

**The Narrative Turn, Corporate Storytelling, and Oral History:
Canada's Petroleum Oral History Project and Truth and Reconciliation
Commission Call to Action No. 92**

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ABSTRACT: As business historians embrace the narrative turn, they would do well to consider the opportunities provided by oral history. For-profit corporate storytellers offer one approach. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's call to action no. 92, however, offers a better one. This article explores the potential impact on business historians of the TRC, using the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project as an example.

Business history is at a crossroads: Should business historians focus on storytelling or traditional case studies? While de Jong, Higgins, and van Driel call for the maintenance of the traditional case study approach to business history—and for its reinvigoration by the application of “scientific explanation”¹—other scholars are more interested in the recent “narrative turn” in business history.² Oral history is uniquely situated, I argue, to assist in this shift to narrative. Recent efforts to use oral history to study business history include those of for-profit corporate storytellers such as The History Factory and industry-specific historical societies created and funded by the industries themselves. This article discusses the role of such firms in the production of oral history and considers the role of oral history and narrative/storytelling in light of the report, *Truth*

and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, especially for no. 92, “Business and Reconciliation.” This call to action is for “the corporate sector in Canada to adopt the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as a reconciliation framework and to apply its principles, norms, and standards to corporate policy and core operational activities involving Indigenous peoples and their lands and resources.”³

I begin with a brief overview of debates on methodology and the role of narrative by business historians and oral historians. The storytelling industry, which has emerged as a commercial solution to the demand for narrative in business history, is then described. Finally, I consider the potential impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) call to action no. 92 on business historians, using the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project as an example.

The Role of the Narrative

Oral history has been used inconsistently to study business history in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, which reflects the failure of oral historians to recognize the value of business history and the failure of business historians and corporate archivists to appreciate oral history methodology. The dismissal of oral history as the collection of subjective, anecdotal accounts,⁴ rife with errors of memory, occurs only among those unacquainted with the past thirty years of scholarship in oral history methodology and narrative analysis.⁵ Knowing *how* and *why* people remember past events, both individually and collectively, allows for a more comprehensive

understanding by historians of those events. As Freund and Quilici observe, “By analyzing how historical actors make sense of the events they experienced, we can gain a fuller portrait of how history is shaped both by events and emotions.”⁶ Oral history gives business historians the tools to access and interpret those memories.⁷

As Ronald Kroeze and Jasmijn Vervloet demonstrate in their article in this collection, oral history is less focused on fact-finding and more interested in understanding how people make sense of the past. Oral history interviews should be conducted with people at all levels of a business, to examine how decision makers—as well as those whose task it was to carry out decisions—understood those decisions, sometimes in very different ways.⁸ Robert Crawford provides a useful example of this approach in this collection.

Oral history is of significant use to business historians interested in a narrative approach. As Kroeze and Keulen assert, “Narrative can help us understand how organizations, managers and leaders make use of their history.”⁹ Further, as Kroeze and Vervloet also demonstrate in this collection, narrative approaches can help explain how employees, customers, and the general public have interpreted that history. Business historians are neither mythmakers nor debunkers; their role is to uncover the “daily use and effect of history in organizations and explain the actions of management.”¹⁰ I would argue that actions and responses of employees and clients should be similarly examined by business historians interested in the full scope of a company’s history. The capacity of oral history to uncover meaning among the various groups involved in business is therefore of tremendous value in this process.

