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'The price we had to pay': Perception and Reality in the Memories of a Veteran of the Malayan Emergency

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Memory is never a static snapshot of a past reality, but an organic process of recall; as much contingent on the demands of the present as the prism of each narrator's perception of the past. A veteran's perception of the Malayan Emergency sees acceptance of British involvement in Malaysia's affairs as 'what we had to do to give them freedom, otherwise they'd be wearing jackboots now'. The testimony a narrator produces is a window into their process of recall; what is remembered, what is forgotten and what is left unsaid: 'People, whether young or old, remember what is important to *them*'. Ultimately, memory is a fallible tool subject to mutations over time; the weight of collective and cultural memories limit individual recollection. Personal narrative is a product of subjectivity.

Memory is never a fixed picture of the past, but an organic reconstruction of previous events, often 'driven by the needs of the present'[1], with ambiguity in the reality remembered and the reality narrated. The oral testimony of Bryn Jones, a seventy-three year old veteran of the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) – a bitter conflict for natural resources between British and Commonwealth troops and communist guerrillas in the Malayan jungle – shows the gaps and overlaps between his perception of events and experiences in Malaysia with the realities of the period. In addition, the interplay between the

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[1] G. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes* (London , 1994), 241

personal memories of the individual, the collective memory of a group, the popular memory of wider society, 'the social production of memory'[2], and the official memory promoted by successive Governments through monuments and military parades, gives a glimpse into the power of received cultural representations, and the influence the socially-produced memory of a group, or society at large, can exert over the perceptions of the individual. Indeed, there are myriad external factors: from the interviewer and interview situation, to cultural norms and the media, which exert a huge influence over the perceptions and memories of any narrator. What Alistair Thomson has termed the 'composure'[3] of memory from all of these disparate elements is a deeply congested, and contested, area of research. Lummis argues that 'It must be accepted that we [Oral Historians] never have direct access to memory'[4]. Nevertheless, memories are an invaluable resource which helps us not only to understand the narrators and the realities they lived through, but also the societal 'system of common life'[5] which frames the perceptions and recollections they offer. Bryn Jones' testimony is a battleground between these competing pressures and priorities. There exists a dynamic flux between his personal memories and the collective memory of soldier colleagues; the popular memory of the culture lived in and the official memory of parades; memorials and statues, all of which colour and shade his own experiences. The cultural pressures of everyday society, the expectations of the interviewer, real or imagined, and the desires and goals of the veteran himself may taint any oral testimony.

The interview situation and the interviewer have a huge impact on the reality evoked and the perceptions offered. Brown has argued:

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[2] Popular Memory Group (Richard Johnson et al), 'Popular Memory: Theory Politics Method' in *The Oral History Reader*, (eds.) R. Perks & A. Thomson (London, 2006), 76

[3] A. Thomson, 'The A.N.Z.A.C. Legend' in *The Myths We Live By*, (eds.) R. Samuel & P. Thompson (London, 1990), 78

[4] T. Lummis, *Listening to History* (New Jersey, 1987), 118

[5] R. Williams, *Keywords* (London, 1983), 294

> The interviewer presents a subjectivity, composed of his/her sex, age, dress, manner of deportment and, of course, the way of asking questions, and this constitutes a culture of signs and discourses that is understood by the interviewee. The interviewee will be responsive in his/her testimony to this presence in all sorts of ways.[6]

The reality Bryn Jones re-creates from his memories is framed within the context presented. Indeed, the variance of influences can be astounding; an unobtrusive object like the recorder can be influential in its own way if a narrator is unnerved by its presence. The impact of these different factors on the narrative produced cannot be underestimated, as Abrams has argued: 'Neutrality is not an option because we are part of the story'[7]. Assumptions were made by Bryn Jones about how much I, as interviewer, would understand, whether military jargon or Welsh; he sought to ground his narrative in a variety of cultural markers, including landmarks of Holyhead – our shared home town – and gestures, and through referencing film and television. This resulted in a narrative an outsider or an interviewer unfamiliar with the man and his community would struggle to understand. He clearly relished the opportunity to be interviewed and subsequently treated the interview as an important event, devoting an entire evening to it.

