George Ewart Evans and the Laboratory of Awareness of Marcel Jousse

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Abstract

The year 2011 was the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Marcel Jousse (1886-1961), a Frenchman whose work was little known until recently in the English language for lack of translation. His “insights into the role and significance of Oral-style cultures were corroborated by the field research of Parry and Lord, and extend beyond into as yet unexplored territory”.1 Walter Ong, who was also influenced by Jousse, said of him that his work may never have the currency that it should.2

This article proposes, through principles of understanding laid down by Jousse, to look at some of the negative responses to George Ewart Evans’s work from academics when he announced in his books the importance of the spoken word as against the written. Evans’s work was nevertheless popular with the general public at the time that it was published, and following his death there were many tributes. However, we learn mainly from the intimate replies to his letters from his friend Jim Delaney of his personal concern and the need to defend his position.

“Such an attitude, of course, stems from an overvaluation of the written word, as if it were the only reliable source for past history, and has no appreciation of the value of oral tradition, or ‘spoken history’ as it is termed by George Ewart Evans, who spent a great part of his life battling against people with this attitude ...”. James G. Delaney, The Irish Folklore Commission.3

Marcel Jousse stated: “If a person’s life could be summarized in a single sentence, and I wanted to sum up my life as a scientific Traditionalist, I would simply say ‘I have been a resistance fighter against bookish and dead Philology.’ ”4

Jousse was born in 1886 in rural France to poor, illiterate, small-farmer parents and was exceedingly proud of his “paysan” background. He said that it was to examples taken from the nature of these people that he owed all the references in his lectures.5 Through the influence of his mother’s deep oral tradition, he had a lifelong fascination with recitation, rhythm, memory, and oral society in general. He studied ethnology, anthropology, physiology, and religion. He was a pioneer in the observation of oral culture who the philosopher Jacques Madaule observed in 1976 was “one of those prophetic geniuses who have the gift of perceiving, half a century before everyone else, some of the governing lines of the future.”6 He set himself on a collision course, however, with the most venerable and fashionable disciples of the moment, leading to his isolation and being ostracised in his own religious community. In spite of this, between 1931 and 1957 he delivered over 1,000 well
attended lectures at the Sorbonne and other French Institutions – always without a script. These are now available on CD from The Marcel Jousse Society. In 1925 he wrote *Le Style Oral rythmique et mnemotechnique chez les verbo-moteurs*, and in 1974-1978, after his death, three volumes of his essays were published in *L’Anthropologie du Geste*. These are not just books about oral society: they are comprehensive “insider” manuals, not only on the essential principles of understanding it but, even more important, how we should reposition our literate selves in order that we can fully understand it. David Attenborough said of Gerald Durrell, the original environmentalist, that everything he said seems now so obvious that we easily forget how radical, revolutionary and downright opinionated these statements seemed at the time. Jousse was similarly fluent and outspoken, “before his time”, with meaningful statements of understanding.

George Ewart Evans (1909-1988) was a schoolmaster who moved to the very rural area of East Suffolk in 1948 where, immersing himself in the local culture, he wrote ten books from the spoken word of the indigenous vernacular people. “I believe the oral tradition to be of special importance in this region” he wrote in 1970, “because it is mainly the voice of a class of people that have had little opportunity to speak for themselves”. Evans reminds us that not only have these people carried our regional culture for us but also a very special history that can never be found in books and goes beyond the written word to the very core of who we are. It is extremely doubtful if Evans knew anything at all about Jousse or his work. They were however doing much the same work and had similar findings. Evans was a man of humble, gentlemanly countenance and needed to get his books published, for apart from his wife’s remuneration as headmistress in small village schools, he had no other family income and therefore had to toe the academic line very carefully. It is believed therefore that he could not say all that he would have liked to in his published work. The present article proposes to look at Evans’s innermost thoughts from the correspondence with his closest allies, and to use some of the findings of the very similar work of Marcel Jousse in support.
On coming to Suffolk in 1948, George Ewart Evans was to discover the importance of the spoken word that the indigenous people live by. Working alone and unfunded enabled him both to have a mind unrestricted by institutional and literate standardisations and academic parameters, and to immerse himself in the culture of the people that he lived among to produce a high level of understanding from an “insider” perspective. In 1956, following his many abortive attempts to find a publisher, Faber and Faber took up and published *Ask The Fellows Who Cut The Hay*. Such was its success that he went on to write nine more books from the spoken word of Suffolk farm workers for the same publisher. Although chided by many in the academic establishment, he ignored them as far as was economically possible, and left us with a view of the natural world – a world free of artificial literate devices – a more real world. He did not nostalgically lament the loss of the past but used it as a metaphor to look at the present.