The recent call for a narrative approach to business history provides an opening to reassess the opportunities provided by oral history. As Hansen argues, storytelling is central to meaning making:

Narratives are basic instruments for ordering reality, assigning causality, and constructing meaning. Humans—whether modern historians or the people they study—make sense of the world by telling stories, and these stories have the potential to frame the way members of an organization or citizens of a nation see the world.¹¹

Without explicitly referencing oral history methodology, Hansen nonetheless invokes many of its interpretive claims. He writes that “narratives are shared and collective, not just individual stories,” and they are used “for constructing collective identity, imagined and epistemic communities, and organizational culture.”¹² Narratives structure the way the past is understood as well as the parts of the past to be forgotten.¹³ What has been forgotten, silenced, and omitted is often the focus of oral history methodology.¹⁴ Much as Portelli’s work has moved historians beyond tiresome debates about the “accuracy” of oral history,¹⁵ Hansen argues that “by moving focus from whether narratives are true or false to narratives’ origins and effects, we can ask different questions that increase our understanding of capitalism at both the micro and the macro levels.”¹⁶

The Corporate Storytelling Industry

A for-profit corporate storytelling industry has emerged in the United States and the United Kingdom to meet the demands of businesses for narrative histories of their own organizations. Some of these corporate storytellers are quite clear about their function as vanity presses.¹⁷ Many founders have their roots in public relations or marketing, not history.¹⁸

The History Factory (in the United States), founded in 1979, is perhaps the oldest of these corporate storytelling businesses. Its aim differs “from consortia of established academic faculty, such as the Business History Group” in that it does not produce “scholarly” business history.¹⁹ Founder Bruce Weindruch has stated that, when conducting oral histories, the focus is on owners and managers rather than workers. In explaining that The History Factory charges corporations US\$10,000 per interviewed person, Weindruch revealed why his clients tend not to request oral histories of lower-level employees.²⁰

There are three significant problems with the corporate storytelling industry. The first, as noted in the case of The History Factory, is the breadth of research they provide. By not interviewing across all levels of a company—let alone clients, customers, suppliers, industry associates, or others—an incomplete (if not skewed) history is the result. A second concern revolves around the storytelling firms’ end product. Do companies that hire corporate storytelling firms provide free public access to the research, including oral histories? Are the oral histories and books that these for-profit storytellers generate merely celebratory or do they also offer scholarly insight? A third concern is the depth of research. Do these corporate storytellers have the freedom to

investigate problematic parts of a company's history? Even when companies approve the examination of the entirety of their past, for-profit storytellers may be hampered by their financial dependence on their clients. Some have suggested that it is for this reason that it is academic historians, not for-profit storytellers, to whom corporations turn when faced with controversies over their history.²¹

Similar questions can also be directed to research projects funded by industry and conducted by not-for-profit entities. Company-funded research projects risk producing corporate histories that fail to ask the difficult questions that von Plato and other historians deem necessary for a critical, historical approach.²² As Durepos, Mills, and Mills found in their analysis of a company-funded history of Pan Am Airlines, "the convention in writing company histories has been to leave out the social and political processes in which the actors have actively engaged in order to craft the company history."²³ Dillon notes that, as an interviewer for Tesco's self-funded history, there was "a strange dichotomy between establishing a relationship with the interviewee and trying to keep a critical distance from the corporation."²⁴ Dillon, however, was employed as a member of the National Life Stories Project at the British Library; as such, she and her coworkers were allowed to include shop-floor staff as interviewees without fear of losing their jobs. As mentioned above, those in the for-profit storytelling industry have a tendency to avoid interviews with lower-level workers as a cost-saving measure. Business historians, however, need to include "bottom-up perspectives from peripheral, low-power, ethnically diverse actors normally excluded from mainstream business history research."²⁵

The Petroleum Industry Oral History Project

The Petroleum Industry Oral History Project offers an instructive example. Begun by petroleum geologist Aubrey Kerr, this Canadian project has produced more than four hundred interviews over three phases from 1981 to the present. The Petroleum History Society was founded by Kerr and “a group of industry veterans, historians and archivists” after completion of the project’s first phase. The society took responsibility for the subsequent phases, which were funded by the society itself and provincial government grants. The project included the Canadian Society of Exploration Geophysicists, the Canadian Society of Petroleum Geologists, and a number of oil companies. Transcripts for many interviews are available online through Calgary’s Glenbow Archives.²⁶