The purpose of the interview was not to collect a rigid account of facts and dates, but a perspective of personal experience. As Terkel states, 'I'm not looking for some such abstraction as the *truth*, because it doesn't exist. What I'm looking for is what the truth is for *them*'[8]. Evaluating Bryn Jones' reality provided an excellent opportunity to understand his perspectives and preoccupations, yet, the conjection is that my own presence fundamentally stained his testimony. Portelli has expanded this point, arguing that 'Oral testimony, in fact, is never

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[6] C. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Edinburgh, 2005), 131
[7] L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London, 2010), 58
[8] S. Terkel, quoted in T. Parker article, 'Interviewing an Interviewer', *The Oral History Reader*, 125

the same twice'[9], due to the innumerable factors which contribute to the production of the narrative reality; from the phrasing of a question, to the time an interview takes place. Every oral testimony is a window to the priorities, values and experiences of the narrator, and this interview was designed to open up a dialogic process; between interviewer as researcher and interviewee as narrator. Through this dialogue the discordances and harmonies between historical reality and narrative perception arise. The taints and turmoils in Bryn Jones' narrative are witnessed at several key points: in his self-representation as a dutiful son and a masculine, drinking-and-fighting man's man simultaneously; in the representation of his initial conscription into national service; how he rationalised his involvement in the Malayan Emergency; how he described the exotic people he encountered, most notably the Gurkha soldiers and the indigenous people of Sarawak, and, finally, his struggle to articulate the traumatic realities of jungle warfare in Malaysia. Each of these aspects of narrative reveals an uneasy alliance between the reality of the situation and the recollections offered. Portelli has argued that 'The life story as a full, coherent oral narrative does not exist in nature; it is a synthetic product of social science – but no less precious for that'[10]. The artifices of the oral narrative betray the hidden motives and purposes of its composure, whether the narrator wants to be the hero of his narrative or through the subtle impact of collective memory on personal recall. If memories are common creations of the human mind, designed to rationalise and justify the worlds around us, then, by analysing memories, oral historians may gain a more human picture of historical realities, whilst also constructing a window into the perceptions and views of narrators and the culture they live in.

A complex representation of identity is produced by Bryn Jones; on one side, the loyal son eager to appease his father, 'for his sake'[11], and on the other, a fun-loving character drinking, fighting and gambling:

[9] A. Portelli, 'What makes Oral History Different?' in *The Oral History Reader*, 39
[10] A. Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia* (Madison, 1997), 4
[11] Bryn Jones Interview, 30/1/2011, Transcribed 02/02/2011, extract 1

> … in Singapore we used to have a good time go to the nightlife to the clubs the Britannia Hotel and the Union Jack Club they used to have er karaoke and er oh yeah er dance with women in the service we er got into a fight with fellers from the R.A.F.[12]

This may partly be due to the fact that he left military service aged twenty-one and, subsequently, as a mature, older man, his memories of national service are dominated by his youth rather than promotions or other events. However, the death of his father in 1959 was the event which caused him to leave the army in order to support his mother and younger sister: 'I says after my father I'd be the only breadwinner'[13]. There appears to be a reluctance to stress any sort of conflict with his father in the narrative; an attempt, consciously or not, to play down any conflicting realities in order to present a harmonious family unit, with a smooth transition from man's man to model son. In a bid to maintain his reputation as a storyteller and retain excitement in his narrative, Bryn Jones may have selected the most thrilling events he can remember, accentuating his role; not only to please his ego by becoming the hero of his narrative, but also affirming his masculinity in light of his capitulation to the demands of his family. Through a narration of the fights, the drinking, the gambling and the general adventures, he fashioned an identity where loyalty to his family is unquestioned; his masculinity and his narrative are re-affirmed through his anecdotes of young manhood. As Abrams has observed, '… men's conversation with other men is often characterised by boasting'[14], and some of Bryn Jones' anecdotes – entertaining as they are – may fall into that category.