Jousse, referring to oral texts, stated: “They bring the past into the present and the present into the future”. He advocated the reliability of the “insider” perception of all human beings as his laboratories of awareness. “Taking the outsider view fails to achieve the desired objectivity because it is inevitably covered by the researcher’s personal, cultural and academic world view and perspective”. In 1976 the historian R. M. Dorson in *Folklore and Fakelore* wrote: “History as written by historians usually has little relation to the historical traditions orally preserved by a people”.

To fully understand George Ewart Evans one needs to understand his work, but there are few who have immersed themselves in oral culture sufficiently to raise their understanding of the mindset of the indigenous people to his level. As Adrian Bell said, “it is necessary to be immersed in the life till one *thinks* as well as talks, in local usage.” Professor Edgard Sienaert, who together with his assistant Joan Conolly, has now translated into English the books and lectures of Jousse, said that, in founding his Oral-Literacy Studies Course at Durban University in 1978, the problem was literacy:

“I was literate. Highly so. It would take me some ten years of training and experience … for me to become, at least, semi-orale. The training and experience are ongoing”.

“In order to appreciate these [traditional] tales properly one had to study them on their own terms, which means that one had to abandon one’s modern literary perspective and put them in their own traditional oral context.”

He adds that

“slowly a bookish orientated academic course became more of a laboratory of personal, ethnic and anthropological observation”. 17

Very few writers have either lived with, been born into, or simply immersed themselves deeply enough in the culture of the people of the spoken word until they could understand the more oral mindset from the inside 18 – the all-important internal perspective. It is not possible to perceive this mindset from an external standpoint. So, as one might well guess, as soon as Evans stuck his head above the parapet he was shot at by academics for daring to say something different to that perceived from the academic viewpoint. Evans had not “discovered” anything; all he was doing was observing, then telling us about ourselves, for the people were here all the time and still are now, 19 as is their unique culture, albeit in a somewhat more diluted form. Western, civilised written society seemed to think that “Livingstone discovered Africa”. If we still think that, then we should ask ourselves what did he discover and for whom? For Africa was there all the time and still is, with its similarly diluted multi-ethnic cultures, in spite of religious, educational and other colonialist interventions from western society, contrary to Africa’s own civilisation.

**Criticism of Evans’s findings by academics**

Edmund Leach, the Cambridge anthropologist, savaged *The Leaping Hare*, stating that it was “a jumble of fantasy and misstatement”. 20 For this book Evans had spent much time deep in the tradition in Ireland with important informants who were friends of his much respected ally, Jim Delaney, of the Irish Folklore Commission. In the opinion of one academic critic, Evans lacked a sense of history. Evans, for once, “was robustly unrepentant” in his reply:

“... whose history? or what history? ... if I myself had been obsessed by the strong sense of history as it existed about thirty years ago, I should never have escaped from its rigid encasing, and it would still be hanging about my neck like a millstone. But there is not one history [but] an amalgam of partial ‘histories’. 21

All that he was seeking was the truth from the first history – that which was the first history of mankind – spoken history.

