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Visions of the Caribbean: Exploring Photographs in the West India Committee Collections

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(Photograph of West India Committee Library in situ at West India Committee, Norfolk Street London - ICS97/8/13)

Despite photographs being widely used to illustrate Caribbean histories, there has been a surprisingly relative lack of scholarly research that explores or interprets Caribbean photographic images as documents in their own right. Photographs provide a rich and special source of documentation of the past and can be used as historical evidence in different ways, not only by depicting physical and social environments, but also by examining the practice of photography as a means of revealing attitudes, expectations and visions of people and place.

The West India Committee collections held at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library include a number of groups of photographs and albums. A selection of these will be used to illustrate how photographs can be used as historical evidence, and how photographs may also reveal much about how the Caribbean has been seen through processes of taking photographs and the subsequent processes of exhibitions, publication, distribution and organisation. The selection will cover both nineteenth and twentieth century images and a range of genre including 'portrait', 'landscape' and 'documentary'.

The West India Committee was formed in the 18th century by an association of London merchants engaged in the West Indian trade and of absentee owners of West Indian estates who lived in London and its environs. The Committee acted as a pressure group for West Indian interests, principally in the support of the sugar and rum trades and, in the first decades of its existence, in opposition to the abolition of the slave trade and then slavery. The Committee took an active role in encouraging immigrant labour from India, China and Africa in the post-emancipation era; opposed the removal of preferential sugar duties for West Indian sugar; and campaigned against bounties paid by the government for locally grown beet sugar. In the 20th century the Committee broadened its interests to promote West Indian trade in general. Its membership accordingly broadened to include members resident in the West Indies, and its role became very much a representative one.

The West India Committee accumulated over its history a large and well-respected library, open not only to members, but also to scholars and others interested in the region. Financial pressures on the West India Committee in the 1970s led to the Library being sold to the Crown Agents at some point prior to 1977. At the time the Library (and incorporated archive collections) were left in situ, as the Crown Agents had no premises suitable to house it. In 1977 when the Committee moved to smaller premises the Crown Agents arranged for the library to be housed at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and in 1979 a formal agreement for the deposit of the collection on permanent loan was reached. A later donation of the institutional archives of the West Indian Committee, from c.1900, was donated directly to the Institute by the Committee in 1999.¹

“Views of Trinidad”

One of the earlier photographic items in the collection is an album entitled “Views of Trinidad”, dated as c.1870-1880. (ICS 96/3/24).

The album is notable for the inclusion of pressed leaves on many of the pages. While these seem merely decorative, without labels or notation, it seems fitting, across from Kew gardens to

¹ The Institute also holds a microfilm of the earlier minute books and records of the Committee (which were sold by the Committee to the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine).

acknowledge that plants (as well as images) too were collected, classified and organised in an effort to 'understand' and describe far off worlds. In examining nineteenth century photography powerful interrelated contexts need to be acknowledged: ideas about the 'other' especially in terms of the development of racial ideology; the expansion and maintenance of European colonial power; and a parallel dominance of ideas which placed value on technical and scientific achievement. Photography can be seen as symbolic of this relationship, technical superiority being harnessed to delineate and control the physical world.(Edwards, 1992 4-7)

We do not know the process by which this album came to be in the holdings of the West India Committee Library. The photographs are labelled as being taken by Felix Morin. We know that Morin was French and in addition to photography worked as a land surveyor. He established a photographic business in 1869 and from about 1893 he had a studio at the corner of Frederick Street and Brunswick Square, Port of Spain, Trinidad. He was awarded numerous medals for photographs at international exhibitions in Trinidad; Paris; St John's, Canada: and a Bronze Medal at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, London, 1886. (Royal Commonwealth Society Library) The objective of the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition was to "give to the inhabitants of the British Isles, to foreigners and to one another, practical demonstration of the wealth and industrial development of the outlying portions of the British Empire". (Cundell, 1886, 2) Morin's exhibit at the Exhibition consisted of nineteen individual photographs, eight plate photographs, nineteen photographs of "types of population", an album with local photographs, and another 24 views. (Colonial and Indian Exhibition, 1886)

Great Exhibitions and photographic images formed part of an emerging international tourist industry and contributed to a global perspective of a world under one roof. (Thomas, 1978 11; Maxwell, 1999, ix) Photographic images of colonised peoples, produced in this late colonial period, were avidly consumed by the public. In a context of the Victorian passion for collecting, photographs of colonised peoples were in general circulation and widely believed to offer an accurate visual record of life in the colonies. (Maxwell, 1999, 11)