A similar conflict may be observed in the narratives constructed by Bryn Jones, of his initial conscription into national service and his later assessments of the event. The narrative swings from the original

[12] Ibid, extract 2
[13] Ibid, extract 3
[14] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 119

dread and resignation: 'Get it over and done with'; 'I'll do my time'; 'I wanted to go and yet I didn't want to go anywhere'[15], towards a much more positive tone: 'I would go through it again … you just get on and you can make it fun, but I definitely would go back again'[16]. Whilst this may be attributable to the experiences and fellowship encountered in the army creating a sentimental attachment, the spectre of collective memory also hangs over the narrative. The individualism of the earlier testimony, around the personal 'I', is counterbalanced by the more distant second person 'you' in the later narrative. It is arguable that the collective memory of Bryn Jones' fellow ex-servicemen coloured the narrative reality, subtly shifting his perceptions to be in greater accordance with the group reality; personal perceptions are faded in order to promote a group reality. It is apparent that he was influenced by the powers of collective and official memory; the contact of fellow ex-servicemen and reunions adulterate his personal testimony the most: 'We talk about the old times have a beer and tell some jokes and it is y-y'know a really good gathering'[17]. Chatting about the old times over a beer would clearly present as collective memory placing a huge pressure over individual memory, so might explain why his memory seems most adept at recalling small anecdotal episodes, which can be threaded into a narrative and told well.

The external pressure to conform to the reputation of a storyteller leads Bryn Jones to recall the most vivid images; the fantastic and the oriental, such as seeing Gurkha soldiers:

> The Gurkha officer had these knives at the back called the Kukri but the sheath was covered in aw precious stones y'know aw y'know it was a beautiful thing it was and they were talking their language but as they were goin' I says to the officer 'How is er thing the Kukri is it sharp' I says 'can I see?' 'No you can't' he says 'you can't see' y'see if they draw

[15] Bryn Jones Interview, extract 4
[16] Ibid, extract 5
[17] Ibid, extract 6

it it's got to be for blood.[18]

The fascination and infectious enthusiasm for the Gurkhas is a combination of awe and curiosity. The brutality and opulence in the Kukri clearly left a mark in the memory and affected his narrative. Understandably so, since he was demonstrably proud at having served alongside the Gurkhas in the Malayan jungle: 'I'd serve alongside them any day'[19]. This episode underlines both his own prowess as a soldier, capable of holding his own against these renowned troops, and his position as a raconteur with an engaging story to tell. The pressure to make the testimony interesting leads to a more ruthless editing of his testimony: 'They [the Gurkhas] told us it'd get hotter by the time we got to Singapore and we said "Aw thank you very much" [laughs] I knew four of them fellers gurkhas very very nice fellers but y'know there was some Nepalese that didn't mix much'[20]. Those Gurkhas who do not conform to his narrative of the 'very very nice fellers', who are polite yet deadly, are demoted from Gurkhas to Nepalese; an example of narrative utilised as an editing of memory. The contradictory realities in the narrative are marginalised.

The deployment of Bryn Jones' cultural markers help frame his perceptions: 'Y'know they made a film of it erm oh Rourke's Drift oh urm Zulu there like that … they won nine but it was actually eleven VCs'[21]. The film 'Zulu' is used to explain the collective pride the South Wales Borderers – the regiment he served in – have in their history. Popular historical memory, in this case, serves to augment the collective identity of the regiment, witnessed in correction of eleven, not nine, Victoria Crosses won by his regiment. Thomson has reinforced this point, arguing that film studios are 'the most important myth-makers of our time'[22], and these myths, popular and official, present a powerful influence on an individual's