These critics did not have his depth of oral experience to match him on his statements about the culture of the spoken word, so they picked on his references to literature and particularly those referring to myth. Raymond Williams, in his book *The Country and the City*, in an attempt to dismiss Evans, picked on “a way of life that has come down to us from the days of Virgil”. 22 Others picked on Evans’s reference to Robert Graves as suspect when qualifying his oral findings of the horseman’s word. 23 Evans, however, had already answered them when in his 1987 book *Spoken History* he had stated that, with reference to Graves’s writing, “the inhabitants of Academe ... are notoriously resistant to any different treatment by someone who does not accept unquestioningly the received way of interpreting the distant past”. 24 But whether Graves’s different view was meaningful or not is beside the point. The
point is that the doubters would have learned more by accepting without question that which Evans had and they did not: a deep and “insider” experience of the culture of the spoken word.

Jousse stated:

“others can only offer books made from books ... How could life spring from this? The book can only give us what has already been lived out. Living man alone teaches us Life”.

“Those who have made genuine discoveries and have contributed to science, are those who have put their books aside and started their study from reality”.

“It is a bad scholar and a pitiful historian who judges the things of the past only according to its written remnants”.

Charles Darwin stated much the same:

“... if we judge the facts that lie before us through the lens of our own extraordinarily cramped and narrow education, we will unavoidably distort all the problems that fall outside our experience”.

**Personal support from Jim Delaney**

However, Evans’s friend and confidant, Jim Delaney, was to reinforce Evans’s belief in the spoken word with his constant letters of encouragement (there are almost 200 A4 pages of his letters in the National Library of Wales), confirming to him his own belief in the spoken word by advising him,

“There is no doubt that Peate and Delargy and their companions in the early years of the century have contributed more to our knowledge of history than the professional historians.”

“I have got a greater knowledge of true history; how the people thought and lived over the last a hundred and fifty years from my informants than ever I got from any history book.”

“… instead of learning from books I learned from the old people themselves and found out afterwards that the books were not at all correct, especially the history books, that never once, in my young days, gave any inkling what the life of the ordinary people was like.”

Evans, however, needed his books to be published, and he described his dilemma:

“I was aware of the attitude of ... chiefly young academics who had joined the new Agricultural History Society ... should I compromise the original rich material I had obtained through the oral tradition ... Should I play safe and keep religiously to the soil, and not risk the book’s acceptance by my publisher ...?”
We can deduce therefore that Evans could not include all of the understandings from his experience that it is believed he would have liked to.

Referring back to the spoken word of the horseman and Evans’s reference to Graves, which was denounced as “highly suspect” by some academics, I have recorded or spoken to probably more than a hundred East Anglian horsemen of the prior culture, and have found that they all, without exception, knew from their own inherited spoken tradition of the power of the “frog’s bone” and of the custom of “spreading the afterbirth”, and there are some who believe in and practise the latter even now, quoting the horseman’s maxim, “Bury the afterbirth and you'll bury the foal”. Having approached more than one horseman who either refused to be recorded once the frog’s bone was mentioned, or declined to talk of it, I believe that they did this only because they believed in its power and that the use and talk of it after one had “sold one’s soul to the devil” would bring damnation. Such is the way that tradition dies hard. The point is that we do not have to believe in it – we only need to believe that they believed it, and it seems to be this that some academics have difficulty in accepting. To their credit, Roud and Simpson did say that “further work needs to be done” on the subject of the frog’s bone. Yes, true, but that is looking only for information – the mere “folklore” – whereas the far more important thing that Evans and Jousse left us with are the principles of understanding: what it means – not “the what” but “the how and the why” – in one word the “wisdom” of it, or as his friend Jim Delaney told Evans: “That, of course, is where the merit of all your books lies, that you have ‘leavened the dense mass of facts with the elastic force of reason’.”

