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DISPERSED OR DESTROYED: ARCHIVES, THE WEST INDIAN STUDENTS' UNION, AND PUBLIC MEMORY

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The West Indian Students' Union was formed in 1945 with the expansion in the number of students arriving in London and elsewhere for further and higher education, and acted as a welfare, political and social organisation. Many future leaders of Caribbean states and territories would occupy positions of leadership within the West Indian Students' Union. Others returned to rise within the judiciary, academia or cultural heart of the West Indies. Students in Britain saw, and arrived parallel to, the Windrush era of migration, and the later clashes in race relations in Britain that were evidenced by such events as the Notting Hill riots of 1958, restrictions on Commonwealth immigrations and Enoch Powell's 1968 "rivers of blood" speech and its aftermath. After the Union ceased to operate (sometime in the late 1970s) its records appear to have been lost.

An Introduction

In the latter half of 2004 the Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library began to curate an online exhibition of our holdings of archives related to or of interest to Caribbean Studies. [i] Our collections include material from the plantation era of Caribbean history, including the letters of Simon Taylor, and the archives of the West

India Committee, and more recent material including collections of papers from CLR James and Richard Hart, the Caribbean Council, the Caribbean Banana Exporters Association London Lobby and collections of material from political parties, trade unions and pressure groups (which my colleague Danny Millum will discuss later this afternoon).

We had been asked to include where possible material relating to the presence of Caribbean people in the UK. One document included in the exhibition was from the papers of CLR James, namely the Report of the West Indian Students' Union Commission of External Affairs (1963). In order to provide additional context we attempted to discover more about the Union and the location of its records. We discovered that Lloyd Braithwaite had written about the union in the mid 1950s and that this manuscript had been published in 2001. (Braithwaite, 2001) But the search for the records of the union itself were largely fruitless. We did find a number of items held in the Caribbean Artists Movement and John La Rose collections at the George Padmore Institute (largely dating from the late 1960s) and reference to the West Indian Students' Union in the archives of the Communist Party of Great Britain (held at the Labour History Archives and Study Centre, Manchester) and in the records of the Colonial Office (held at the National Archives at Kew).

Despite searches on various databases and appeals for information within the archives community, the Caribbean community in the UK, and in the Caribbean itself, no further records were found and it appears that the official record of the union has been dispersed or destroyed.

So why does this matter? And what can be done to attempt to fill this gap? I want to continue by discussing the position of West Indian students in Britain, the West Indian Students' Union itself, the nature of archive collections and archival collecting, and suggest some actions that can be taken.

Background

There is evidence of West Indian student organisations existing before 1945, but these organisations seemed both small and short-lived. West Indian students were not new in Britain and white planters in the West Indies had, since the early days of the 19th century sent their children to Britain to be educated, or in the case of their daughters, to

be both educated and ‘finished’. (Little, 1948, 92; Political and Economic Planning, 1955, 2)

West Indian students in the first half of the twentieth century took part in, and sometimes leadership roles within, organisations such as the West African Christian Union, the African Progress Union, and Union of Students of African Descent. A West Indian Students’ Union existed as early as 1924, publishing Baron Oliviers’ *An appeal to the people of the West Indies* (Olivier, 1924) and references exist to other associations. In the early 1930s a West Indian Students’ Association was formed, but again it appears this was a short-lived body. Students were also active in other organisations of the time, including the League of Coloured Peoples. (Adi, 1998, 16-24, 32, 53; Killingray, 2003, 61-63)

After World War Two the number of students arriving from the colonies, including the West Indies, increased rapidly. Before World War Two at no time did the overall number of colonial students at universities rise as high as 2000 in a single year. After the war, the number of overseas students of all origins rose steadily year by year and by 1960-61 there were 35729 British students from the Commonwealth and United Kingdom dependencies at universities and other institutions of higher learning and of these 6949 from the British Caribbean. In 1939 there had been 166 West Indian students in Britain, by 1947 there were 929, and three years later 1114. (Carey, 1956, 29; Patterson, 1963, 37-38) Students attended universities, the Inns of Court, polytechnics and technical colleges, and teaching hospitals.

