



University  
of Glasgow

Abrams, L. (2009) *Revisiting Akenfield: forty years of an iconic text*. Oral History, 37 (1). pp. 33-42. ISSN 0143-0955

Copyright © 2009 Oral History Society

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

The content must not be changed in any way or reproduced in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder(s)

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details must be given

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/6210/>

Deposited on: 2 September 2009

## REVISITING *AKENFIELD*: 40 YEARS OF AN ICONIC TEXT

Lynn Abrams

Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield*, now forty years old, is generally acknowledged as one of the most influential books in the field of oral history.<sup>1</sup> First published in 1969, *Akenfield* is a classic which still has the power to move the reader with its unsentimental, straightforward descriptions of a rural life that was hard, unremitting and something to be endured. This evocative portrait of life in an East Anglian village illustrated the potential for a new kind of history which told the stories of ordinary folk in their own words. To the twenty-first century reader it is a powerful description of a world we have lost.

In this article I want to revisit *Akenfield* as a classic of British oral history, to examine how its reception and use has mirrored trends in oral history practice in the UK, and to reposition it as a text which can have a lot to say to oral historians today. For 40 years *Akenfield* has acted as a lightning rod, attracting criticism and praise in equal measure but always reflecting the obsessions of the oral history community. *Akenfield* should not just be seen as an exemplar of a certain kind of oral history practice that was path-breaking and yet not quite professional enough as some have intimated. Rather, I suggest that it can still teach us a lot about how to write history using oral narratives and dare I say it, offers a masterclass in the writing of a history which speaks to its readership.

*Akenfield* is a portrait of English rural life based on a series of interviews or conversations with the inhabitants of several villages located in the Deben Valley of East Suffolk, some twenty miles from the county town of Ipswich. In 1966 Blythe was commissioned to write a book about the changing nature of the English countryside. He decided 'to do something unusual' in his own patch, having been born in Suffolk and at the time living in the village of Debach. Some years later Blythe remarked that his only real credentials for having produced the work were 'that I was native to its situation in nearly every way and had only to listen to hear my own world talking.'<sup>2</sup> Oral history was not something with which Blythe was familiar; not altogether surprising as the term only

entered the British academic lexicon in the late 1960s - but a conversation with the village nurse demonstrated to him the insight to be gained from allowing people to speak about their own lives.

From there, I just shaped the book. I cycled around on a Raleigh ... I would ask somebody to talk to me about keeping pigs – and suddenly he would tell me something astonishing about himself, or be so open about his emotional life that I was astounded. Often I hardly asked any questions at all, I just listened. These were people whose lives covered the 1880s to the 1960s, and they talked about bell-ringing and ploughing and the church and the village school.<sup>3</sup>

Blythe spoke to a range of inhabitants, drawn chiefly from the village of Charsfield but also from the surrounding villages and rural environs, in order to capture the rhythms and everydayness of an ordinary rural community on the cusp of change. The voices of labourers old and young, skilled craftsmen, professionals, men of the church and village women are represented, from the vet to the gravedigger, the thatcher to the magistrate. All engage with Blythe in what he called ‘a natural conversation’ about life, work and death, apparently speaking freely, openly and without sentimentality about a shifting social and economic landscape. The book as Blythe describes it, ‘is the quest for the voice of Akenfield, Suffolk, as it sounded during the summer and autumn of 1967.’<sup>4</sup>

Ronald Blythe was born in Suffolk in 1922 and has lived all his life in rural East Anglia - notably in the landscape described in *Akenfield*, and latterly on the border of Suffolk and Essex where today he resides in the house formerly occupied by the artist John Nash. His working life has encompassed employment as a reference librarian, the editor of Penguin Classics for more than 20 years and a Reader in a rural Essex parish of the Church of England.<sup>5</sup> But predominantly Blythe has lived a writer’s life, ‘looking, listening, storytelling, dreaming – and toiling in the inescapable Suffolk manner’, influenced by ‘East Anglia, literature, Anglicanism and my artists and writer friends.’<sup>6</sup> His literary output and contribution is encompassed by these interests: the English countryside, the everyday-ness of rural life, the place of the church and the spiritual in that environment and the representation of all of these by writers and artists such as George Herbert, John

Clare, Francis Kilvert, Benjamin Britten and John Constable.<sup>7</sup> And running through much of Blythe's work is an autobiographical thread that links the past with the present, which weaves together the spiritual and the secular, and which facilitates a conversation across and between generations of rural folk. All of this is done without the hindrance of rose-tinted spectacles on account of Blythe's childhood and upbringing in the years characterised by depression in the agricultural counties and his experience of massive and irreversible change in the countryside which had profound effects on the structure and psychology of the rural community. *Akenfield* was not Blythe's first book – he had already published a novel, collections of short stories and was a noted editor – but it was this book that brought him acclaim and set the tone for much of his later work.<sup>8</sup>