The images contained in the album are in many ways typical of colonial photography of the period, including streets, scenery, and government buildings, largely modelled on European conventions of photography – a view straight down a main street; newly erected buildings; subjects of local importance and pride. (Thomas, 1978, 121) Such representations reconfigured the unfamiliar according to the pictorial conventions of the picturesque view, making foreign lands more attractive to prospective visitors and settlers. (Hight and Sampson, 2002, 5) The album includes a number of portraits of (non-European) local people, presented not as individuals but as types. These are such photographs that are typical of the period, and versions of which, from all corners of the world have been subject to analysis and interpretation over time.

The ability of photography to depict the human body made it one of the most powerful mediums in the Victorian era for bringing European viewers imaginatively face to face with people different from themselves conveying "the sense of fragmentary glimpses of strange and imaginatively exciting worlds". (Thomas, 1978, 33) Commercial photographers tapped into a market hungry for portraits from around the world. Such photographs usually conformed to a convention of clinical poses, often made in studios with artificial backdrops. These photographs were produced for a European market – to meet European expectations and fantasies of the European imagination. (Kossoy, 1998)

In interpreting these photographs we are drawn to looking at items of jewellery and dress; the use and non-use of props; implied relationships between pairs and groups of people; and the contrasts between individuals. These portraits are labelled simply to convey race and gender. The individuals are not named and no other information is given on the labels to ascribe to them any individual status, aside from clues (which may of course be misleading) from the photographs themselves.



(Page from “Views of Trinidad”, dated c.1870-1880, labelled “Martinique Woman” and “Coolie Woman” - ICS 96/3/24)

The depiction of people as ‘types’, often in series was common in this period. Such series provided documentation of racial differences, reconfirmed European identity and enhanced scientific proof of white superiority. The use of photography as a means of picturing ‘race’ was linked to increasing concern with the accuracy of systems of human classification. (Ryan, 1997, 146-148)

The Landscape of Aftermath

To turn now to a later time period and two albums that sit astride landscape and documentary – what I will call the “landscape of aftermath”. These cover the earthquake that struck Jamaica in 1907, and the landslides that affected St. Lucia in 1938.

The West India Committee collections include an album of photographs of ruins in Jamaica following the 1907 earthquake. (ICS 96/2/2/1) The earthquake began Monday, January 14th, 1907 at 3:38 pm, Kingston time, followed immediately by two additional shocks, which in combination

with a furious fire which burned throughout the following day brought about great loss of life and utterly destroyed a large part of Kingston, including most of the piers, banks, government buildings and much of the business quarter. Water, sanitation and transport systems were completely destroyed. There was a large loss of life (estimated to have been about 1000 persons) and the extent of property loss was so worrying that, within 48 hours of the earthquake, the West India Committee had convened a special meeting of 'Jamaican Proprietors'. (Lobdell, 1993)

The Committee took an active role in relief fundraising in liaison with the Lord Mayor of London, advocated for imperial assistance for rebuilding, and criticised the lack of nearby naval vessels, resulting in the need to accept assistance from American warships. Over the next nine months the *West India Committee Circular* continued to report on activities in Jamaica.

Again the provenance of this album is unknown. Recent research has revealed that the photographer was J W Cleary, who established a photographic business at 89 King Street, Kingston, in the early 1880s and whose firm continued there until at least 1922. (Royal Commonwealth Society Library) Prints of some of these photographs are also held at National Royal Army Museum where they had been incorrectly ascribed to Lt Col P S Wiltshire of the Royal Artillery.



(From "Earthquake Shock in Jamaica. Jan. 14th, 1907. Photographs of Ruins" - ICS 96/2/2/1)

It is worth noting that these photographs in documenting the impact of the disaster do not reveal the entire story. The final photograph shows the camp set up at the racecourse for survivors of the quake. The collected official correspondence relating to the earthquake reveals that the upper part of the racecourse was reserved for "the better class of people" who paid the Quebec Company rent

for the land they occupied, and that the West India Regiment provided a guard to assist in maintaining their privacy. (1907, 72)

Natural disasters were obviously of concern and interest to the Committee and in addition to other items relating to the great hurricane and earthquakes in Virgin Islands in 1867-68; hurricane damage in the Turks and Caicos Islands, 1926-1928; and Hurricane Janet of 1955; also held in the collection is an album of photographs by Harold E. Box of scenes in the Cul-de-Sac Valley in St. Lucia after the landslide disasters of November 21st, 1938 (ICS 96/3/38).



