It was an exciting time to be a cognitive psychologist

We speak to Alan Baddeley, Professor at the University of York, about his new book *Working Memories: Postmen, Divers and the Cognitive Revolution* (Routledge)

The title of the book is a neat, and perhaps irresistible, bit of word-play... but you give us much about your early life and education as well as your working life. How much of this was garnered from your own memory and how much from other sources?

The first chapter, growing up in a working-class district of Leeds was largely from memory although I did reread Richard Hoggett’s *Uses of Literacy* which gives a broad account of Hunslet during the 1950s. My account was however checked by my older brother in an attempt to avoid too many confabulations.

In general I have attempted to have one or more friends check all the chapters, although they could not of course be expected to verify the more detailed aspects of my recollections.

The chapters trace a continuous series of distinct episodes in your life. Which of these did you find easiest to write about, or gave you the most pleasure? (Assuming it wasn’t all a chore!)

The most enjoyable chapter to write was that describing my year spent in the US immediately after graduating, leaving a country that had only just abandoned food rationing to five days of feasting on the liner Queen Mary and the dramatic arrival in New York harbour. This was followed by a wonderful year in Princeton when I decided I could enjoy myself without worrying about passing exams, then a drive in a Chevrolet convertible across the US to Los Angeles before returning to austerity and job hunting. All of this was recorded in the almost weekly letters I sent to my recently widowed mother and that she kept until I rediscovered them over 50 years later.

You have lived through some fascinating times in the development of psychology as a discipline and have met some of the great figures – what or who stands out as a highlight for you?

Two meetings with eminent psychologists spring to mind. One was with Donald Hebb during the winter of 1956 to discuss the possibility of doing a PhD at McGill. I decided not to accept the offer, according to my letter home, because it involved working on what was then known as physiological psychology. The temperature of 20 below zero outside might possibly also have played some part!

The second meeting occurred later when I had moved to the MRC Applied Psychology Unit to do a PhD on postal codes. Bartlett had retired but retained a room at the Unit and would occasionally bring around visitors. I still remember my trepidation in describing the work I was doing on learning lists of nonsense syllables, remembering his views on such material. He happily responded in suitably benign grandfatherly way.

There seems to be a sense of inevitability when looking back on the trajectory of one’s life; but that’s not how it feels when living through it, of course. What were the real unexpected or unlooked for turning points in your career?

The most dramatic turning point in my career came in
the year I returned from Princeton. Jobs were scarce and I moved from a period as a hospital porter to that of a very unsuccessful teacher in a school in a local mining community and then to a research post at the Burden Neurological Institute in Bristol. Here I was due to work on some positive effects of alcohol funded by the Iveagh Bequest (money from Guinness!). The Burden was distinguished by the presence of a brilliant neurophysiologist, W. Grey Walter together with a rather unreliable director who announced after I had been there for a few weeks that I must depart since he had inadvertently given back the money to the trust! I got on very well with Grey Walter who assured me that he would be able to obtain funding from the US Air Force but would need to clear this with the chairman of the board of the Institute. At about this time I received an invitation from the Applied Psychology Unit to consider a post doing research on postal codes. This led to an interview with Broadbent and Conrad on the very day that we expected to have confirmation or otherwise of the possibility of US Air Force money. Grey Walter said he would send a telegram and rather dramatically, it arrived during my interview with a message ‘Chairman still not back’. I had an easy decision and have in total spent 30 happy years of my career at the Unit.

Casting modesty aside, what do you think the legacy of your working life will be?
I hope the broad concept of working memory will remain. The detail has and will continue to change as it links up with neighbouring research areas and disciplines. This is particularly true of the central executive which was proposed essentially as a stop gap concept to cover the way in which attention controls behaviour. However I hope that the general concept of a broad system in which it makes sense to separate visual, verbal and executive components might survive, offering a model that is simple enough to be widely understood and used. At a slightly more detailed level, I suspect the phonological loop which is the simplest component might continue to be useful. Finally I hope that some future historian of the cognitive revolution might discover Working Memories, brush off the cobwebs and learn what it was like… it was an exciting time to be a cognitive psychologist.

You seem to be still very active in your eighties… will working ever be just a memory for you?
I have been fortunate enough to be able to escape from administration and extensive teaching allowing me to focus on research. This involves collaboration with my younger colleagues who cover for my inevitable limitations. I intend to continue as long as I enjoy it at which point I may be no longer capable of remembering anything very much!

For more on memory, and the ‘divers’ of Alan Baddeley’s title, see our interview with Hilde and Ylva Østby on p.62