*Akenfield* is generally regarded as one of the seminal texts in the history of oral history in the United Kingdom, often coupled with George Ewart Evans' contemporaneous studies of English rural life – also largely from Suffolk - which likewise were based on oral or 'spoken history'.<sup>9</sup> The significance of the book, then, derives in part from its timing: it was part of that social history revolution which viewed history from the bottom up, and which aimed to give a voice to ordinary historical actors. Following on the heels of Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), *Akenfield* tapped into a new spirit within historical writing which sought to document and interpret the lives of working people and furthermore, to validate or legitimise people's own interpretation of their experience.<sup>10</sup> Until then largely the preserve of the antiquarian and the ethnographer, oral history now entered British historical practice with this book in particular partly responsible for a popular boom in the methodology at all levels, from academic to community-based studies.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, *Akenfield* offered a different perspective on rural life than the social scientific approach, exemplified by W.M. Williams' *A Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth* (1956) and his later study of Ashworthy in the West Country.<sup>12</sup> Blythe acknowledges Williams' work along with one of Ewart Evans' studies, *The Horse in the Furrow*.<sup>13</sup> It is perhaps worth noting here that Ewart Evans argued that there were two entirely different kinds of knowledge – that derived from oral evidence and that deduced

from scientific analysis – and ‘they are not in their essence antagonistic but complementary.’<sup>14</sup> *Akenfield* sits within this longstanding English local history tradition but offers a view of rural life drawn from people’s own sense of the past and the present.

The second and perhaps most compelling reason for *Akenfield*’s place in the canon of British oral history is its sheer literary quality. Blythe is a poetic writer; indeed the author remarked in the preface to the Penguin Classics edition that ‘the book is more the work of a poet than a trained oral historian, a profession I had never heard of when I wrote it.’<sup>15</sup> The author’s skills as a writer are artfully deployed, not only to evoke the Suffolk landscape - ‘On a clear day – and they are mostly clear days in this part of the world - you can see as far as you can bear to see, and sometimes farther’;<sup>16</sup> but also to mediate between his respondents and the reader in a series of introductory passages which provide context for the ruminations of his interviewees. And arguably (and more controversially) it is Blythe’s skill as a writer that allows him to convey the words of his narrators with such sympathy and unsentimentality.

*Akenfield*, then, has a prominent place in the annals of British oral history on account of its methodological innovation and its quality as a piece of literature. Indeed it is probably fair to say that it occupies a special place in British cultural memory, prompting not only several reprints, culminating in the accolade of becoming a Penguin Classic, but also a celebrated film based on Blythe’s screenplay directed by Peter Hall and, in 2006, a homage in the form of Craig Taylor’s *Return to Akenfield*, consisting of a series of interviews with the next generation of inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> Having said this, many oral historians, while acknowledging *Akenfield*’s significance, regard it as a book of and in its time, a piece of history itself which, in the context of today’s practice, would not pass muster.

Upon publication in 1969 *Akenfield* was hailed as a masterpiece, *The Times* reviewer describing it as ‘a delectable book, a book to linger over and cherish.’<sup>18</sup> But it soon attracted criticism from the relatively new academic field of oral history and the social science disciplines more generally. While the elegiac quality of Blythe’s village portrait

was recognised and appreciated, the lack of social-scientific rigour was widely deprecated. As early as 1972 following the publication of the second edition, Jan Marsh writing in the *Cambridge Quarterly* looked to *Akenfield* for the combination of ‘sociological authenticity with the kind of insights formerly regarded as the prerogative of novelists’ and found it lacking. ‘Exhilarating to read’ it might have been, but authentic and verifiable it was not according to this reviewer who deplored Blythe’s methodology as much as his deployment of a ‘cheap “mystical” version of pastoral idealism’ which allegedly shapes his portrayal of English rural life.<sup>19</sup> Marsh was irritated by what she saw as *Akenfield* purporting to represent something it was not. Blythe himself said that *Akenfield* could be anywhere, ‘not spectacular’, ‘the book was meant to be about not a special village but any village’.<sup>20</sup> The fact that *Akenfield* was a pseudonym for a number of villages was not in itself condemned, but Blythe’s failure to inform his readers of this fact was, and for Marsh this initial sleight of hand resulted in mistrust of the book as a whole. Added to this the realisation that the list of occupations given at the beginning of the book is also ‘sketchy’ if not a fabrication, and that the oral respondents speak little about their families and this reviewer is very worried indeed. ‘What all this amounts to is that not enough facts are included for the reader to check Blythe’s account of rural life for himself.’<sup>21</sup>

Similarly Howard Newby, at that time a sociologist conducting research on social change in rural Britain, reviewing *Akenfield* upon the appearance of the film in 1974 in one of the early issues of *Oral History*, expressed academic anxiety about the book purporting to be something it was not.<sup>22</sup> ‘Although *Akenfield* is clearly not sociology’ he writes, ‘it certainly seems to be documentary, and even ... oral history.’<sup>23</sup> And yet he concludes it is neither of these. The amalgamation of several villages into a single fictitious one, the personal selection of respondents by Blythe and examples of what Newby describes as ‘artistic licence’, all combine to create a book which ‘is a statement by Blythe not by the inhabitants themselves.’<sup>24</sup> Although acknowledging the book as a ‘magnificent piece of writing’ this reviewer, with his own intimate knowledge of Suffolk rural life and concern about scholarly integrity, concluded that artistry and academic standards were uncomfortable bedfellows. ‘If all oral historians were allowed such artistic licence, what

then for oral history? More enjoyable, more pleasurable to read, perhaps, but certainly not history.’<sup>25</sup> Newby’s anxiety, of course, was symptomatic of a more widespread debate within the historical profession regarding the nature and practice of history. *Akenfield* as Newby states, sits on the cusp – or, as he less charitably puts it, in a no-man’s land – between a novel and a documentary study. In 1975 these demarcations were more rigidly drawn; just a decade later historians were actively questioning the distinction between history and storytelling and advocating an easier and more productive relationship between the two.<sup>26</sup>