Susan Birley and W. J. Wood, two of the project’s interviewers, described the first stage of the project. Birley notes, “From its inception, there has been an underlying conflict between those who feel that it was created for the benefit of the industry and those who regard it as a history project and therefore responsible to the dictates of historical objectivity.”²⁷ She notes that oral histories are one way to convince skeptical business people to embrace history, as “businessmen view oral testimony as harmless and a situation which is under their control.”²⁸ Indeed, the description provided of the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project’s process suggests that, in this case, control rested with industry rather than scholars. An advisory committee of industry retirees identified potential interviewees. Many read directly from notes prepared beforehand or treated the tape recorder as a Dictaphone during their interviews.²⁹ The committee also

suggested interview questions. However, Wood observes: “From the outset there was an intuitive discomfort with this approach and after two months... the approach to selecting narrators for interviewing was changed.”³⁰ Interviewers now identified topics of interest, and the advisory committee subsequently recommended relevant potential interviewees.

In the project’s initial phases, these topics of interest ignored the relationship of Indigenous peoples to the petroleum industry.³¹ Some narrators discussed negotiations with Indigenous peoples, communication with the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, or the influence of the Berger Inquiry, but these topics were introduced by the narrators, not the interviewers.³² Interviewers sometimes revealed their lack of interest by labeling the subject a “diversion” or by abruptly changing the topic.³³ These occasional, and at times disparaging or dismissive, references to Indigenous lands and rights hint at a broader, important story, as in this excerpt from an interview with former geophysicist and consultant Don Crane:

All through British Columbia of course, we had the Indians and up through Norman Wells and Inuvik we had the Dene, or the Inuits I guess they’re called. We had to have a lot of talks with them. In those days it was a little easier, I think, now they’re a little more demanding. But we could go in and show them what we wanted to do and hire them and quite often it worked well. But in the Arctic Islands of course, there’s no people at all, at all, no Eskimos or anything.³⁴

An exception to the project's lack of interest in Indigenous peoples is Betty Cooper's interview with Petroleum Industry Oral History Project founder and former petroleum geologist Aubrey Kerr.³⁵ Cooper comments that the reserves were "Indian lands that had their oil and gas rights." At another point, Cooper pushes Kerr to clarify the role of Indigenous peoples in negotiations for drilling rights:

Cooper: Were these restrictions to protect or to limit the Indian rights to the property?

Kerr: No, they were to articulate their rights, I mean make them—"

Cooper: What would they have to articulate, they had all the rights?

Kerr: I know, but they [the Canadian federal government] had to set up a mechanism whereby the rights, the oil, and gas could be won by somebody else. In other words, the Indians weren't going to do their own drilling. The point was, there had to be an agency to administer the granting of these rights to companies.

Cooper: The Indian people themselves did not have that right, to do their own negotiating?

Kerr: Well, at first they were told after all negotiating was done, what had happened to them. And there was some bad deals made.

Cooper: This is what I'm asking you.

Kerr: Yes, that's right. And way back they were just like children, you see.

Cooper: How far is way back?

Kerr: Well, in the '20s and the '30s, there were all kinds of deals.

Later in the interview, Cooper challenges some of Kerr's assumptions and stereotypes, asking more pointed questions. Kerr observes that negotiations with any one Indigenous group were always "separate from [those with] any other land of Indians." She interjects, "Of course, I think that is something that one has to expect in dealing with different nations, which is what they are," and then draws a comparison to the individual nations of Europe. At another point, Cooper confronts Kerr's suggestion that government negotiators always acted in the best interest of Indigenous peoples:

Cooper: When you went in there, were you there to worry about Indian rights, or just make sure that the government got the best deal?

Kerr: Well, you could equate that. If the government got the best deal, the Indians got the best deal.

Cooper: If I could just clarify that question on this tape, Aubrey. The reason I wanted you to discuss a little further, the government's position vis-à-vis the Indians, was because from your remarks, obviously it was not ever thus, that what was good for the government was good for the Indians.<snip>

Kerr: They [Indigenous people] still kept speaking to me, so I guess I wasn't doing that much bad with them, but the Indians were always suspicious.