So to have a clear understanding we need not only to appreciate the gulf between oral culture and literate society but to recognise that information by itself is not wisdom. It is commonly said that we are now in “the information age”. Information by itself, however, in terms of understanding can be considered valueless, for it is only when it can be correlated into wisdom that it brings reason. Wisdom is therefore the understanding of it. Most of what Evans was able to say about meaning he put in the introduction and conclusion of his books. To understand more of his innermost feelings and reason we need to go beyond his books and even beyond his published papers to his personal correspondence with his closest supporters in whom he could confide, such as Iorworth Peate and Jim Delaney. The three of them had a strong understanding of the oral tradition, the depth of which would be difficult to find in the United Kingdom in the current age. Jim Delaney wrote to Evans:

“I think yourself and Peate – for whom I have great regard both as a person and a folklorist, are the only two with this human approach to our discipline. I think if you cannot bring these people to life, from whom we collect, the labour is vain and unprofitable. You do that in your books, particularly in the one on the horsemen, a book that I cannot find words enough to praise”.

and again:

“You are… a voice crying in the wilderness. But you must realise that the work you are doing will live, when the glamorised and much publicised bestsellers are cluttering up the wastepaper baskets. You are not only recording some precious
part of the past but you are making history live for the future”.

“I sympathise with you in that you are working alone with no official backing as we have here in Ireland. That is a big handicap for you, that you must always be on the offensive, whereas that never occurs to us”.

Delaney was a full-time professional folklorist with the Irish Folklore Commission in Central Ireland and also had an academic background, having gained an MA from University College Dublin. He had learned from his experience, however, that it was preferable to take his studies directly from people rather than books. His people were his friends who he lived amongst. It is from these letters that we learn the things that go to the core of the matter. The way that he supported George Ewart Evans in maintaining his beliefs against the “academic frontiers” is heartrending, and the way that people will quickly rise up to try to destroy that which is beyond their comprehension can produce equally emotional feelings.

Delaney told Evans how his letters were like the first snowdrops and lifted his heart amazingly.

“you are the only one, outside of my own colleagues in the department that I can write to at such length and in such a strain. ...these academics have an inordinate reverence for the written word, and they have a deep abhorrence of the spoken word, by which I mean they distrust the people from whom you and I have gathered such treasures of material that has shed new light on folk belief. ... These people are only scratching the surface and are afraid of their lives to go out to the living sources of this material. And I think the whole secret lies in this: They are afraid of these ordinary, what they consider uneducated people and they confuse literacy with knowledge. But people like Bill Egan and John Connaughton are not ignorant. They are masters in their own field, and it is up us to sit at their feet. ... It is the first time I actually and forcibly realised what you have to contend with. You have my heartfelt sympathy”.

Writing of Max Müller and George William Cox, Delaney stated:

“It is extraordinary to me how these scholars lose a sense of reality! I think it is because they are too urbanised and not near enough to the soil. If you want reality you must talk to country people”.

Jim Delaney (R) and the storyteller Thomas Farrell, 1957. Photo: Leo Corduff. Courtesy Criostoir Mac Carthaigh, Archivist, National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin.
“I am reading Peate’s *Tradition and Folk Life*. He says on page 70: ‘To the study of the social body must be added a study of the soul, if the study is to be complete’. ... In fact the introductory page of this Chapter 5 should be shouted from the housetop for the benefit of materialist students of folk life”.44

“I am afraid, my dear George that you are rather lost among philistines over there”.45

Jousse advised us “We must follow a new line of stepping-stones back to the ‘knowing’ paysan”46 and he called this “paysanism”. “They [the peasants] lived life in close contact with soil, sap, wind and sky”.47 As a product of living oral culture and an authentic oral-style person he would say, “I am illiterate by training”.48

It is sad that the inroads which Evans made on behalf of orality into literacy have in many ways grown over. I find it equally interesting that the class of people who stood in Evans’s way are the very ones who now would claim and celebrate him as their own. Some even romanticise his work for their own ends, which is something that, with his concept of true history, wherever it came from, he would have been wholly against. Whatever “writing” he did in Wales is inconsequential in comparison with what he did in Suffolk, and it is his work and not his writing that makes him one of the most important historians of our time. This is because he was one of the first to recognise the importance of the oral traditions, and having told us, was made to suffer for his belief, being pilloried by reviewers and other critical academics. Whilst his work is much more acceptable at local, cultural, social, and oral history levels now, he then had to have the strength of conviction to stand his ground against the weight of many in the establishment. But who was in a position to argue with him? Few indeed had his depth of source experience and we should ask ourselves why could the academics not understand what he was saying and why were they so vociferous in their condemnation? It would have been possible to have reinforced what may appear to some to be radical thoughts with proof by way of examples from experience in the oral tradition, but rather than brief discussion in a short article, they require a greater degree of evidence, and much more extensive consideration than can be offered here.