This significant increase in numbers of students was partly due to a rise in educational standards in the West Indies, and largely due to new financial support and scholarships made available to them. Colonial Government scholarship schemes were made available after 1940 and Britain provided scholarships, after 1946, under the Colonial Development and Welfare Acts. The post-war period also saw, for the first time, a significant number of women students arriving in Britain. (McCowan, 1952, 4)

Student Experiences

Despite their increased numbers, colonial students were still a small minority in British universities (just over 2 per cent in 1953). (Political and Economic Planning, 1955, 56) Students arrived at ages varying from 18 to as old as 45. Most of these students up to

the mid-1940s came from homes that, by colonial standards in particular, would have been considered wealthy, (Little, 1948, 248) and after 1945 were still largely middle-class.

Students had a variety of individual expectations and experiences. In 1954 the research group Political and Economic Planning, (PEP), found that compared with other colonial students West Indians had a larger degree of cultural identification, or perceived common interests with British students, but noted that students experiences differed based on skin colour, institution of study, and place of residence. Fairer skinned students had better expectations and better experiences of their time in Britain whereas 'Afro-West Indians' were more likely to report colour prejudice, disillusionment, and some degree of bitterness. Students at universities usually enjoyed their stay more than those at polytechnics or the Inns of Court, and provincial towns provided a better social life than did London, which was often described as lacking student activities and as a lonely city. (Political and Economic Planning, 1954, 88, 285-286, 291)

West Indian students were often successful in student life. There were at least three West Indian presidents of the Oxford Union before 1955. (Political and Economic Planning, 1955, 150) Despite many positive experiences, many students in the early 1950s commented on the 'reserved manner' of British people, and also remarked on the ignorance of, and apathy about, the colonies. Students also felt the impact of other events in British race relations. After the Notting Hill riots Mervyn Morris, studying at Oxford from Jamaica, wrote that "It was not an easy time for any white Englishman to speak naturally to a Black, as the Notting Hill riots, a few months before my arrival in England, had been followed by public discussion of race and racial problems, which, though necessary and helpful, produced self-consciousness in any racial situation". (Tajfel and Dawson, 1965, 11-12)

Accommodation was a major problem for colonial students, and it was in looking for accommodation that students most often came face to face for the first time with colour prejudice. Students experienced difficulty in finding accommodation, and there was evidence that some were required to pay more for their rooms because they were 'coloured'. This 'colour tax' also applied to West Indian migrants. (Political and Economic Planning, 1955, 76, 85; Carey, 1956 68-71)

West Indian students were not entirely left to their own devices. The major political parties were interested in creating links with colonial students. There was interest also from churches and missionary societies, and groups such as the Student Christian Movement, the Victoria League, the East and West Friendship Council, and Rotary and Inner Wheel Clubs, which aimed to promote friendship between British people and overseas students. (Political and Economic Planning, 1955, 50-51) It was frequently alleged that the Communist Party systematically met new arrivals at the docks or railway stations, although there is no evidence to support this claim.(Political and Economic Planning, 1955, 158-9)

West Indian students in Britain came under the domain of the Colonial Office from 1940. With the great increase in student numbers, responsibility was delegated to the British Council in 1950, for the reception, accommodation and general welfare of colonial students, while the Colonial Office retained responsibility for securing student admission. Liaison officers were appointed by Colonial Governments to act under the supervision of the Director of Colonial Scholars. These officers helped the Students' Department and Colonial Governments to keep in touch with the personal problems and general welfare of students.

The British Council produced leaflets for students about to come to Britain with advice on money, luggage, procedures on disembarkation, housing and clothes and general advice; made arrangements for students to be met on arrival in the country; and organised courses that provided an introduction to the mechanics of everyday life in Britain. The Council assisted with the provision of accommodation including running the Hans Crescent House which was a centre for colonial students' activities in London. (Political and Economic Planning, 1955, 35-44)

While most West Indian students came to Britain with strong territorial identities, a common theme in writing of the period describes how distance (and isolation within British community life) reduced the importance of these differences and increased their consciousness of unity or West Indian identity – a consciousness that may have been of importance in the realization of West Indian Federation. (Political and Economic Planning, 1955, 95-96) George Lamming described it thus, "No Barbadian, no Trinidadian, no St Lucian, no islander from the West Indies sees himself as a West