[18] Ibid, extract 7
[19] Ibid, extract 8
[20] Ibid, extract 9
[21] Ibid, extract 10
[22] Thomson, 'The A.N.Z.A.C. Legend' in *The Myths we live by*, 74

perception of reality. As a soldier, Bryn Jones accepted the official perspective of British involvement in Malaysia's affairs as 'what we had to do to give them freedom, otherwise they'd be wearing jackboots now'[23]. The use of 'jackboots' here is to denote totalitarian regimes, yet, there is a failure to see the contradiction in being a conscripted soldier sent to fight Malaysian people, to secure Malaysian resources for a British Government which denies a conscript his own freedom. Yet, the creation of a narrative which grants the opportunity to be, in some small way, a hero in his own life story, is an understandable development; 'Narrative is a way of making sense of experience'[24]. Acceptance of the official perspective of the conflict is an example of a narrative providing comfort, as well as a justification to the narrator who produces it. Dawson has argued that 'Britain's wars have always been fought in other people's countries'[25], therefore, military service overseas was the unquestioned norm for military service.

The tumultuous realities of Bryn Jones' era are pushed to the margins of his own story. Melvyn Bragg also noticed this trend: 'A man will talk of the Second World War, not in terms of Rommel or Montgomery or Eisenhower, but in a way in which everyone who served under those generals would understand'[26]. Tangentially, the Suez crisis is described as 'The whole Suez canal business yeah so erm if we went out of the barracks we had to tell them where we were going'[27]. A momentous event is brought down to human scale; the annoying inconvenience of having tabs kept on your every movement. The narrative used is a humble perspective of turbulent events and, like many of the conscripted soldiers involved, he was more concerned with having "a good laugh"[28] and getting home in one piece than anything else, and his account reflects this. As a

[23] Bryn Jones Interview, extract 11
[24] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 121
[25] Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 235
[26] P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 1982), 132
[27] Bryn Jones Interview, extract 12
[28] Ibid, extract 13

member of the infantry 'footsloggers'[29], his recollection concerns the average soldier. Although affectionate for the army – joined through compulsion as part of the Government's program of national service – Bryn Jones was sent along with thousands of other 'raw recruits – virgin soldiers'[30] to Malaysia, a jungle warzone. It is astonishing that he is so accepting of these developments; he displays an institutional narrative[31] to deal with the events imposed upon him and thousands of other national service conscripts: 'Get it over and done with', 'Unfortunately a few that didn't come back [home] … but that I'm sorry to say is the price we had to pay'[32]. This acceptance of the conditions of conflict is dismissed as a reality to be endured; the casualties of national service a mere occupational hazard. Growing up during the Second World War, in an era of militarisation and massive state intervention in citizen's lives, national conscription was accepted as a normal event in life; '… the price we had to pay'. The use of 'we' implies not only Bryn Jones' generation, but a collective memory which still operates in his narrative.

The horrific memories of jungle fighting, against Communist guerrillas, are still his own personal experience:

> When I came back [to the base] I landed a job erm … because … erm getting nightmares yeah because we had to kill fellers yeah aw the bandits well that's what we'd know them as and erm getting nightmares could see it and everything anyway I had a job in the Officers Mess which was cushdie'[33].

Here, there is a real struggle to express the horror of the jungle fights and the subsequent nightmares suffered. There is a break with the official discourse of the guerrillas as 'bandits', instead acknowledging

[29] Ibid, extract 14
[30] P. Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire 1781-1997* (London, 2008), 454
[31] Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia*, 20
[32] Bryn Jones Interview, extract 15
[33] Ibid, extract 16

their status as human beings, as another group of 'fellers'. Rejection of the official memory of 'bandits', 'that's what we'd known them as', brings no comfort and no resolution, as the traumatic experience 'blocks narrative expression'[34]. Instead,the narrative hastily shifts towards his time in the Officers Mess. Anecdotes follow, of the first taste of curry and gambling adventures. Safe, oft-told tales which allow him to 'impose some control on a memory which could not otherwise be borne'[35], without providing any of the final closure of resolution, help him to deal with some of the more disturbing memories from his national service. The perspective is moved from outdoors to the domestic indoors, in order to obscure the violent realities witnessed.