Concerns amongst oral historians about Blythe’s methodology are forcibly expressed by Paul Thompson in *The Voice of the Past*. Although Thompson is at pains to praise *Akenfield*, remarking that ‘it succeeds through the immediacy with which the spoken word confronts a reader with the presence of people themselves’, at the same time he compares it unfavourably with the ‘exacting standard’ set by Ewart Evans in his *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay*.<sup>27</sup> Whereas the latter’s work skilfully amalgamated historical and cultural perspectives with a close and painstaking attention to the language of the respondents Blythe, it is implied, plays fast and loose with his material; in short *Akenfield* cannot be trusted. Blythe is accused of ‘less careful scholarship’, blending stories from a number of villages into a portrait of one, inventing data and Thompson implies that Blythe has manipulated the words of his informants. Although the oral evidence in *Akenfield* is the book’s strength, in Thompson’s opinion its authenticity and reliability has to be doubted.<sup>28</sup>

Such criticisms are not surprising when we recall the scholarly context within which pioneering oral historians like Thompson were working in the 1970s. Oral history was a new methodology and was generally mistrusted by many historians and social scientists. Memory was regarded as unreliable; oral history did not produce data which could be verified and counted. Oral evidence was way down the hierarchy of acceptable sources, playing second or even third fiddle to written materials and especially official documents. Pioneering oral historians, then, were at pains to justify their practice to the critics. Verification of evidence obtained from oral interviews was one of doing this, cross

checking with written sources in order to separate truth from fiction as well as setting the oral evidence in the wider context and checking for internal consistency.<sup>29</sup> Oral historians working predominantly within a social-science framework were also concerned about the representative nature of their data, recommending the use of scientific sampling methods and making strenuous attempts to obtain a representative sample of respondents.<sup>30</sup> At this time oral historians were a somewhat defensive group within the historical profession, at pains to justify their practice in order to gain acceptance for themselves and their research. It was not until the 1990s that oral historians had the confidence to critique their own discipline, accepting that myth and subjectivity were intrinsic to the construction of oral accounts but in no way detracted from their veracity.<sup>31</sup>

The methodology employed by Blythe fell short of all of these 'standards' and therefore, in the context outlined above, it was difficult to defend. The picture of Blythe cycling around the villages, stopping to talk to people who might have something to say, with no concrete sense of a representative sample and lacking even a structured interview schedule, let alone a system of recording and transcribing the interviews, was enough to give the historian apoplexy, hence Thompson's accusation of 'less careful scholarship'. But we should remember that Blythe was not an academic or an historian in the professional sense; his approach to writing the book was a personal and literary one and his aim was not to produce a rigorous scholarly study whatever the expectations of the publishers Allen Lane who contracted *Akenfield* as part of a series of sociological studies of changing village life across Europe.

More critical perhaps were misgivings about the presentation of the oral history evidence itself. In 1971 Raphael Samuel, in a peroration on 'The perils of the transcript', argued powerfully in favour of maintaining the integrity of the spoken word in the process of translating speech into text.<sup>32</sup> At its worst the spoken word might be 'mutilated', at best merely smoothed out, but for Samuel such imprecise transcription which ignores the rhythms and imperfections of the spoken word, which renders dialect silent and which even imposes the author's interpretation of a respondent's words, is a dangerous practice which leaves the reader suspicious. To drive home his point Samuel cited an extract from



*Akenfield*, a passage he suggested had been tidied up and which, in his opinion, sits dead on the page. Paul Thompson too writes of the dangers of mutilation and distortion and cites the very same passage from *Akenfield* to illustrate the pitfalls of failing to preserve the syntax of the spoken word.<sup>33</sup> Both critics juxtapose Blythe's rendering of the spoken word as text with that of Ewart Evans who, Samuel suggests, produces a more memorable passage because 'the speech is ragged at the edges; it twists and turns, gnaws away at meanings and coils itself up.'<sup>34</sup> In short, Samuel is suggesting to us that Ewart Evans has the facility, the artistry even, to retain a degree of authenticity whereas Blythe has somehow taken something away from the speaker. 'One wishes to know', writes Thompson of Blythe, 'where the interview has been cut, and what has been put in to sew it up again.'<sup>35</sup>

Again, these concerns are reflections of a particular moment in oral history practice when the retention of authenticity and the attempt to render the spoken word as faithfully as one could was regarded as an essential skill of the oral historian. The motivation underpinning this was a laudable commitment to hearing the voices of the dispossessed, of not silencing those whose voices had been silenced in the past, a commitment to democracy in the interview and research process and the obligation to be a good researcher – 'The historian ought not to impose his (sic) order on the speech of his informants'.<sup>36</sup> And practitioners today are usually taught to aim to reproduce the narrator's speech as closely as possible because 'faithful reproduction takes us one step closer to actual data, any deviation becomes an error.'<sup>37</sup> But we should remember that all of us, to some degree, manipulate our material to suit our agenda. Even Samuel and Thompson, by selecting a short extract from the middle of a longer conversation with the farm-worker Leonard Thompson have, at the very least, taken his words out of context. If one reads the extract in question as part of the longer description of his family's circumstances the reader can comprehend all too well the material poverty and psychological hardship of this man's experience.<sup>38</sup>