Indian until he encounters another islander in foreign territory… In this sense most West Indians of my generation were born in England." (Lamming, 1960, 214)

Kenneth Ramchand, from Trinidad and studying at Edinburgh from 1959 to 1963 noted that racial categorisation by British people led to the formation of West Indian groups and a kind of recognition, at last of West Indian community, as a kind of defensive measure. (Tajfel and Dawson, 1965, 28-29) Elliot Bastien, also from Trinidad, and studying at Birmingham, from 1960 to 1964, attributed the frustrations encountered in England, the discrimination, stereotypes and ignorance as contributing to an atmosphere for many West Indians in England, which give birth to a Caribbean nationalism, or wider consciousness of "negritude".

Relationships with Migrants

Especially in the earlier years of the West Indian Students' Union students and the new migrant population in the UK remained largely apart. Students were generally part of the 'middle-class' of the coloured community, experienced comparatively better conditions and accommodation, and led largely unsegregated lives. Their stay was not only more limited, but also, on the whole, more comfortable than that of worker migrants. (McCowan, 1952, 6-9; Carey, 1956, 11-12; Glass, 1960, 203) Students in London tended to live in different areas from the majority of West Indian migrants, one London report noting that "Most coloured students lodge north of the river. A minority, however live in South London, either because it is cheap or because they are attending one of the South London hospitals or technical colleges. As might be expected, most of these students avoid the working-class migrant settlements and congregate in areas with greater social pretensions such as Streatham and parts of Norwood."(Patterson, 1963, 58)

The West Indian Students' Union

In December 1945 113 students registered for the first West Indian Students' Conference, held at St Peter's Church Hall, Belsize Park, and formed the West Indian Students Union.

The aims and objectives of the organisation were to:

- promote fellowship between West Indian students in the UK;
- concern itself with the general well-being of West Indian students in the UK;

- stimulate interest in the cultural, political and economic development of the West Indies;
- promote facilities for higher education in the West Indies; and
- establish contacts with similar organisations in the UK and other parts of the world.

Its early activities included a deputation to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in November 1946 on the question of the establishment of a West Indian university, a bi-annual newsletter, a series of talks on individual West Indian territories, and a study group on the economic history and development of the West Indies, led by Dr W Arthur Lewis, then teaching at LSE. (Walmsley, 1992, 4-5) The union acted as both welfare and political organisation as well as providing social, sporting and cultural activities – including West Indian dramatics, dances and steel bands.

Not all West Indian students belonged to the union, some were not aware of its presence, others believed it offered few benefits in return for the costs of membership. One of the most important reasons for a lack of a stable membership was however the lack of an enthusiasm for a West Indian cause. (Braithwaite, 2001, 135)

The union took advantage of both the arrival of large numbers of West Indian students to Britain, as well as their increased political awareness. The political outlook of the Union was described in 1956 as one of opposition to 'imperialism' and to colonial rule, but less nationalistic and more given to compromise than the West African Students' Union. The union represented West Indian students in their dealings with the various official bodies in Britain. Although in 1956 WISU had not been officially recognised by any of the West Indian governments, informal contacts were maintained and recognition would soon follow. By the mid 1950s its membership in London included about 200 to 250 students, but an affiliated membership with West Indian clubs in provincial universities brought this number up to nearly 1000.

Leadership of the Union included some of the most politically active students in London and was described by Braithwaite as based on protest rather than welfare concerns. (Braithwaite, 2001, 137) Office holders included such notable figures as Linden Forbes Burnham; Michael Manley; Errol Barrow; Maurice Bishop, Lee Llewellyn Moore and Locksley Comrie.