**Meeting George Ewart Evans**

I first met George Ewart Evans at his home at Helmingham, Suffolk in 1965 where I was well received, and we went on to regularly exchange contacts. I distinctly remember him telling me in his strong Welsh accent, “There’s a book there that might interest you” as he disappeared to find information for me. It was Thomas Tusser’s *Fiue hundreth pointes of good Husbandrie*. At that time I did not know of it and I was too embarrassed, because of my own ignorance, to ask about it. Nevertheless, I immediately bought a copy of this Elizabethan farming book, written in verse, when I returned home. How I wish that I had kept in closer contact with Evans, as from a similar parallel vision I now find many insights upon which I would have liked to seek his thoughts. He put me on to several traditional singers, including Sam Friend and Horace White, who I recorded, and I in turn put him on to people for his
radio programmes, including for example Jimmy Knights, who had gone to work, after harvest, in the maltings in Burton and whose recorded information he used a lot. From my then position as a local agricultural auctioneer I acquired old and unusual agricultural hand tools such as a scuppet which I duly presented to him. He was extremely grateful, most approachable, and invariably modest and self-effacing.

George Ewart Evans was a person of strong principle, and it is sad that academics and others have ignored his request not to be saddled with the title “oral historian” when this is something that he tried very hard to get away from. “There’s nothing I should like less than to be embalmed as one of the potentates of oral history” he wrote on 12th December 1971 to his friend Peter du Sautoy of Faber and Faber. The term reminded him of “the filing cabinet of a well equipped dentist”. To Iorwerth Peate on November 10th, 1976 he wrote that he confessed to being

“a bit disillusioned with oral history as it has developed in Britain and have lost any enthusiasm I had for the movement. I find that when I go to conferences they hold ... I’m not really in sympathy with them, probably through an inability to tune into their wavelength. I sometimes feel I must be an odd person – something like Dai Bach y Sowldiwr from the Rhondda whose mother saw his company marching and called out proudly ‘Look! Look! Our Dai! He is the only one in step.’ ”.51

In 1948 the University of Columbia launched a project called “Oral History”. Paul and Thea Thompson of the University of Essex and others founded the Oral History Society in 1969 and amicably it seems applied this academic label to the work that George Ewart Evans had already been independently engaged in for at least twenty years. They were from a university department; he was not. In spite of the reservations he had, he went along with this designation as it was the first major recognition he had had from the establishment, and he very much hoped there would be some remunerative lecturing work for him, as all previous attempts at securing funding and other university recognition had failed.52

However, a single note by itself is not music. To understand why he was disillusioned with the title “oral historian” with regard to his work, and preferred the folk life approach, I believe we must look at the content of some of his lectures, where we find that, with the freedom to say more of what he wished, he begged people to see things holistically and not take away anything piecemeal. In one paper he refers to two of the most outstanding figures in Folklife Studies who emphasised this directly and indirectly, particularly Professor Sigurd Erixon of Stockholm, who “advised [folklife] students ... to listen to an informant’s whole life story, if this is possible, rather than take away specific information about what he happens to want at that moment” and Seamus Delargy’s plea “for the collector to be in absolute sympathy with the people he is interviewing”.53

Referring to the former, Evans said,

“It is this wide approach which is the best feature of folk life, in my opinion; its refusal to divide up what is essentially an organic whole into rigid compartments

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like agricultural history, economic history, political history, social anthropology and so on; and its attempt to estimate the whole field of material with its numerous aspects in the foreground. Folk should therefore mean the whole of the community.”