Given that *Akenfield* was not conceived as an oral history but as a literary work, such criticism now appears harsh.<sup>39</sup> Recently Blythe elucidated both the spirit and the method

of his approach. 'The literary aspect of the book comes from my being a kind of poet-historian and the "spiritual" side of it derives from my lifetime association with the rural church.' And as for how Blythe conducted his interviews: 'Some of the talk was taped, some of it was taken down as notes, some of it was recalled from childhood onwards.'<sup>40</sup> It was – and still is – rare to find the transparent and unadulterated use of the spoken word in published texts. Even Ewart Evans, whose work is praised as much as Blythe's is criticised, does not appear to reproduce his informants' speech entirely faithfully.<sup>41</sup> He does make some attempt to retain dialect words (though usually with a translation) and reproduces in part the Suffolk accent or pronunciation as with this quotation from shepherd Robert Savage: 'Us shepherd chaps had to be serious serous chaps. The farmers would let us git on by ourselves. You were independent and you had to think forrard.'<sup>42</sup> But one might contrast this with an account that appears in *Ask the Fellows that Cut the Hay* of shepherd Liney Riches by a contemporary, the artist and naturalist George Rope (1846-1929). Rope writes that 'it is impossible in writing to give any idea of his fine rendering of the pure Suffolk dialect; or the true pronunciation of certain vowels and diphthongs'. 'In pointing out the position of some particular member of his flock he would say: "Hin owd on laid agin the hid o' the trow"'.<sup>43</sup> Clearly too much phonetic spelling may be a hindrance to the reader's comprehension - in Thompson's words it can 'reduce a quotation to absurdity'<sup>44</sup> - but can we really say that the insertion of the odd dialect word or accented pronunciation always helps to retain the meaning of a passage or statement?

I beg to differ. Indeed, there is a sense in which Blythe's tidied-up, elegant prose manages to convey meaning at least as well as a faithfully reproduced transcription with all its ragged edges. Take this extract from the reminiscences of the afore-mentioned farm-worker Leonard Thompson, a man memorably described by Blythe as 'a little brown bull of a man with hard blue eyes and limbs so stretched by the toil that they seem incapable of relaxing into retirement.' On what he termed the war between farmers and their men in the years before the First World War, Thompson said:

These employers were famous for their meanness. They took all they could from the men and boys who worked their land. They bought their life's strength for as

little as they could. They wore us out without a thought because, with the big families, there was a continuous supply of labour. Fourteen young men left the village in 1909-11 to join the army. There wasn't a recruiting drive, they just escaped. And some people just changed their sky, as they say, and I was one of them.<sup>45</sup>

The reader is certainly able to discern precisely the import of Leonard Thompson's words without the aid of dialect or faithfully reproduced syntax. And to further amplify this point one is drawn to Blythe's remarkable portrayal of his encounter with Davie, the oldest of his respondents, a man who 'insists he has nothing to say.' Davie has mentioned the practice of gangs of men and boys singing together as they scythed the corn. 'What was the song Davie?' asks Blythe. 'Never you mind the song – it was the singing that counted' was Davie's reply.<sup>46</sup> Davie's sparse words do more than any faithful reproduction of meter, syntax and dialect to remind oral historians that sometimes it is not the words themselves that convey the meaning but the action, the performance of telling or communicating. It is a message that Blythe has taken to heart, telling his readers that 'I decided to keep to what was being said, and to a certain rhythm in each speaker, using a story, "Tom-tit-Tot" from the Suffolk Folklore Society's collection to give a wonderfully accurate example of our dialect.'<sup>47</sup> It was not Blythe's intention to produce an ethnology of dialect or a record of what he termed the quaintness of village life. It was a 'quest for the voice of Akenfield' at a point in time.<sup>48</sup> For Blythe that voice was not the faithfully reproduced spoken word but the meaning and sentiment expressed by his respondents.

Clearly then, *Akenfield* does not conform to some academics' notion of what an oral history study should look like. Yet *Akenfield* still represents an early example of oral history that many oral historians would strive to emulate and not merely because of its continuing popularity. In Ron Grele's *Envelopes of Sound*, a group of eminent oral historians highlight *Akenfield* as a iconic work, Studs Terkel, himself not an academic historian, enthused, 'Oh gosh yes, that's a great book'.<sup>49</sup> Why then, in spite of all the criticisms levelled at it, does *Akenfield* still inspire affection and why is it still identified

as a seminal work in the field? Why has *Akenfield* become the model by which certain kinds of local or rural studies, particularly those employing oral history, are measured?<sup>50</sup>

At a basic level *Akenfield* remains important simply because it was one of the first studies to use oral history and because by interviewing elderly people in the 1960s Blythe could reach back to the decades before the Great War. Indeed it is this section of the book where Blythe relates the stories of the ‘survivors’ (survivors of the pre-First World War feudal conditions in agriculture and of the war itself to which many fled to escape) that has the greatest impact on the reader. Secondly, *Akenfield* manages to convey the harshness and the inequalities of rural life through the unsentimental and unromantic recollections of its speakers. One remembers as particularly striking the words of the former gardener at the ‘big house’ who described the petty humiliations of the class system such as staff having to turn to face the wall if they encountered their superiors unexpectedly in a passageway. ‘It was terrible. You felt like somebody with a disease.’<sup>51</sup> At the same time it perhaps taps into a longstanding English romanticism for the countryside and all that it symbolically represents. Blythe manages to convey the changing times as a matter of regret, even when channelling the words of a young farm-worker who was critical of the ‘old boys’ on the farm:

They’ll talk all day about what they did years ago. You’ll occasionally meet men who’ll say, ‘Thank God – those days have gone!’ but you’ll still meet quite a few who, if they had their way, would be back with the horses tomorrow... They have to touch everything with their hands – they dislike the idea of not touching things. They must handle, touch...They would do the sugar-beeting perfectly – the worst damn job on the farm – even if their fingers were half-dropping off with the cold.<sup>52</sup>

In the context of present day historical practice though, *Akenfield* is a comfortable bedfellow. Since the 1970s when oral history practitioners were still experimenting with technique and were having to continually defend their methodology from their critics, practice and theory has moved on markedly, demonstrating confidence and maturity. At the same time historical writing more generally has come to embrace a diversity of

approaches. Oral history has developed into a distinct methodology with guides to best practice and it has become intensely theorised. Debates about faithful transcription, representativeness and authenticity have been mostly superseded by deliberations about intersubjectivity, memory, composure, narrative construction and other theoretical perspectives. In this context *Akenfield* might initially appear outdated, a relic of a time when oral history was still a newcomer on the scene, when it offered what many believed was a more democratic view of the past. And it might appear as a rather romantic piece of work that was quickly overtaken by technically and theoretically more sophisticated studies. But I would argue that the opposite is true for a number of reasons.

Firstly, oral history has retained its interdisciplinary character which means that as a methodology it is constantly drawing upon practices and interpretive models developed across a range of disciplines, including literature but also linguistics, psychology, sociology and anthropology, and there is room within this broad church for a variety of approaches. Oral history practice today is as diverse as the number of disciplines in which it is used. At the same time, the use of life history narratives – or the turn to biographical methods – has been particularly embraced by the social-science disciplines as a means of engaging with subjectivity and the self and of relating the personal to the social.<sup>53</sup> Second, what might be called community history has recently undergone a revival, albeit in a different guise from the community studies pioneered in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, clearly documented in the pages of this journal.<sup>54</sup> *Akenfield* stands as an exemplar of a community history that succeeds in saying something meaningful about personal experience as well as broader social change. The book was quickly embraced by the communities featured so that when Peter Hall made the 1974 film the inhabitants eagerly participated in the re-telling of their community history.<sup>55</sup> Thirdly, the popularity of a historical practice – at least within social and cultural history - which acknowledges and even celebrates the place of subjectivity and of narrative analysis, has opened up the field to a diverse set of methodologies and theoretical frameworks. Blythe's attempt to capture the spirit of a community through the stories it tells about itself is, dare one say it, fashionable, in tune with the historical times.

In the preface to the second edition of the book in 1999 Blythe wrote: ‘My only real credentials for having written it were that I was native to its situation in nearly every way and had only to listen to my own world talking.’<sup>56</sup> He continued, ‘There are various ways to describe a time, a place, a condition. One can come to them from outside and say what one saw. Or one can emerge from within a community ... and be at a particular moment its indigenous voice.’<sup>57</sup> With these words Blythe was reflecting the turn to a focus on the social construction of the interview that was happening within oral history more generally. Oral historians were increasingly interested in the dynamics of the interview process, analysing not just the intersubjective relations between the interviewer and the respondent but also the context-specific variables that impact upon the story that is eventually told.<sup>58</sup> Blythe’s place within the community was seemingly crucial to the kind of responses he received.

Having been born between the wars during the last years of the great agricultural depression, I was in a kind of natural conversation with all three generations who spoke to me in the mid-sixties, and I was able to structure their talk over farming, education, welfare, class, religion and indeed life and death in terms such as I myself was experiencing these things, although now with a writer’s version of them.<sup>59</sup>

He was an insider in many ways. There was never any pretence at objectivity in *Akenfield*. Indeed, Blythe’s own voice and his sympathy for his subject matter, maybe even his evident sense of regret at a disappearing way of life, shape the book. The introductory sections to each chapter and the selection of excerpts from the interviews place the author in our line of sight – or hearing. Far from undermining the authenticity of the book, our ability to hear the author/interviewer fits with current practice which accepts the presence of the author, and is interested in the intersubjectivities arising from the relationship between researcher and respondents and the impact on the outcomes.<sup>60</sup> And in one chapter, that in which Blythe presents Lana Webb and her grandmother, he actively places himself in the narrative and, as David Faris has observed, overtly adopts the techniques of storytelling as opposed to allowing Lana to tell her own story.<sup>61</sup> This is the only chapter in which Blythe does this but the fact that he does so alerts the reader to his narrative presence throughout the book.

