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Mairtin Mac Con Iomaire

*Technological University Dublin*, [mairtin.Macconiomaire@tudublin.ie](mailto:mairtin.Macconiomaire@tudublin.ie)

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**Hidden Voices from the Culinary Past:  
Oral History as a tool for Food Historians**

**Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire Ph.D., Dublin Institute of Technology**

There has been a growing interest in culinary history and gastronomy in the last three decades (Messer, Haber et al. 2000). Much of the work of culinary historians is centred on written sources, ranging from cookbooks, diaries, or menus. The voices and life experiences of most food workers (both domestic and professional) are hidden, apart from the minority who wrote cookbooks or memoirs. This paper discusses the use of oral history as a tool to un-lock the experiences of food workers and draws on the author's experiences using oral history in researching the history of Dublin restaurants 1900-2000 for his Ph.D. in the Dublin Institute of Technology.

The words Dublin or Ireland do not immediately come to mind when *haute cuisine* is mentioned. However, two leading French chefs, the brothers Francois and Michel Jammet, opened a restaurant in Dublin in 1901 which, up until its closure in 1967, remained one of the best restaurants serving *haute cuisine* in the world (Mac Con Iomaire 2006). *Haute cuisine* was served in many Dublin hotels, clubs and restaurants during the twentieth century and came under similar influences as Paris, London and other European cities, moving from the Escoffier orthodoxy to the influence of *nouvelle cuisine*. In 1949, another French chef, Pierre Rolland, arrived in Dublin as *chef de cuisine* of the Russell Hotel and the restaurant under his leadership also became world renowned for *haute cuisine* (Mac Con Iomaire 2004). Dublin restaurants serving *haute cuisine* enjoyed a 'golden age' in the two decades that followed the Second World War. The kitchens and dining rooms of the Russell and Royal Hibernian Hotels became nurseries for young Irish chefs and waiters who gradually replaced the Continental head chefs and waiters and became the culinary leaders in the 1970s. When the *Egon Ronay Guide* covered Ireland for the first time in 1963, the Russell was awarded three stars – the highest possible

accolade. It was described as ‘one of the best restaurants in Europe’ in the 1964 guide and by 1965, the entry for the Russell Hotel Restaurant read ‘words fail us in describing the brilliance of the cuisine at this elegant and luxurious restaurant which must rank amongst the best in the world’ (Egon-Ronay 1965:464). The *Michelin Guide to Great Britain and Ireland* was first published in 1974, awarding one star to the Russell Hotel which also closed in 1974. *Haute cuisine* moved from the restaurants of Dublin to the country house hotels during the 1970s and 1980s. The next Michelin star was not awarded in Dublin until 1989, to another French chef / restaurateur, Patrick Guilbaud. By 2001 there were two Dublin restaurants awarded two Michelin stars each, Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud, and Thornton’s, run by an Irish chef Kevin Thornton.

The academic fields of food studies and culinary history span many academic disciplines (Duran and MacDonald 2006:234). Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach to the identification and analyses of research material was adopted in the above study. The main primary research methodology employed was in-depth life history interviews with chefs, waiters, restaurateurs and discerning diners who had lived experiences of Dublin restaurants during the twentieth century. One of the reasons for using oral history in this project was the lack of written material available, but this was compensated by the fund of outstanding personal experience provided in the oral testimonies. This paper will discuss the origins of oral history, explore its use in culinary history, and give solid examples of how it has helped this researcher to un-cover valuable data concerning the history of Dublin restaurants that may have otherwise remained un-accessed.

### **Origins of Oral History**

One of the research tools to emerge in the study of history of the past half century is oral history (Beiner 1999:1). The modern use of the term ‘oral history’, referring to a taped memoir, a typed transcript, or a research method that involves in-depth interviewing is relatively new. Yow (1994) credits Alan Nevins’ work in 1948 at Columbia University as the first organised oral history project. But ‘oral history’ in fact is as old as history itself. It was the first kind of history. *Thucydides*, who in the fifth century BC sought out people to interview and used their information in writing the *History of the Peloponnesian War*,