The Unions activities were largely based at the Hans Crescent House hostel, until the West Indian governments found them a centre of their own in June 1955. (Political and Economic Planning, 1955, 46)

West Indian Students Centre

Efforts to create a West Indian students centre may have begun as early as 1923. In 1950-51 a vigorous approach was begun. (West India Committee, 1955a) . With the support of West Indian Governments, who paid set up costs of $96,000 for the cost of the purchase and preparation of the building and its main contents, and also donations of other equipment, books and money from individuals and companies with interests in the West Indies (West India Committee, 1954) the Centre, at No. 1 Collingham Gardens, was officially opened by Princess Margaret on June 1st 1955.

The purpose of the centre was to provide for all West Indian students resident in the United Kingdom and Eire a social club, open from 10 am to 11 pm. The Centre was non-residential and contained a lounge, library and bar as well as dining, billiards, games and television rooms. A monthly programme of social and cultural activities was arranged, including games such as tennis, netball, cricket and football and regular speakers on a range of topics of interest to West Indian students. The Centre was administrated by a board of governors nominated by the West Indian governments and the Secretary of State for the Colonies, together with student representatives. Membership began at 5/- for members resident in London and 2/6 for others, with members of the West Indian Students' Union covered through a compounded annual subscription. (West India Committee, 1955b; West India Committee, 1955a) The centre became the physical site of the West Indian Students' Union and its activities.

The West Indian Students' Centre rapidly became a focus not just of full-time student activities, but also a popular venue for part-time students permanently resident in London and every type of West Indian social, political and cultural event. The Centre offered organisations such as the Caribbean Artists' Movement, the Commission for Racial Equality and West Indian Standing Committee a meeting place and facilities, which in turn enriched the life of the centre and the students who used it. (Walmsley, 1992, 20)

In 1967 efforts were made to improve the facilities, described as “dreary and demoralizing late Victorian”. A scheme was produced to refurbish the entrance hall and the Board of Governors also sought to improve the lighting and decoration of the bar, dining room and lounge (using brightly coloured fabrics designed by the talented Miss Althea McNish of Trinidad), and appealed for help in the *Chronicle of the West India Committee* for funds to support this work from companies with commercial interest in the West Indies. (West India Committee, 1967)

In acknowledgement of the generosity of these firms the journal published photographs of the completed work in January 1970, which included depictions of Unity Week, held in August 1969, which included an art exhibition, a teach-in on ‘Our Cultural Heritage’ featuring Selwyn Baptiste talking on steel bands, Errol Lloyd discussing African Art and Horace James speaking on Trinidad Folk Music. During the week CLR James gave an address on The International Black Struggle, and was presented with a bust of himself, sculpted by Errol Lloyd. Other events included a film festival, dance and Black Arts Festival. (West India Committee, 1970)

Given this commercial support, it is interesting that this Unity Week event represented the climax of the West Indian Students’ Union’s increasing interest in the international black struggle, largely influenced by Afro-American concepts of blackness, and the ideology of Black Power. (Walmsley, 1992, 249-250)

Popular interest in the Union appears not to have been high at this time and an AGM in May 1969 only attracted eight members. The papers held at the George Padmore Institute reveal the growing interest in Black Power among the leadership of the Union. At the same time the programme of activities remained varied – for example in September 1970 we find five folk group rehearsals and a fundraising dance for this group, other dances for the football club and Black Arts Workshop, cricket games, and meetings or talks on ‘The Political Situation on Dominica’, ‘The History of Guyana’, ‘Black Women in the African Liberation Movement’ and ‘West Indian Rebellions in the Thirties’. The centre at this time also hosted netball, table tennis, keep fit classes, basket ball, and a School for Black Youth (part of the emerging Black education movement).

During this time the Centre was a site of a number of conflicts over entrance, reflecting a continuing tension within the Centre over its openness to 'ordinary immigrants'. (Walmsley, 1992, 128) Some felt that the Centre was overly controlled by High Commission officers, who selected the topics, speakers, and times of discussion. This created tensions at a time when there was a rise in black consciousness among students. (Walmsley, 1992, 154-156)

The union came into increasing conflict with the governing body of the Centre and the West Indian governments. In the case of the Board of the Centre, the definition by President Gary Burton of the West Indian Students Union as 'an independent revolutionary organisation under black control' and the decision to open up membership of the union to all West Indians had important repercussions for access to the centre. The Union was often critical of West Indian High Commissions, governments and leaders, and 'the reactionary black bourgeoisie'.