Thus, *Akenfield* is a narrative about the rural past shaped by the respondents but also by Blythe himself. Of course we all take our own prejudices and expectations into an interview situation and, if we are working within an academic environment, we also are aware of having to conform to certain dominant academic conventions. An early critic of *Akenfield* described Blythe's technique as producing 'imaginative truth', a term which would not have been embraced by historians in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>62</sup> In the context of much current historical practice however, and especially that shaped by poststructural theory, we are more willing to accept that imaginative accuracy is perhaps all a historian can hope to achieve. The piecing together of landscapes of the past is undertaken by all of us by enveloping our evidence within a persuasive narrative and the gaps are often filled in with our imagination. It is the researcher, the author who eventually shapes the story out of the narratives of his or her respondents and we bring our own agendas to this practice. In my own work, most recently constructing the past as imagined and represented by women in Shetland, utilising a combination of written and oral sources, the resulting narrative takes the form of a dialogue between Shetland women of the past and the present articulated within a framework of myths or ideas about women's place in Shetland's history.<sup>63</sup> The disparate voices located in the written record as well as oral narratives are woven by the historian into a material landscape, the result being a tapestry combining material traces (such as statistical and census data, documentary evidence and so on) and mythical traces (oral narratives, stories, folktales etc).

In oral history this process of imaginative mediation is even more marked. Few, if any, oral historians would argue that the spoken word should not be mediated by the researcher if the material is to be presented for public consumption. Whilst recognising the fact that there is a qualitative difference between the oral interview and the written transcript – even when strenuous attempts have been made to reproduce the spoken words as accurately as possible - the majority of oral historians adopt a more pragmatic stance.<sup>64</sup> For all our genuine attempts to reproduce an oral history interview in textual form, and our insistence that oral history is a different kind of evidence, nevertheless we often treat it rather roughly: selecting, editing and cutting where it suits us, rarely

presenting our audience with an unadulterated transcript.<sup>65</sup> Rebecca Jones describes the space between the oral interview and the written manuscript as ‘a long, meandering journey in which a narrative is crafted. The oral history interview is the starting point in the process of creating the narrative, but the journey continues through transcribing and editing to publication.’<sup>66</sup> Even Alessandro Portelli, perhaps the most fervent advocate of orality, intervenes in his respondents’ narratives, selecting appropriate passages and surrounding them with interpretive prose. ‘The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact’, writes Portelli, ‘but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge.’<sup>67</sup> In this light, Blythe’s representation of his respondents’ words appears less worrisome.

It is partly Blythe’s editorial interventions that make *Akenfield* such an engaging and thought-provoking read. He combines the spoken word with acute observation to make an editorial comment on the nature of rural society, on the changes that have occurred and which are still occurring and the relationship between the past and the present. As he converses with the old man Davie, Blythe encircles this encounter with observations and literary description that may not belong in a traditional scholarly analysis but which undoubtedly adds something to our understanding of the man. As Blythe tempts answers out of Davie he notes that:

High up on the wall of the biggest barn in the village, almost at the apex of the east wall’s pediment, on the inside and armorial beneath its mantling of cobwebs, there is a deep and perfect impression of a small hand with the fingers fanned out. It is Davie’s hand, pressed into the wet plaster when he was fourteen, after he had helped to mend the barn. A chink in the roof spotlights the clean lines of this dusty answer. ‘There – that’s something,’ says Davie. ‘Or you could say, “that’s all”.’<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, Blythe paints a portrait of his respondent for the reader, immediately and memorably fixing him or her in our mind’s eye: the orchard foreman Alan Mitton is described as ‘tall. Viking-looking, the biggest man in *Akenfield*, a natural leader and king-pin of the apple workers.’ Orchard-worker Michael Poole is described as ‘sharp-featured and fair. There is no rest in the “simple” face, it has the alertness of forest-



creature, eyes seizing at every object.’<sup>69</sup> Blythe’s introductions position him both as an observer and evaluator but also a creator of a story.

Another trend in current oral history practice is attention to the analysis of narrative form; indeed it often regards the respondent’s production of a narrative as a desirable outcome of the interview. Narrative analysis is underpinned by the proposition that individuals produce accounts of themselves and their past that are ‘storied’, meaning the accounts are in the form of stories or narratives.<sup>70</sup> The production of an oral history narrative operates on several levels: the narrator constructs a story or narrative to make sense of the world but in order to do this he or she draws on stories or narratives that circulate in culture. The researcher subsequently also crafts a narrative from the accumulation of oral histories. Hayden White concisely defines narrative as a solution to the problem of how to translate knowing into telling’.<sup>71</sup> Narrative analysis, then, may be applied to individual texts or oral histories by means of carrying out a detailed examination of the narrative structures and devices deployed by people. But the theory can also be applied more widely, for instance to help us understand how people strive to understand and articulate their place in the past and the present. The content of what is said is still important but so is the way in which it is said. In *Akenfield* Blythe’s respondents all construct narratives in which they position themselves within the community and the world more generally. For example, Gregory Gladwell, the blacksmith, tells us his family’s ancestry, politics and religion before describing his childhood days and then moving on to a thoughtful peroration on the past. Reflecting on the 1930s, a time when his grandfather was forced to close the forge and everyone was looking for work, he remarked:

I hear people run the gentry down now but they were better than the farmers in a crisis. Theirs was the only hand that fed us which we could see. So we bowed a bit; it cost nothing, even if it wasn’t all courtesy. Nobody left, nobody went away. People were content. However hard up they were, they stayed content. The boys had their arse out of their trousers, no socks and the toes out of their boots. My brothers and myself were life this, yet so happy. I think other families were the same. The village kept close.<sup>72</sup>

In this extract we can identify some clear themes: a benign acceptance of social class differences, a harking back to the 'good old days', the value of a close community. Later in this man's narrative we find a pride in hard work and a job well done and a reflection on change in the village manifested in less face-to-face contact. The story told by the blacksmith is one of change and transition and worry about the impact of that change on the individual, the community and the nature of rural life more generally. The blacksmith's narrative is also Blythe's.