is oft cited as the first oral historian. The term 'oral history' can be confusing. It often implies a misleading analogy with already differentiated aspects of history – economic, agricultural, medical, legal, culinary, and so on. Whereas oral history can never be a 'compartment' of history in its' own right, it is a technique that could conceivably be used in any branch of the discipline (Evans 1975). Many scholars, especially anthropologists and sociologists who don't see themselves as oral historians, also use the method of oral history. The same is true of journalists and documentary makers. Yet all may be writing history; and they are certainly providing for it (Thompson 1988). The use of personal testimony in the investigation of society has never ceased, but the mechanical recording of in-depth interviews is a post WWII phenomena. Whereas Nevins interviewed 'persons significant in American life' or the 'great men' approach, George Ewart Evans, who pioneered oral history in England, collected the memories of Suffolk villagers. The essence of oral history is that it can catch hold of people's memories through their own voices, a quality that is especially relevant for those marginalized by or excluded from 'big' history, such as hospitality and food workers.

### **Strength of Oral History**

The oral historical approach according to Tosh (1991:227) gives social history 'a human face' and recovers 'lost areas of human experience'. Evans (1957:xiii) contends that to capture the 'living past' one cannot rely on traditional historical archival methodology. It can only be gathered and preserved through the oral historical approach before it perishes with the informants. Oral historians, according to Davis, Black et al. (1977), 'are haunted by the obituary page. Every death represents the loss of a potential narrator and thus an absolute diminution of society's collective historical memory'. A wide range of literature exists on best practice in the use of oral history (Yow 1994; Perks and Thompson 1998). Starr (1984:4) describes oral historians as 'modern muses armed with tape recorders in quest of first-hand knowledge that would otherwise decay'. There are a number of terms that are used interchangeably with oral history. They include life history, personal narrative, life story, oral biography, memoir and testament.

The in-depth interview enables the researcher to give the subjects freedom to answer as they choose, to attribute meanings to the experiences under discussion, and to introduce a range of topics. Interviewees are brought through their lives chronologically focusing on family background, education and training, employment history, (and in this researcher's project) eating out history and other relevant topics. In this way new un-discovered data may be generated. This freedom often enables the researcher to discover aspects of behaviour, or key information not previously available. The interview process can also provide a means of revealing the existence of fresh written documents and photographs, which may not have otherwise been identified. The special characteristic of this research method is the high level of interaction between the interviewer and narrator. The objective is to understand the multiplicity of experiences in a total life context (Taylor 2002:262).

### **Validity of Evidence**

Oral sources, like all other sources need to be considered critically. Using what Denzin (1970) calls 'triangulation', the insights gained from oral sources can be compared and combined with standard archival and published sources to produce a truer picture of the past. Thompson (1975) reminds us that much of documentary data is suspect. Reports, accounts of war and political diaries are written by the upper echelons of society; the winners write the history and generally represent only the victorious in any conflict and present solely their view. Marriage and birth registration information have been often falsified to hide the fact that the age of parental consent was not reached in the first instance, or that a nine-month gap didn't exist in the second. Census forms are often completed in haste and without due care. Lummis (1987) concludes that even 'hard' contemporary statistical evidence is still what somebody told somebody, and if truth is concealed the facts will be erroneous. Kearns (2005) questions why archival sources like the diaries or memoirs of politicians, clergy or business men should be considered any more valid than oral evidence since he notes that common people have nothing (or significantly less) to gain by not telling the truth, compared to some of the more affluent members of society. Hoffman (1984:72) contends that when undertaken in the most professional way, oral histories may be superior to many written records, noting, 'archives are replete with self-serving documents, with edited and doctored diaries and

memoranda written “for the record”. In thirty years of using oral history, Kearns (2005) points out that his research has never been challenged by any academic; on the contrary, most modern histories of Dublin draw on his work (Coogan 2003; Ferriter 2004).

Oral history interviews can contain untruths, or exaggerations. Discrepancies within testimony and differences in comparison to other sources, according to Yow (1994), can point to truths not factually accurate but psychologically true. The subjectivity of oral history is both inescapable and crucial to an understanding of the meaning we give our past and present.