For example, people have come from the literate world to study dialect, but dialect is only part of the language, and language is tied into the whole of the life and even the land itself. The same could be said about those who have come from the external perception to “collect” folksongs – for whom, one might ask. All too often their intention is merely to use the material they have collected and transcribed for their own purposes as they think fit, in a revival that can never represent the history and wisdom that it does in the tradition: “... dialect and most of the traditional lore are tied up inextricably with the whole way of life in the countryside …”; “there is at the present time a real danger of a new orthodoxy evolving in local studies” said Evans in 1969. “The present vogue of revival of folk singing on the concert stage and elsewhere has distorted our concept of the essence of oral composition” stated Albert Lord. “Revival is a paper moon” wrote Millman Parry. Enid Porter referred to folk as an “awful word ... which has to be accepted for want of a better word ... It’s everything to do with the life of the people”, and J. Geraint Jenkins would have liked to get rid of the word “folk” and substitute for it “the correct term ‘ethnological’”. So whilst Evans had reservations, and revival could be considered to be a millstone around the neck of the general use of the word folk, it was this whole-life study in placing the spoken word, as he defined it, at the forefront of history that was the deciding factor in his determination to stand by the word “Folklife” and what this meant for him.

The importance of the “whole-life” study

Evans was nevertheless so incensed by the attempted breakup of the whole of folklife by the academics, that in his essay in honour of Iowrthe Peate he wrote “… and if one goes after a single element of it and nothing else, violence is being done to a historically rich folk-life situation”. And later:

“In spite of my reservations about the title ‘oral history’ and the expressed aims of the American founder, I could see that when the new departure from conventional history was heralded from America, only a bold and singleminded claim to place oral evidence in the forecourt of History would gain a sure entry. Yet my main difficulty in accepting unreservedly the American ‘oral history approach’, as this appeared from the evidence of their work that we saw over here, was the lack of historical depth in the subjects they investigated”.

It is quite possible therefore for “collectors” to arrive from a purely academic background, call themselves “oral historians”, and take
away what they think will be an addition to some sort of “book history”, whereas Evans felt that the whole subject has a far greater depth and takes a deal more understanding, which can only come from prolonged experience and total sympathy with the speakers passing on their knowledge.

Jousse, on defining his anthropology as holistic said,

“the anthropos is not something one cuts up into small pieces.”

“It is imperative that we study the living in its living form, and exclude the study of dead books: we must add an in-depth study of the living, expressive and rhythmic geste” [Jousse referred to language as being part of the whole human expression – the “rhythmic geste”].

“It seems that our western science is afraid of life. When man and his expression is the subject of study, our western civilisation is not interested in the living gestes of man, but only in their dead remains”.

Romanticism and revival represent neither history nor wisdom
Anyone who has worked as closely as Evans did to the people of a more oral society will know that what they sought in one word was truth: truth through their metaphorical mind of sayings and story that puts a measurement on the present and with it true history from their amazingly accurate memories, together with a total belief in the tradition to pass it on. So when Blythe’s “fictionally based” book Akenfield was published, Evans joined the criticism and declared, “What, in fact, the book has done is establish a new strain of romanticism in ‘country’ writing”. Romanticism has no place in history – it distorts the truth.

Walter J. Ong, “arguably one of the most significant intellectuals of the twentieth century”, saw the importance of the spoken word. In a number of books, but particularly in Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word (published in 1982 and later translated into twelve languages), he made defining statements in reminding us that the spoken word came first and should be considered as first now. “We have to remind ourselves … that writing is completely and irremediably artificial … [but that] is not to deny that it is essential for the realization of fuller human potential”. As Jousse sees it: “the alphabet is one of the verbal tools, which should be treated with caution”. When Millman Parry established that the Homeric epics were passed on orally for many generations before being written down, Ong said he “succeeded in undercutting this cultural chauvinism so as to get into the ‘primitive’ Homeric poetry on this poetry’s own terms, even when these ran counter to the received view of what poetry and poets ought to be”.