*Akenfield* then, always popular amongst the public readership, has come full circle as it finds itself in alignment with the current historical fashion for the acknowledgement of the interplay of subjectivities, the turn to biographical method and the analysis of narrative. Blythe uses the stories of rural change as the narrative solution in *Akenfield*. It is the means of bridging the interpretive gap between the interviewees' voices and a composite picture of English rural life. This is not cutting corners or sacrificing authenticity for a good story. Rather the story is what it is all about. Blythe's story or narrative is the result of his personal journey into the lives of the *Akenfield* inhabitants. It would be inauthentic if it was anything else.

What all the critical reviews of *Akenfield* have shared is an acknowledgement – sometimes begrudging – that this book is a delight to read, a literary masterpiece. And it is this quality of the book that accounts in part for its continued popularity amongst the public and oral historians alike. Craig Taylor, whose *Return to Akenfield* has revived interest in Blythe's original, remarked that 'the world that did the talking was vivid in the detail it accorded everyday tasks and poignant in its evocation of a disappearing past.'<sup>73</sup> In these respects *Akenfield* represents the best that oral history can achieve: it might not be a model in terms of its methodology but it records the detail of the past that otherwise would be lost and at the same time it tells a story of broad historical change fashioned from the voices of the people and shaped by the experiences and personal perspectives of the author.

## Notes

I would like to thank Ronald Blythe for his polite and helpful response to my enquiries and Callum Brown and Donald Spaeth for valuable comments on earlier versions of this article.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Blythe, *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (1<sup>st</sup> edition, Allen Lane, London, 1969, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Penguin, 1972; reprinted with new preface Penguin, 1999, published as a Penguin Classic 2005). All references to the text in this article refer to the 2005 edition unless stated otherwise. It was also published in French as *Memoires d'un Villages Anglais* and in Swedish as *Porträtt av en Engelsk by Akenfield*.

<sup>2</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, Preface to 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1999), p 8.

<sup>3</sup> Blythe in Craig Taylor, *Return to Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London, 2006), p 7.

<sup>4</sup> Blythe *Akenfield*, p 18.

<sup>5</sup> For a brief biography written by Blythe see Taylor, *Return to Akenfield*, pp 3-7.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Blythe, *Field Work: Selected Essays* (Norwich, 2007), p ix.

<sup>7</sup> It is not possible to list Blythe's extensive literary output here but some exemplars include: *Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, edited, with an introduction, by Blythe (Harmondsworth, 1970); *Divine Landscapes* (Harmondsworth, 1986); *Word from Wormingford: A Parish Year*, with illustrations by John Nash (London, 1998); *Talking about John Clare* (Nottingham, 1999). For an abbreviated but representative selection of Blythe's writing over 30 years see *Field Work*.

<sup>8</sup> The pre-*Akenfield* books included *A Treasonable Growth* (1960), *Immediate Possession* (1961); *Age of Illusion* (1963). There are strong echoes of *Akenfield* in Blythe's collections of *Church Times* articles published in the Wormingford series, *Word from Wormingford* (London, 1997); *Out of the Valley* (London, 2000); *Borderland* (Norwich, 2005); *A Year at Bottengoms Farm* (Norwich, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> George Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* (London, 1956); *Where Beards Wag All: the Relevance of the Oral Tradition* (London, 1970); *Spoken History* (London, 1987), amongst many others.

---

<sup>10</sup> Although very different, Studs Terkel's work had the same ambitions. See particularly *Hard Times* (1970).

<sup>11</sup> Paul Thompson, Review of *Return to Akenfield*, *Oral History*, vol 35 no 2 (2007), p 111.

<sup>12</sup> W.M. Williams, *A Sociology of an English Village: Gosforth* (London, 1956); *A West Country Village, Ashworthy: Family, Kinship and Land* (London, 1963).

<sup>13</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, pp 11-12.

<sup>14</sup> Ewart Evans, *Crooked Scythe: an Anthology of Oral History* (London, 1993), p 197.

<sup>15</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, p 8.

<sup>16</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, p 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Akenfield* (1974), directed by Peter Hall; Taylor, *Return to Akenfield*.

<sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 10 May 1969, p 20.

<sup>19</sup> Jan Marsh, 'A Miraculous Relic?', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol VI, no 1 (1972), pp 70-77, p 76.

<sup>20</sup> 'Ronald Blythe: Writer' in Taylor, *Return to Akenfield*, p 7. Blythe explains the choice of the name Akenfield in his preface to the 1999 edition.

<sup>21</sup> Marsh, 'Miraculous Relic', p 72.

<sup>22</sup> Howard Newby, *The Deferential Worker: a Study of Farm Workers in East Anglia* (London, 1977); *Green and Pleasant Land: Social Change in Rural England* (London, 1979); *Property, Paternalism and Power: Class and Control in Rural England* (London, 1978).

<sup>23</sup> Howard Newby, 'Akenfield Revisited', *Oral History* vol 3, no 1 (1975), p 80.