### **Oral History in Culinary History**

The use of oral history in culinary history is still at an early stage. Despite growing culinary collections in libraries such as the Schlesinger in Harvard, New York Public Library, Oxford Brookes, or the University of Adelaide, neither have a culinary oral history archive. There are, however, a number of oral history projects in the wider areas of food and wine. The California wine industry oral history series was initiated in 1969 with a generous funding from the Wine Advisory Board, but it was not until 2002 that the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) of the University of California, Berkeley, inaugurated the food and food way interview series, which include interviews with chefs and other food workers, based on generous funding from the wine industry. More recent oral history projects in America include the Southern Foodways Alliance ‘Gulf Coast Foodways Renaissance Project: An Oral History Initiative’ in the University of Mississippi, and the Delta Food Oral Histories in the Delta State University, which seem to have grown from the potential loss of both New Orleans and the Gulf Coast’s culinary heritage following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

In England, the British Library houses a number of collections including the ‘National Life Stories Food Project’, ‘An Oral History of the Wine Trade’, ‘Food: from Source to Salespoint’, and ‘Tesco: An Oral History’. Recent research published by the Oral History Society ([www.ohs.org.uk](http://www.ohs.org.uk)) included papers on the poultry industry, cooking tools as inalienable possessions, and memory of food, family and conflict. Two Australian

culinary oral history sources include Newton (1996) and Stewart (1997). Other food related oral history projects have been inaugurated in recent years worldwide, some of which are linked to the growing Slow Food movement, or attempts to capture the influence of the ethnic food cultures of immigrants on their host communities. The Irish Taste Council recently commissioned an oral history project to interview food artisans including fishermen, farmers, butchers, bakers and cheese makers, in order to capture the traditional techniques and knowledge they hold before they disappear forever.

### **A Researcher's Experience**

There is a current dearth of research on Dublin restaurants and this researcher's 'history from below' study is in keeping with the post-modern historiography of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, particularly through the technique of oral history. Iggers (1997:14) discusses how history's subject matter has recently shifted from social structures and processes to culture in the broad sense of everyday life, 'history has assumed a human face as attention is given to individuals, common folks not just the high and mighty'. Appadurai (1991) suggests that performing 'genealogies of the present' can create a more historical picture of present situations. The methodology of the study was motivated by the pioneering work of Kearns (2001) in Dublin's urban folklore and oral folk history.

Focus groups were employed in a semiformal manner to inform the research process and to identify key individuals as potential sources of information. Ratcliffe (2002) suggests holding at least one or two strategic conversations with 'remarkable people', who might not be central to the study itself, but have the capacity to think creatively and differently. One such interview was held with Dr. Garret Fitzgerald, former *taoiseach* / prime minister of Ireland. Fitzgerald (2005:~30) argued that lack of immigration in Ireland led to catering workers and other service industry workers such as the banks receiving significantly higher wages than their counterparts in England. He observes:

'It always struck me as the perverse thing in economics, we were such a poor country that we were emigrating but nobody immigrated here, and because there was no immigration they could unionise the staff in hotels and restaurants, which they couldn't do in England'.

Traditional documentary and archival evidence were examined and compared with primary sources to provide a robust account of the history of Dublin restaurants from 1900-2000. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that to build dense, well-developed, integrated and comprehensive theory, a researcher should make use of any or every method at his or her disposal, keeping in mind that a true interplay of methods is necessary. They also stress that the research design, like the concepts must be allowed to emerge from the research process.

‘Remember, the idea behind varying methods is to carry out the most parsimonious and advantageous means of arriving at theory. Such a task calls for sensitivity to the nuances in data, tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility in design and a large dose of creativity’ (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Census Reports covering the twentieth century available in the Central Statistics Office (CSO) library were analysed for statistics and data on restaurants, restaurant workers, and foreigners working in the hospitality industry. The 1911 census became available online in October 2007 and this research tool was harnessed to better understand patterns of employment, and the role of foreign employees in restaurants and hotels in Edwardian Dublin (Mac Con Iomaire 2008).