Cooper: It would seem that they needed to be.

Phase III of the project, which commenced in 2011 and focused on the oil sands, pays slightly more attention to the role of Indigenous peoples in the history of the Canadian petroleum industry. Two interviewers, Peter McKenzie-Brown and Adriana A. Davies, routinely asked if narrators would like to comment on their connections with Indigenous peoples.³⁶ However, they rarely followed up with subsequent questions, and tended to accept their narrators' responses uncritically.³⁷ In one interview, for example, the interviewer concludes, "Syncrude [one of the largest oil sands companies in Canada] certainly has been applauded in terms of encouraging aboriginal entrepreneurship and also employment, so it's nice to know that these initiatives happened when you were involved."³⁸ In another, a question is preceded with the comment, "People complain a lot, yet the aboriginals, in my view, seemed to have benefited quite a bit from this [oil sands development] project."³⁹ Although there is an increased awareness of the importance of Indigenous peoples to the history of Canada's petroleum industry, there is little critical engagement with it, as evidenced by the following interview excerpt:

Interviewer: Aboriginal [people and issues]: I hope that it will become an important part of this project.

Narrator: We could spend the rest of the afternoon talking about the "would of/should of" and what we need to do different moving forward but—"

Interviewer: But we won't.⁴⁰

How might the Petroleum Oral History Project change in light of engagement with the work of Indigenous researchers on this subject? Lorraine Hoffman, for example, conducted oral histories with elders in the Wood Buffalo Region regarding the Athabasca oil sands.⁴¹ Listening to these interviews might lead petroleum industry interviewers to revise their interview protocol. Without asking more challenging questions, particularly with regard to the interaction of the industry with Indigenous peoples, the project runs the risk of producing a sanitized history. Tracy Friedel has analyzed energy companies' use of "the popular image of the Indian as environmental steward" to promote themselves "not only as environmentally friendly, but as friendly in a social sense through the inclusion of Aboriginal peoples as economic 'partners' in fossil fuel development."⁴² She argues that the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility "merely hide[s] the stark truth of contemporary development, that Canada's energy infrastructure is increasingly subject to the interests of transnational corporations rather than the communities whose image they so readily appropriate."⁴³ As it stands, the Petroleum Industry Oral History Project could be critiqued in the same way.

TRC's Call to Action No. 92

A more transparent and critical business history, one that is honest about corporations' past mistakes, is needed. The work of the *Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte* and others in the 1980s precipitated a revolution in German business history, forcing academics, businesses, and society to finally come to terms with corporate complicity

with the Third Reich.⁴⁴ Canada still needs to come to terms with the historical impact of business on its Indigenous populations, and those businesses' complicity in settler colonial capitalism.⁴⁵ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's *Calls to Action* report includes no. 92: "Business and Reconciliation."⁴⁶ The Canadian TRC did not interrogate business in the same way as did the South African TRC, which "held hearings on the moral complicity of business in apartheid, calling on companies to account not just for active collaboration ... but for profiting from and sustaining the apartheid economy."⁴⁷ Nonetheless, there is much that is required of Canadian business in light of the TRC. Jean Paul Gladu, chief executive officer of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, observes: "While many Canadian companies are proactively seeking to engage aboriginal peoples, we must continue to encourage Corporate Canada not to ignore the importance of economic reconciliation."⁴⁸ Business historians that engage with the oral traditions of Indigenous people, conduct high-quality oral histories with a wide range of participants, and openly confront the business community's role in ongoing colonial dispossession in Canada can make a helpful contribution to this reconciliation process.