<sup>24</sup> Newby, 'Akenfield Revisited', p 81.

<sup>25</sup> Newby, 'Akenfield Revisited', p 82.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, John Brewer and Stella Tillyard, 'Waterland: History and Telling Stories', *History Today*, vol 35, no 1 (1985), pp 49-51.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Oxford, 2000), p 102. It is interesting to note that Ewart Evans was also criticised, particularly for his interest in and use of myth and his stress on the continuities in rural life. See Alun Howkins, 'Inventing

---

Everyman: George Ewart Evans, Oral History and National Identity', *Oral History*, vol 25 (1994), pp 26-32, here p 31.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, pp 101-2..

<sup>29</sup> For a summary of this debate see Rob Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London, 2006), pp 2-4.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Thompson's Edwardians project at Essex University was typical of this approach. For details of the sampling and data collection methods employed see

<http://www.qualidata.ac.uk/edwardians/about/introduction.asp>

<sup>31</sup> See Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds), *The Myths We Live By* (London, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Raphael Samuel, 'The Perils of the Transcript', *Oral History*, vol 1 (1971), pp 19-22.

<sup>33</sup> The passage cited is from the interview with Leonard Thompson, in *Akenfield*, p 32.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel, 'Perils', p 391.

<sup>35</sup> Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, pp 260-1.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel, 'Perils', p 391.

<sup>37</sup> R.O.Joyce cited in Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford, 2005), p 317.

<sup>38</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, pp 32-44.

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, *Return to Akenfield*, p 6.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald Blythe correspondence with the author, 8 Aug. 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows*, p 30.

<sup>42</sup> Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows*, p 28.

<sup>43</sup> Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows*, p 30.

<sup>44</sup> Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, p 262

<sup>45</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, p 37.

<sup>46</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, p 21

<sup>47</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, p 10

<sup>48</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, p 18.

<sup>49</sup> Ronald J Grele with Studs Terkel et al, *Envelopes of Sound: the Art of Oral History* (New York, 1991), pp 80-1

---

<sup>50</sup> A 'Google scholar' search reveals *Akenfield* is regularly referred to by reviewers of such books, in the main in a positive light.

<sup>51</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, p 103.

<sup>52</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, p 98.

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, Prue Chamberlayne, Joanna Bornat and Tony Wengraf (eds), *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science* (London, 2000)

<sup>54</sup> For a summary of the developments in community history see Paul Thompson and Brenda Corti, 'Whose Community?: the Shaping of Collective Memory in a Volunteer Project', *Oral History* 36:2 (2008), pp.89-98. The authors recount how Ronald Blythe spoke at the launch of a community oral history project in Wivenhoe, Essex in 2004 thus linking community history past and present (p.94).

<sup>55</sup> See the 2004 BBC documentary 'Akenfield Re-visited' about the making of the of the original 1974 film. [Hhttp://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/829583H](http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/829583H) and [Hhttp://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/akenfield.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/akenfield.shtml) (28.11.08). On the continuing use of 'Akenfield' see Peggy Cole, *Charsfield and Surrounding District in Pictures* (Ipswich, 1999).

<sup>56</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, p 8.

<sup>57</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield* p 10.

<sup>58</sup> See Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester, 1998), pp.9-20. On the subjectivities implicit in the interview relationship see Valerie Yow, 'Do I Like Them Too Much? Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-versa', in *Oral History Review* 24:1 (1997), pp.55-79.

<sup>59</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, p.8.

<sup>60</sup> Luisa Passerini's *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (Middletown, Conn., 1996) is an extreme example of the author inserting her own subjectivity into the text in a deliberate way, combining Passerini's personal memories, the stories of her interviewees and an account of the analytical process.

<sup>61</sup> David E. Faris, 'Narrative Form and Oral history: Some Problems and Possibilities', *International Journal of Oral History* vol 1, no 3 (1980), pp 159-80, here p. 175-6.

---

<sup>62</sup> Marsh, 'Miraculous Relic', p.75.

<sup>63</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Myth and Materiality in a Woman's World: Shetland 1800-2000* (Manchester, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> See Francis Good, 'Voice, Ear and Text: Words, Meaning and Transcription', in R.Perks and A. Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Abingdon, 2006), pp.362-73.

<sup>65</sup> See Charles T. Morrissey, 'Oral history and the Boundaries of Fiction', *The Public Historian*, vol 7, no 2 (1985), pp 41-6.

<sup>66</sup> Rebecca Jones, 'Blended Voices: Crafting a Narrative from Oral History Interviews', *The Oral History Review* vol 31, no 1 (2004), p 23. See also Michael Frisch, 'Preparing interview transcripts for documentary publication', in Frisch, *A Shared Authority* (New York, 1990), pp 81-146.

<sup>67</sup> See Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, 1991), pp. 46-8; and Portelli, *The Order has been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Massacre in Rome* (Basingstoke, 2003).

<sup>68</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, p 21.

<sup>69</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, pp. 187 and 194.

<sup>70</sup> For a guide to the method of narrative analysis see Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (London, 1993).

<sup>71</sup> Hayden White cited in Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (London, 1993), p 3.

<sup>72</sup> Blythe, *Akenfield*, pp 112-3.

<sup>73</sup> Taylor, *Return to Akenfield*, p xii.