In December 1975 the heads of West Indian governments decided to discontinue the centre in its "present form" and letters were written to interested parties stating that the 30th September 1976 was the date that the centre would cease to operate, and called for proposals for alternative use of the centre. In 1977 the West Indian Students' Centre was still operating, hosting the Society of Caribbean Culture (West India Committee, 1977), and in February a talk by Richard Hart, following the December 1976 elections in Jamaica (Race Today, 1977). No mention of the centre has been found since and it now houses the High Commissions of Dominica and St Lucia.

Archives and memory

A brief outline of some of the history of the West Indian Students' Union raises questions about the formation of Caribbean political leadership, relations between West Indian students and migrants, the appeal of political ideologies, and the role and function of higher education in the post-war period.

The absence of the records of the West Indian Students' Union or of the West Indian Students Centre prevents these questions being fully answered. Recent archival theorists have stated that "memory, like history, is rooted in archives"(Schwartz and Cook, 2002, 18), and that without the presence of archives memory falters, knowledge of accomplishments fades, and pride in a shared past dissipates.

The remnants that remain of the West Indian Students Union's records are partial and reflect individual decisions made to keep documents and records of particular formats, or that relate to particular events, activities or people. Alternative records (from the Communist Party and Colonial Office) reveal how the organisation was seen, by two very different bodies. The South African archivist Verne Harris uses a metaphor of the 'archival sliver' to describe how archival records present only a small and partial view of social history. This partial view can be distorting and in the absence of the records of the West Indian Students Union itself, it is all too easy to construct narratives of political radicalism, conflict and of angry young men – and to exclude stories about sports teams, cultural events, and of women.

Archives are generally seen as passive resources, able to be exploited for various historical and cultural purposes. Recent critical thinking has questioned the notion of archive neutrality and stated that archives control the past through a process of privileging or marginalizing certain stories through processes of appraisal, selection, description, preservation and communication. (Schwartz and Cook, 2002)

Harris has described how in South Africa records were deliberately destroyed between 1990 and 1994, included those confiscated by the security police from individuals and organisations opposed to apartheid. Other records were lost during raids and other attacks on anti-apartheid structures and premises, and anti-apartheid organisations were reluctant to commit certain types of information to print and preferred to destroy records rather than let them fall into the hands of the South Africa security forces. (Harris, 2002, 70) It is thus clear that the combination of these events results in huge gaps in our potential understanding of the South African anti-apartheid struggle.

Similarly we may regard the case of the West Indian Students' Union as an example of a wider process, whereby the records of our recent past have been lost. This is particularly the case for groups that are informal, marginalized, short-lived or unstable, or perhaps predominantly made up of young people. This process has important implications for both the present and the future exploration of the Caribbean experience in Britain.

If archives are socially constructed institutions, which maintain the power of controlling what is and will be known about the past, about the power of remembering over forgetting, then this suggests an accountability or responsibility to public memory. The Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library has therefore begun a project which aims to collect and catalogue and make available what fragmentary or incomplete documentary evidence remains of the West Indian Students' Union – by advertising in alumni newsletters, email listservs, personal contacts and the like, and collecting original or facsimile documents, photographs or other records so that some overall record remains, however partial, incomplete or biased.

We also wish to encourage oral historians to pursue the ex-members and others involved in the West Indian Students' Union so that their memories are not lost. Such a study is likely to require interviews in both the UK, the Caribbean and indeed elsewhere, and is no doubt urgent as those people involved in the Union, especially in its earlier years get older.

Archive records face threats to their existence at critical points of instability in their surrounding context (Sassoon, 2000, 121). The closure of the West Indian Students' Centre and the cessation of the West Indian Students' Union, tied as it was to the building, represented a critical point at which the records of an ongoing organisation became records of an organisation which was no longer. So while we will continue to search for the archives themselves, we will also attempt to discover the story of what happened to them, recognising that "an absence of records can, in itself, be seen as evidence, and there comes a point in the research process where it may be more telling to explain erasure than continue searching for records"(Sassoon, 2000, 117).

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