This is not just a Canadian problem. Business historians worldwide need to embrace narrative and oral histories to bring to light the historical effects of business on Indigenous peoples and the environment. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes that Indigenous peoples around the globe "have suffered from historic injustices as a result of, inter alia, their colonization and dispossession of their lands, territories and resources, thus preventing them from

exercising, in particular, their right to development in accordance with their own needs and interests.”⁴⁹ As Andrew Smith observes, few business historians are actively engaging with the extensive literature on colonialism.⁵⁰ Eventually, however, business will have to answer for its involvement in the treatment of Indigenous peoples, environmental change, and other issues of contemporary relevance. Historians will write about these matters whether or not corporations provide access to their records. When this happens, interpreting settler–colonial archival records will require increased attention to narrative and the methodology of oral history.⁵¹ As I have shown, however, this task cannot be left in the hands of business or the for-profit storytelling industry alone.

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¹ de Jong, Higgins, and van Driel, “Towards a New Business History?”

² Mads Mordhorst and Stefan Schwarzkop, editors for a special issue call for papers,

“Towards a Narrative Turn in Business History,” in *Business History*,

http://www.ebha.org/files/news/CFP_Narrativesandbusinesshistory.pdf; Hansen,

“Business History”; Kobrak and Schneider, “Varieties of Business History.”

³ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Calls to Action*,

http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.

⁴ There are similarities between this critique of oral history and Kobrak and Schneider’s

description of mainstream economists’ dismissal of business history as “a series of

unsystematic anecdotes.” Kobrak and Schneider, “Varieties of Business History,” 404.

⁵ See, for example, Dunaway and Baum, *Oral History*; Perks and Thomson, *Oral History*

Reader; Sheftel and Zembrzycki, *Oral History Off the Record*; Llewellyn, Freund, and

Reilly, *Canadian Oral History Reader*; Yow, “Effects of the Oral History Interview”;

Shopes, “Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn”; Thomson, “Four Paradigm

Transformations.”

⁶ Freund and Quilici, “Exploring Myths in Women’s Narratives,” 159.

⁷ See, for example, Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*; Portelli, *Battle of Valle Giulia*; Yow, *Recording Oral History*.

⁸ Kobrak and Schneider, “Varieties of Business History,” 411. In the oft-quoted words of Alessandro Portelli, oral history explains “not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.” Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 50.

⁹ Kroeze and Keulen, “Leading a Multinational Is History in Practice,” 1281.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Hansen, “Business History,” 696–697.

¹² *Ibid.*, 697.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 700.

¹⁴ See, for example, Passerini, “Memories between Silence and Oblivion”; Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “Only Human”; Layman, “Reticence in Oral History Interviews”; K’Meyer and Crothers, “Reluctant Narrators, Taboo Topics.”

¹⁵ See, in particular, Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli*; Portelli, *Order Has Been Carried Out*.

¹⁶ Hansen, “Business History,” 700.

¹⁷ Essex Publishing, in the United States, for example, describes itself as producing business *books* rather than business *histories*. The company is a spinoff of Greenwich Publishing, which was founded by a former public relations executive. Essex Publishing Group, “Library” (<http://www.essexpublishinggroup.com/library>); Greenwich Publishing,

“Our Story” (http://greenwichpublishing.com/our_story.html); Essex Publishing Group,

“Our Story” (<http://www.essexpublishinggroup.com/our-story>).

¹⁸ See, for example, Red Letter Books, in the United Kingdom

(<http://www.redletterbooks.co.uk>); The Story Mill, also in the United Kingdom

(<http://www.thestorymill.co.uk/>).

¹⁹ Delahaye et al., “Genre of Corporate History,” 39.

²⁰ Weindruch, keynote address, “Corporate Voices: Institutional and Organisational Oral Histories” Conference, University of Sussex, England, July 5, 2013.

²¹ Delahaye et al., “Genre of Corporate History,” 39.

²² See Alexander von Plato’s four-stage life history interviewing method, outlined in “Contemporary Witnesses”; and his interview with Alexander Freund, in von Plato and Freund, “German Approach to Oral History II.”

²³ Durepos, Mills, and Mills, “Tales in the Manufacture of Knowledge,” 64.

²⁴ Dillon, “From Market Trader to Global Player,” 57.

²⁵ Maclean, Harvey, and Stringfellow, “Narrative, Metaphor,” 1233.