Rejection of the official memory of resisting evil "guerrillas" brought no closure and, whilst collective memory through Bryn Jones' circle of ex-servicemen friends has provided some comfort, there has been no solace. These painful memories are negotiated by surrounding the bad with the good: his escapades with the Malay cooks and waiters; his attempts to gamble his way to riches, and his novel experiences with Asian beer and curry suffocate the memories of jungle fighting. As Ben-Amos has argued, 'Memory, collective and individual, transforms our social and material surroundings into a language that tells us about the past.'[36] Whilst remembering always occurs in the present, the recollections offered by each narrator provide vital glimpses into a different era, supplying clues to the circumstances of both the past and the present. Memory is never a static snapshot of a past reality, but an organic process of recall, as much contingent on the demands of the present as the prism of each narrator's perception of the past. The testimony a narrator produces is a window into their process of recall; what is remembered; what is forgotten and what is left unsaid: 'People, whether young or old, remember what is

[34] P. Riano-Alcala, 'Seeing the past, visions of the future' in *Oral History and Public Memorie*s, (eds.) P. Hamilton & L. Shopes (Philadelphia, 2008), 285

[35] M. Roseman, 'Surviving Memory' in *The Oral History Reader*, 238

[36] D. Ben-Amos, 'Afterword' in *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*, (eds.) D. Ben-Amos & L. Weissberg (Detroit, 1999), 298

important to *them*'[37]. Attempts are made to create a narrative reality which can rationalise experiences and memories: the conflict in Bryn Jones' role as a son; his masculinity; his military service; his involvement in the Malayan Emergency; the exotic ethnicities encountered, and, most poignantly, his struggle to come to terms with the traumatic realities of jungle warfare fifty years on. The descriptions of jungle warfare found in history books are rendered pale comparisons to Bryn's reality of fretful, snatched minutes of sleep in the dark, or the harsh marches through hostile jungle, or the continued abhorrence at the brutal fighting witnessed.

Oral history contains the power and capacity to bring all of the grand and sweeping elements of history books down to the humble, human level of the ordinary men and women who endured and survived. Personal narrative is a product of subjectivity; in this case, a window into a veteran's perception of the Malayan Emergency, in conjunction with a reflection on the culture and era the narrative was produced in. Ultimately, memory is a fallible tool subject to mutations over time; the weight of collective and cultural memories limits individual recollection. The added complication of traumatic memories strains the establishment of a coherent narrative. Tonkin has characterised memory as

> … part of cognitive empowering and a means to being; it is developed through social interaction; it is medium as well as message. The contents or evoked messages of memory are also ineluctably social insofar as they are acquired in the social world and can be coded in symbolic systems which are culturally familiar.[38]

For Tonkin, memory is imprisoned in the social world it is used within. Indeed, the collective memory of the soldier colleagues and the popular memory of society's received representations of events, such as the plethora of war films, coupled with the official memory

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[37] V. R. Yow, *Recording Oral History* (2nd Edition) (Oxford, 2005), 39
[38] E. Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts* (Cambridge, 1992), 112

promoted through memorials and parades, plays a large role in the formulation, formatting and composition of personal memories. Oral testimony is, like other sources, a flawed account of the past. There is potential for misrepresentation, omission, mistakes and lies, alongside the influences of the interviewer, the interview situation, memory – collective, popular and official – as well as the priorities of the narrator and the demands of cultural conventions. These peculiarities of oral history may also be, with careful consideration, some of its greatest resources. The mutations and marks in the narrative provide a fleeting glance of the people who lived through momentous historical events, the culture they lived in and the culture they lived through; not just collations of facts and figures.

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