Jousse reminded us that this wonderful gift of literacy can have shortcomings when he stated that

“… the discovery of the printing press was a noteworthy victory over space and time. Because of it, the speaker’s meagre voice, transposed to the visual faculty, could be spread over millions of pages and disseminated to the four corners of the earth. The momentary echo of the voice no longer transformed into memories that
were subject to change and forgetfulness. Metal type rendered what was ephemeral, immutable and almost eternal.

Soon man started to notice in himself the psychological damage caused by premature, immoderate use of the book.”

Conclusion – a challenge for further enquiry

It was the anthropologist Hugh Brody, who having lived with the Inuit people in the frozen north of Canada, said, “there are lessons to be learned from the hunter-gatherer world that go to the core of who we are as human beings. These are lessons about the nature of history… and the extent to which language is inseparable from the identity and well-being of any people”. That is similar to the understanding that Evans also left us with. From his personal correspondence, I believe that he would like to have published a deeper insight into the cultural differences which we can now reflect back upon ourselves to show what we are losing in this urban media-controlled society of artificial, technological devices in which we all survive. It is easy to find the “folklore” – the plain information: there are many sources still all around us for those “prepared to look over the hedge” as W. G. Hoskins, the father of local history and a man “for whom [Evans] had great respect”, stated. More difficult to get hold of, however, are the principles of understanding – the wisdom and history. This then is the challenge for further enquiry. In referring to people as walking history books, and stallion leaders as walking stud books, Evans was telling us that this history, the personal history that we all carry, goes to the very core of who we are – it is our identity, which can be personal, regional, and with it national. “Our cultural history is carried forward deep within us today which is one reason why we need to examine our cultural past carefully,” said Walter Ong. Our personal history therefore is our very identity – it is who we are. We need to understand and accept this fuller picture of history.

As Jousse put it:

“The original and capital sin of our Written-style civilisation is that it considers itself singularly superior and unique and believes, moreover, that everything not recorded in writing does not exist. ... the human sciences ... have not studied, in any depth, which aspects of ethnography are anthropological, and instead they skim the surface of bookish ethnicity”.

Mervyn Cater, a horseman recorded both by George Ewart Evans and the author (DVD 26, “My father the original horse whisperer”). © The author
In spite of the 1870 Education Act, the passing on of oral wisdom and oral culture in general was still prevalent in the English countryside for the next century and has strong residual effect in parts to this day. This Act however was a licence for the educators in charge to teach everyone that the unwritten was incorrect and the only way forward was through literacy. The importance of learning to read and write no one can deny, but what of the side effects? “In place of abstract knowledge, the illiterate countryman has a genius … Elementary education’s first effect is to supersede that genius” said Adrian Bell. Vance Randolph, who wrote a great deal about the life, songs, stories, and idiom of the people of the Ozark Mountains of North America who he lived among stated: “My informants were old friends who straddled the ridges and knew more than any man can learn in schools”. Walter Benjamin, like Jousse, “was not against the latest technological inventions but the manner in which they might be used to entrance, captivate, and deceive people”.

Ong, “a deeply original thinker. In many ways ... ahead of his time”, said that he thought his book, *Orality and Literacy*, would “attempt to overcome our biases in some degree and to open new ways to understanding”. Professor Edgard Sienaert similarly has endeavoured to “level the orality-literacy playing field”. But who can believe this will happen in this new electronic age where further literate technological devices such as texting, email, iPod, the internet etc arrive almost daily? “… we live in a culture that doesn’t encourage us to think in a metaphorical way” wrote Daniel Morden in 2003. However much easier these artificial devices make communication and access to information, do they not also bring further literate distortions to our natural habits and minds and with this a further inability to understand the importance to us of the very opposite – the natural world of the spoken word to which George Ewart Evans and Marcel Jousse in their own individual ways lit beacons of understanding? Ong, Jousse and others have referred to the fact that our discovery is as yet incomplete. I believe that it is through placing ourselves in the position of the more-oral mindset of the natural world that we can understand what is happening within ourselves in modern society today. Dr Johnson said, “Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it.” Evans and Jousse have led us to an even more important
third kind in “that which we have not yet discovered”, or as an old Suffolk countryman was to put it in his naturally inherited metaphoric language: “It’s knowing what you don’t know what count”.  