²⁶ These transcripts are very inconsistent for the first two phases: many are missing or are partial, and styles vary widely. See “Petroleum Industry Oral History Projects,” June 3, 2016 (<http://www.petroleumhistory.ca/oralhistory/index.html>); and “News Release: Oil Sands Companies Partner in History Project,” January 18, 2011

(<http://www.petroleumhistory.ca/oralhistory/2011-01-18osoh.pdf>), both part of the Petroleum History Society Oral History Projects.

²⁷ Birley, “Petroleum Industry Oral History Project,” 32.

²⁸ Ibid., 33.

²⁹ Ibid., 36; Wood, “Petroleum Industry Oral History Project,” 26.

³⁰ Wood, “Petroleum Industry Oral History Project,” 27.

³¹ Mackenzie, interview, Peter Bawden, January 1985, transcript at no. 087.

³² Berger, *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland*.

³³ See, for example, Jack Minchin or Peach [listed as “Jack Minchin or Peach?” on the transcript], interview, Harry Alger, October 27, 1981, transcript, 8; Susan Birley, interview, John Andrichuk, May 16, 1983, transcript, 1–2; Aubrey Kerr, interview, Robert A. Brown, May 24, 1982, transcript, 3.

³⁴ Tina Crossfield, interview, Don Crane, June 12, 2001, transcript at no. 122. See also Peter Mackenzie, interview, Thelma Cameron, December 1984, transcript at no. 203; Betty Cooper, interview, Harry Carlyle, April 14, 1982, transcript at no. 413.

³⁵ Cooper, interview, Aubrey Kerr, November 1982–March 1984.

³⁶ See, in particular, those interviews conducted by McKenzie-Brown and Davies.

³⁷ Two interviews by Davies are an exception; she asks more critically whether specific media reports and documentaries are “a fair way of presenting the industry, and do they have a case?” Davies, interview, Jacob Masliyah, June 24, 2011, transcript, 12; Davies, interview, Kem Singh, June 12, 2013, transcript, 25–26.

³⁸ Davies, interview, Jean (Culver) Lund, July 16, 2012, transcript, 21.

³⁹ McKenzie-Brown, interview, Richard L. (Rick) George, August 2, 2011, transcript, 11.

⁴⁰ McKenzie-Brown, interview, Kathleen Taylor, November 1, 2011, transcript, 14.

⁴¹ These were deposited at the Provincial Archives of Alberta, Lorraine Hoffman fonds, 1998. Hoffman used them in writing *Inkonze*.

⁴² Friedel, “(Not so) Crude Text and Images,” 241–242.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 250–251.

⁴⁴ Levis, “Memory and Liability,” 236–238; see also Jürgen Jeske, “Wie die Unternehmensgeschichte seriös wurde,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, June 4, 2006 (<http://www.unternehmensgeschichte.de/files/presse/GuG2.pdf>).

⁴⁵ My thanks to my colleague Alexander Freund and the University of Winnipeg Oral History Centre staff for sharing with me their insights regarding Canadian businesses’ impact on Indigenous peoples and parallels to German businesses in the Nazi era.

⁴⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Calls to Action*.

⁴⁷ Rajak, “Corporate Memory,” 270.

⁴⁸ Jean Paul Gladu, “Economic Equality Must Be Part of Indigenous Reconciliation,” *Globe and Mail*, August 1, 2016 (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/rob-commentary/economic-equality-must-be-part-of-indigenous-reconciliation/article31215507/>).

⁴⁹ *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, adopted on September 13, 2007 (https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf).

⁵⁰ Andrew Smith, “Why We Need to Integrate the Historiography of Colonialism and the Historiography of International Business,” blog post, July 25, 2014, (<https://pastspeaks.com/tag/colonialism/>). Smith points to Maria Misra’s book (*Business, Race, and Politics in British India*) as a valuable exception. See also Brown, “Tracing

Burma's Economic Failure"; van den Bersselaar, "Reconstructing African Careers in European Business."

⁵¹ Decker, "Silence of the Archives," 163, 167.