

FOREWORD

Penelope Lively

History springs to life when it speaks. Those who bear witness to the past give it immediacy, which is why historians pay close attention to oral history and why, for all of us, the human voice is uniquely compelling. It is such a rich source, loaded with implications – turn of phrase, word usage, accent, emphasis, emotion. No two people will tell a story in the same way, and when, as with this very special archive of recordings, the story is of a place, of Exmoor, then the product is like an intricate tapestry. Here, 78 voices create a picture of life in this area during the twentieth century, a collective life as varied as the landscape itself, in which occupation and experience are complex and contrasting. We hear from landowners and agricultural workers, from blacksmiths and builders, doctors, postmen and the AA man, from teachers and those who moved from one job to another, and from many others.

The marriage of photographs with recordings means that these voices are not disembodied in the sense that oral history usually has to be. Mark Rattenbury's portraits add another dimension to the archive – the tapestry is not just one of sound but also of powerful black and white imagery. The faces and settings of the contributors are a firm reminder that a society, any society, perhaps especially a complex rural society, consists of people – an invigorating mixture of people each with a vision and an experience that is particular and illuminating.

Exmoor is a remarkable place – beautiful, exceptional in its resources, with a long and intriguing history of human occupation. Those of us who feel a touch xenophobic about it are fully entitled to do so, in my view. I should declare an interest: my family were 'incomers' over a century ago, in the 1880s, when my great grandfather started to bring his young family

to Wootton Courtenay each year for extended holidays. Subsequently, four of them settled in the area, including my grandmother. I spent much of my adolescence at her home; my family retains a foothold, and now a sixth generation is growing up familiar with and passionate about West Somerset and Exmoor.

Those recorded – those portrayed here – include both incomers and people rooted in the region for generations. Together they bear witness to decades of great change. Life on and around the moor is very different from that known by some of the contributors in the early part of their long lives. Some themes crop up fairly often – leaving school at 14, the strains of caring for frail or elderly members of the family, a sharp knowledge of the cost of living, hunting, trenchant views on the National Park Authority. Quite often there is a connection between speakers – relationships, work connections, or simply the association of those who have lived out their lives in a place where people tend to be known to one another. Today, Exmoor is inevitably a less tightly-knit community: easier transport, an uprush of tourism and second home ownership, changing farming practices have all played a part. But it still commands exceptional loyalty; those who know it, remain committed.

In gathering these recordings, Birdie Johnson has created a crucial archive. Future historians will be indebted to her, and the collection will serve as a fascinating resource for contemporary researchers. This book presents some of the faces behind the voices and a flavour of the content of the recordings. This is how these Exmoor people are, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Penelope Lively

INTRODUCTION

Birdie Johnson project consultant

I have been trying to remember what it felt like over two years ago, standing on Tom Troake's doorstep, recording equipment over my shoulder, waiting for him to answer the doorbell. 'It's a pivotal archive,' the Dulverton and District Civic Society and I had been telling people in the preceding months, 'and will be lodged with the record office.' But I don't think we had any idea quite how important it would turn out to be.

In the end 78 people talked to me. That's over 200 hours of recordings, ranging from one to nine hours in length, as varied and corroborative as anyone could wish for. As I moved on around Exmoor, from bungalow to country house, cottage to sheltered housing, anxious to keep ahead of Mark and his camera, a pattern of common themes began to emerge, which I can only touch on here.

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For many people childhood ended at 14, when they started work, if not before. They helped on the farm or in the business, did the milk round, went whortleberry picking and mole catching and learnt the value of money. They trapped rabbits to pay the rent and everyone walked, took taxis or caught the train. Many families relied on a double income; the husband out at work while his wife ran the shop, or the farmer's wife taking in visitors, helped by her daughters. Visitors came for the hunting, fishing and walking, sometimes for a month at a time, staying on farms and in the hotels and guest houses, from Mr Usher to Mr Colman, whose cars were mustard yellow.

Church was, and still is, an important part of most people's lives. They went to Sunday school, church and chapel, sang in the choir and became church wardens. They joined the Women's Institute, the Young Farmers Club and Rotary Club, and served as parish, district and county councillors. They played nap, and cricket and football, and went to dances, whist drives and bingo. Their mothers sang and their fathers played the violin. And young and old, they followed the hunt, from the daughter perched on her mother's shoulders as she ran through the woods, to the villager out in his car, to the huntsman working his hounds. It is the thread that links together people brought up on Exmoor, whatever their background.

Then there is wartime. They reclaimed land and planted potatoes. The men were in the Home Guard, planes crashed on their way back from Wales and everyone kept two pigs. There were evacuees, and land girls and prisoners of war working on the farms. Eisenhower visited his troops, camped on the moorland, and Alfred and Violet Munnings came to Wootton Courtenay and Withypool.

There is so much more. I have only scratched the surface. I was continually amazed by how much people remembered, and in what detail. And at everyone's generosity in inviting Mark and me into their homes, and talking so freely. Looking back now, I can't help feeling that the decision to photograph them was an inspired one. The combination of portrait and recording has a rare alchemy, giving substance to the archive. The contributors have not been lost sight of, but are linked forever to their recordings.

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Let me summon up a few of them, on behalf of the many.

Leslie Norman, who sat in his chair like a benevolent leprechaun, mind skittering here and there with everything he had to say. Muriel Pearcey, table laden with tea, who played 'I want to be happy' on the piano when I left. Ben Halliday, custodian of the land, telling me time was something he had plenty of. Ann MacEwen, who quizzed me about myself before we started and fed me soup in the garden afterwards. Bill Partridge, whose wartime experiences have shaped his life, taking time out for reflection. Dick Rawle who carried his wife's diaries in a suitcase to my car and gave me cherry tomatoes from his freezer. Mary Schofield, dwarfed by her chair, giving me butterfly kisses, saying 'you will come again, won't you?'. And Leslie Delbridge, diffident about talking to me, doubting his memory, who sat for over three hours at the kitchen table describing a life which, to him, seemed unexceptional. 'There's more I want to say,' he told me later, 'It's important'.

And so it is.