Notes


2. See also W. J. Ong, Orality and Literacy, the Technologizing of the Word, London, Routledge, 1988, pp. 20, 34, 68. James Joyce was also influenced by Jousse and had attended his lectures. See L. Weir, “The Choreography of Gesture: Marcel Jousse and Finnegans Wake”, James Joyce Quarterly (Spring, 1977), 14, 3, 313-325.


16. Ibid.


29. Delaney, 30/12/1973, 5. I am grateful to Eoin Delaney for permission to consult and quote from his father Jim Delaney’s correspondence.
30. Ibid.
34. Decker Murfitt, a horseman all of his life from the Cambridgeshire Fens, when interviewed by the author in a public meeting at The Pavilion, Soham, Cambridgeshire, 12/6/2008. DVD66 (available from www.oraltraditions.co.uk).
38. Dr Iorwerth Cyfeiliog Peate, born 1901, was recording people of the prior culture of Wales as a student. He set up St Fagans Folk Life Museum, Cardiff, initiated the Society of Folk Life Studies in 1960 and, like Delargy and Evans, “used an anthropological technique, the technique not so much of the interview, but of the long and patient recording, of living with the people and getting to know a few outstanding informants over a long period of time ...” (G. E. Evans, *The Days That We Have Seen*, London, Faber and Faber, 1975, p. 23). Delaney (2/6/1975, 2-3) was to write about this to Evans in that Delaney always let people’s minds go up boreens (laneways) because it was here that he found the unexpected and best information.
46. www.marceljousse.co.za/home.html.
49. See, for example, Howkins, 27-33; Williams, 1991, pp. 39-42.
53. Seamus Delargy, born 1899, prevailed on De Valera to establish what was to become the Irish Folklore Commission. He was the main pioneer in the British Isles of the folk life movement, “using the name folk as the Scandinavians did to describe the whole people and not just a section of it” (Evans, 1987, pp. 248-249). He had “a tremendous respect” for the work of Evans (Delaney, 5/5/1971, 1).
68. Sienaert, 2006, 6. As Edgard Sienaert puts it: “the alphabet is only a tool, nothing more, nothing less”, e-mail to the author 26/2/2011.
69. Ong, p. 18. It is an interesting coincidence that Ong’s relative, Edmond Ong, emigrated to the USA from Lavenham, Suffolk (where Evans’s work largely took place) in 1630, and Peter Ramus, the sixteenth-century Parisian philosopher and educationalist on whom Walter Ong spent a year’s study in over 100 libraries, lived in this same area.
71. H. Brody, The Other Side of Eden, London, Faber and Faber, 2001, p. 8,
73. Evans, 1960, p. 197, and T. J. Farrell, Walter Ong’s Contribution to Cultural Studies, New York, Hampton Press, 2000, p. 3. Ong also said, “The interaction between orality that all human beings are born into and the technology of writing, which no-one is born into, touches the depths of the psyche”. Ong, 1988, p. 178.
75. Bell, pp. 49-50.
78. Farrell, p. 58.
79. Ong, p. 2.
81. Christopher Holderness of Melton Constable, Norfolk, said in an unsolicited comment in a
letter to the author (25/6/2009), “I agree with you entirely about what Society is losing mentally. I see it in the young people I am in contact with as a supply teacher. It is really quite depressing”.


84. Hugh Charles Alleston, Boxford, Suffolk, in an interview with the author circa 1954.

Neil Lanham is an independent researcher, who has observed, absorbed and recorded the oral culture of the people of his native Suffolk for almost all of his 74 years. He has published two books from the oral tradition, collected 600 traditional English songs, and interviewed numerous horsemen and other indigenous vernacular people. For the purpose of recycling the culture back to the people, many of his recordings are available on CD and DVD from his website, www.traditionsofsuffolk.com.