[37] John and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Oxford, 1992) p. 10
[38] Jordanova, p.80
[39] Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices in the 21st Century* (London, 1997) p.4
[40] Comaroff, p.10

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORY AS QUEST: THE CASE OF IRISH TRAVELLERS AND AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

3.1 The Quest for History: Travellers and Aborigines and 'History from Below'

History may not be a subject of major interest to many members of the Travelling community. In the same way that Aboriginal history is not written, for the most part, by Aborigines, and a history of an African tribe is most likely not going to be written by a member of that tribe, the history of Irish Travellers is not written by Travellers. There are several reasons for this. The seeming disinterest of the Travelling community in education leaves many non or semi-literate, and incapable of writing any kind of history. Stereotypes play an intrinsic role in Irish society, and while this is not indicative of all Travellers, the self-same stereotypes remain. Much of the general public may not have any interest in history, but perhaps it is easy to have no interest in a history when one already has one. For Travellers, this is not such a ready commodity. History is important in understanding the present, as well as the past, and this may be where the root of at least some of the anti-Traveller prejudices in modern Ireland lie. A history of Travellers engenders a history of the 'Other', and most certainly a history from below. Oral history is vital in the creation of a Traveller history. Private testimonies represent, predominantly, the only method historians can possibly have in seeking to explain the Traveller past. It is ultimately the only way, due to the high levels of non-literacy among the community, and therefore, the lack of any written history or records. There are huge similarities here inherent in Australia's History Wars. Aboriginal history is utterly comparable in its status of 'history from below', and its utter dependence on oral testimony. The difficulties in the quest for Aboriginal history have resulted in the History Wars. Historians have argued fervently over the actual extent of the atrocities committed

against the Aboriginal race in history, causing these 'Wars'. This is the dilemma of having no recorded history. It is primarily the settled community who have attempted to resolve the problem of the lack of Traveller history. There are, of course, massively diverse opinions of Travellers within the settled community, and then, obviously between historians. In the same way as Aborigines do not write their histories, neither do Travellers, therein creating the problem of diversity of opinions. Any given aspect of Traveller history, or Traveller life for that matter, may, and most likely does, differ between Traveller and historian, leading to another potential 'History War'. The comparisons between the lifestyles and histories, or perhaps pasts rather than histories, of these groups are many, and make a comparative study in terms of this lifestyle and history a very viable and interesting study.

A problem recurrent in the history of 'Othering' is ethnocentrism. This is the tendency to look upon a certain culture as logical or sensible, while viewing others as somewhat bizarre, strange or even dangerous. This problem is largely recurrent due to the fact that histories of the said groups have very rarely been carried out by members of those groups; they are created by members of what one would term as western society. Oral history, then, is essential in the creation of history of the 'other', and in the empowerment of neglected social groups. The main problem in this regard lies in interpretation. As Trevor Lummins attests in his essay on "Structure and Validity in Oral Evidence", "the problem at the heart of using the interview method in history still remains that of moving from the individual account to a social interpretation".[1] The problem the historian remains- is the individual experience being accounted entirely reliable, as does the problem for the 'neglected social group'- is the historians interpretation going to be contextualized in a manner which is agreeable to the interviewee. Lummins asserts that while retrospective interviewing and oral testimony is necessary, and capable of establishing factual data, it must be interpreted and structured in terms of other gathered data.[2] If this process is carried out correctly, and is as objective as possible, then it is absolutely vital, and utterly invaluable to the documentation and empowerment of 'other' groups. In the case of the Australian Aborigine and the Irish Traveller, often the "individual account" is almost vilified, discredited. The historian must ensure this does not happen with the facts he/she has been given. Katherine Borland speaks of the need for a

[1] Trevor Lummins, "Structure and Validity in Oral Evidence", in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (New York, 2006) p. 255.
[2] Ibid, p. 255.

"negotiative interpretative process"[3] in her essay "That's Not What I Said". She explains for herself, as a folklorist, the need for a skilfully told story, but invariably the need for the self same tale to be contextualized properly. She explains this as the difference between "the thinking subject and the narrated event and thinking subject and the narrative event".[4] In this way, oral testimony must be structured and contextualized correctly, but must retain objectivity, as far as possible, on the part of the historian.

3.2 The history of Irish Travellers

Interest in the history of Travellers was peripheral for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century's.[5] The Gypsy Lore Society, set up in Britain in 1888, began to stimulate an interest in the culture of the 'Other', gypsies, nomads, travellers. It was set up by members of the urban middle class, who were fascinated by groups who appeared to be "unblemished by the ravages and corruption of modernity"[6]. It would be very difficult to affirm if the same were true now. Therefore, from the outset, the history of Travellers was studied and written by non-Travellers. W.B. Yeats was said to be a member of the Gypsy Lore Society. Míchael Ó hAodha asserts that this interest in gypsy and Traveller culture subsided for the first half of the 20th century. A major catalyst which thrust Irish Travellers back into the construct of Irish history was the "Report of the Commission on Itinerancy", a government report, released in 1963[7]. The report was, by all means, incredibly short-sighted. It proposed the assimilation of the Travelling community, without envisaging any major problems. The report was in no way an anthropological or historically merited paper, as it had little or no input from either field. Diarmuid Ferriter states that the 1963 report "suggested that the real solution lay in coaxing the Travellers into becoming settled"[8]. It was compiled by non-Travellers, with very little actual study into the lives and culture of the community. While ethnicity was not the political 'buzz word' in 1963 that

[3] Katherine Borland, "'That's not what I said' Interpretative Conflict in Oral Narrative Research", in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (New York, 2006) p. 310.
[4] Ibid, p. 311.
[5] Míchael Ó hAodha, *Irish Travellers: Representations and Realities* (Dublin, 2006) p.13.
[6] Ibid, p. 15.
[7] Ibid, p. 35.
[8] Diarmuid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2004) p.594.

it is now, the government cleverly avoided mentioned anything even marginally related to the ethnic status of Travellers. In hindsight, the report arguably served to help Travellers develop their 'ethnicity theory', which the likes of Martin Collins and members of Pavee Point, and the Irish Traveller Movement constantly refer to in the media. While the community are often silent in response to constant, and often sensationalist, media criticisms of them, the Travellers who do speak publicly on issues that affect their community usually belong to these groups[9]. The aforementioned assimilatory and conciliatory methods have, in terms of modern Irish society at least, served only to widen the divide between the settled and Travelling community's. Now more than ever, Travellers are a separate entity, and perhaps, ethnic group.

Traveller woman, Mrs. Ward pictured outside her trailer (caravan) in Tullamore, County Offaly. (*P. Harrison Collection*).

[9] Eamon Dillon, *The Outsiders: Exposing the Secretive World of Ireland's Travellers* (Dublin 2006) p.11.