Material Culture is a method used by many different disciplines and as such the definitions of it can vary. One writer defines material culture as the study through artefacts of the beliefs – values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions – of particular community or society at a given time (St George 1988:18). For social historians in particular, material culture is a useful tool to gather information on groups other than the elites. This is valid for restaurant and hospitality workers. Since the life stories of the ‘working class’ were not often recorded, and very rarely in their own words, some of their story can be extrapolated by studying the material objects left behind. The main types of material culture analysed in this research were photographs, menus, advertisements, and awards. Some cutlery, crockery, delFTWARE and other catering equipment were also studied. During one of the first interviews with Herbert (Sonny) Geldof (1912-2005), I was shown a framed Diploma of Merit from the Irish Food and



Cookery Exhibition 1912 that was hanging on the wall, which was won by Geldof's father, Zenon, a Belgian chef who came to Ireland in 1907. Further research revealed that the Irish Food and Cookery Exhibitions were held in Dublin from 1909 to 1912. The names of prize winners published in the newspapers, when cross-referenced with the 1911 census data helped the researcher draw a clearer picture of restaurant workers in Edwardian Dublin than had previously been known.

### **Creative Interviewing**

A particular strength in this research project was that the researcher, a chef by trade, could draw on first hand experience in the restaurant business in Dublin, and engage in a dialogue where mutual respect and understanding led to very detailed conversations, and secured fresh and significant data. Ratcliffe (2002) states that it is rare for a researcher to have the standing and proficiency in a particular field to fulfil this requirement. This shared experience leads to what Douglas (1985) describes as creative interviewing, and derives from the tradition of oral history. The word 'creative', however, refers primarily to the interviewer, not the respondent.

'Creative interviewing involves the use of many strategies and tactics of interaction, largely based on an understanding of friendly feelings and intimacy, to optimise co-operative, mutual disclosure and creative search for mutual understanding' (Douglas 1985).

This creative approach leads to the disclosure and probing of details that may not have been revealed to a researcher from another field. The strength of oral history according to Burke (1991) 'is the strength of any methodologically competent history. It comes from the range and the intelligence with which many types of sources are harnessed to pull together'.

### **Identifying Informants**

The challenge in oral history is to 'track down' members of the 'old crowd' as they are affectionately known (Kearns 2001:9). Brewer (1990:18) explains the importance and urgency of seeking out this 'small number of survivors whose life experiences will be lost to future generations once they pass from the scene'. Memories of stories of Jammet's

restaurant during ‘the Emergency’ (WWII period) from a deceased teacher of professional cookery in the Dublin College of Catering led this researcher to identify the need to record the life stories of two surviving chef / instructors from that period: Liam Kavanagh and Bill Ryan – thus initiating this research project. In 2002/3, a number of informal focus groups were held among the academic staff in the School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) to formulate a rough outline of the principal hotels and restaurants of Dublin’s past, and the key individuals who worked in them. These sessions identified some of the first interviewees. Each interviewee was asked to suggest other individuals who would be worth interviewing. Bryson (2007:54) calls this the ‘snowball sampling’ method. Having interviewed thirteen individuals and received various old menus and photographs that helped illuminate the past, influenced by the methodology used by Guest (2004:64), it was decided to make a public call for information using radio programmes and other media. A 20-minute interview on the Marian Finucane Radio Show RTE Radio One (average listenership 372,000 according to JNLR 2004) was secured on Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2004. The response was exceptional. Over 45 responses from individuals including retired chefs, waiters, discerning diners and relatives or friends of catering workers furnished stories, names of potential interviewees, pictures and copies of old menus.

### **The Interview Process**

Interviewees were originally contacted by telephone, e-mail or letter, and the background to the research project was explained. A suitable time for an interview was sought and the interviewees were asked to make any relevant material such as photographs, menus or newspaper clippings they had available on the day of the interview. The interview process followed best practice as outlined in Yow (1994). Each interviewee was brought through their life in chronological order focussing particularly on whether there was catering in their families, how they got involved in catering, their education and training and the various positions they held over their lifetime. Interviewees were asked about technological changes they had witnessed, eating out patterns, union involvement and also gender within the restaurants in which they worked. Interviewees were also asked to identify who they felt the main pioneers / instigators of change were during their working life.

Over fifty interviews were undertaken. The interviewees' year of birth ranged from 1911 to 1969. Thirty seven interviews were formal face to face interviews that were tape recorded. The remaining interviews were carried out over the telephone due to distance, age and convenience to the interviewees. Research notes were taken during these interviews. Some individuals were visited or telephoned more than once to clarify certain topics, dates or events.

### **Editing, Coding and Analyses of Interviews**

Each tape-recorded interview was transcribed and then edited. Each thread of the edited interviews was numbered for ease of referencing as practiced by Muldowney (2005). For example when discussing the high esteem in which Pierre Rolland was held in Dublin catering circles, the references (Ryan 2004:~67; Clancy 2008:~44) refer to thread 67 of the interview with Bill Ryan (7/1/2004) 'Rolland was a God, in Dublin he was the God in the cheffing business you know', and thread 44 of the interview with John Clancy (22/1/2008) 'Rolland sat on a stool at the hotplate. The hotplate was dressed with white linen, and all the *cloche*'s were there, all spotless, spotless!..... Now, Rolland was treated as a God, he was a God in that kitchen'.

The principle approach in coding and analysing data utilised in this research was the grounded theory approach outlined in Strauss and Corbin (1998). This approach enables the researcher to develop a theoretical interpretation while still grounding it in the empirical reality reflected in the data.

### **Sample of Research Findings from Oral Histories**

A number of themes emerged from the various oral history interviews including education provision, career patterns, migration, gender, unionisation, and alcoholism. Interviews with two life long friends Liam (Bill) Kavanagh and Bill Ryan, both born in 1927, reveal how both became chefs by chance, since other trades were closed. They both won scholarships to the Dublin College of Catering which opened in 1941 and later in 1948 they both won a scholarship to work in the Savoy Grill in London under one of Escoffier's protégés, Chef Albon. They both later spent many years travelling the world

on Cunard Ocean Liners, and Liam Kavanagh spent a number of years in the 1950s working in New York City in restaurants such as The Forum of the Twelve Caesars, *Le Valois*, *La Crémaillère à-la-Campagne*, The Four Seasons and in The Country Gentleman Club in Saratoga Springs. He returned to Ireland for the opening of the Intercontinental Hotel, Dublin, in 1963. Bill Ryan returned to Ireland in the late 1950s and following a few years in the Gresham, Jury's and Moira Hotels, he spent around thirty years working in Dublin Airport Restaurant, which was noted by Egon Ronay for the quality of its cuisine. Both Kavanagh and Ryan became part-time culinary instructors in the Dublin College of Catering in the 1990s, where this researcher made their acquaintance.

Other interviewees highlighted the importance of restaurants such as Jammet's, The Russell, The Royal Hibernian, and The Red Bank Restaurant as nurseries for culinary talent (Farren 2003; McGee 2004; Connell 2008). The same would later be true of restaurants such as Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud, Thornton's, and The Park (O'Reilly 2008; Thornton 2008). The influence of working with some of France's leading chefs such as Troisgros and Bocuse was also identified as important in transferring culinary knowledge from France to Ireland (Ryan 2005; Thornton 2008). A number of interviewees spoke of their own memories working in Dublin restaurants, but also had memories of their foreign born fathers who had been industry leaders in Ireland during the first half of the twentieth century (Opperman 2004; Gyax 2005; Hood 2006). Some current leading foreign born restaurateurs resemble the Normans who arrived in 1169, in that they have become more Irish than the Irish themselves. Guilbaud (2008:~128) discusses whether his food is Irish or French:

'It is Guillaume's and my food, people say we are French, of course we are French, I am born in France so is Guillaume and Stefan, but Guillaume is here twenty eight years and he is only forty four, he is living longer here than he did in France, in his family he has two sons and a daughter and is married to an Irish lady, he is bound to have Irish ideas and so his food is modern Irish, I don't like the term modern Irish because it means nothing. His food is his food, it is Guillaume's food. It is the way Guilbaud's is designed it is the restaurant's food. It is a mixture of French and Irish, because the product is local product, we try and work with local product'.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing on this researcher's experience documenting the history of Dublin restaurants 1900-2000, this paper proposes the use of oral history among culinary historians to gather and preserve parts of the 'living past' before it perishes with the informants (Evans 1957:xiii). It calls on curators of culinary libraries to build oral history archives which can be accessed electronically. It took the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 to remind many Americans how fragile the culinary diversity and traditions that surrounds us all can be. Let us act now rather than fear the obituary page!!!

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