(Photograph of aftermath of St Lucia landslides - ICS 96/3/38)

The landslide, the result of surface erosion caused by deforestation on steep slopes, accelerated by abnormal torrential rainfall, led to between 96 and 150 deaths. Nearly one thousand people had to be evacuated from the area and much damage was done to food plantations and cane-fields. The January edition of the *West India Committee Circular* included a selection of photographs from this album and an eyewitness account by Fox, who had been in St Lucia collecting plants for the British Museum, having just completed a two year contract on Antigua as island entomologist.

Harold E Box was a member of the West India Committee and a Fellow of the Royal Entomological Society. He has been described as “a somewhat peripatetic figure, reporting on coffee pests in Kenya in 1921, sending insects from British Guinea to the Imperial Institute of Entomology in 1923, and at the Imperial College of Agriculture in Trinidad in the 1930s”. (Taylor, 2006) He worked in both Africa and the West Indies, under the auspices of various Colonial Development Funds and at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad. His obituary noted the importance of his work on crambine moths and on sugar-cane insects generally (and their biological control) from 1924-1960, and the important part he played in the successful

control of *Diatraea* in the British West Indies (as well as Puerto Rico, the Argentine, and Venezuela) (Royal Entomological Society, 1976, 51)

In his account Box describes the steep hills bordering the Cul-de-Sac Valley as “literally pock-marked with the red scars of recent landslides; the swollen river was a like a stream of clay with evidence that in places it had reached a height of 15 feet over its normal level”. He states that “At Ravine Possion the community was almost entirely wiped out and in addition to those who were killed instantaneously many must have suffered lingering agonies before overcome by death. It was a sad sight to see stacks of coffins in heaps here and there along the now peaceful countryside”.

Post Independence Images

More recent collections include a selection of photographs from the latter donation of institutional archives of the West Indian Committee consisting of a large number of photographs sorted into two series, one sorted by country and another of ‘Caribbean personalities’. These photographs largely date from 1960 to 1980 and were used for West India Committee publications. For the purposes of this paper I selected a sample of photographs that had strong visual impact and also illustrate some common themes across the collection.

Photographs from Antigua and Barbuda (ICS 97/8/2) include images of industry, government buildings, shipyards, cement works and mining. More typical images include beaches and palm trees²; royal visits; and carnival queens.

The file of photographs from the Bahamas (ICS 97/8/3) focus on tourism, and include pictures of golf courses, fishing, sailing and new hotel and leisure developments. This focus should be no surprise, tourism being the most important sector of the Bahamas economy, nor should it be surprising that most of the images sit firmly within the clichéd sun-sea-and-sand imagery used in Caribbean tourism. (Sheller, 2003, 36)

Tourism began in the Bahamas in the mid-19th century with government support for the construction of hotels and subsidised steamship services. It blossomed once again in the 1920s when Prohibition brought well-to-do American visitors to the islands, but then slumped after Prohibition ended. In 1961 when Cuba (with its glitzy casinos and beach resorts) was closed to American tourists the Bahamas government set out to increase tourist numbers, dredging Nassau’s harbour so it could accommodate up to six cruise ships at a time and building a bridge connecting Nassau to Paradise Island.

In 1949 Bahamas had 32000 tourists visit, by 1968 numbers had grown to over 1 million per year, contributing 71% of GNP and 55% of the government’s total revenue, and employing two-thirds of the labour force. The United States accounted for over 75% of visitor numbers and was the focus of tourism marketing and promotion. (Bahamas Ministry of Tourism and Checchi and Co, 1969; Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, 1971-1980; Archer, 1977) Given this emphasis on the United States market this next photograph I will show is perhaps at first look surprising.

² Mimi Sheller in *Consuming the Caribbean*, “Nature, landscape, and the tropical gaze” discusses the palm tree as a key symbolic icon for the entire Caribbean region with shifting cultural meanings.

A Ministry of Tourism photograph, this is captioned:

“The best of two worlds is evident on this subtropical resort island where double-decker buses straight from the streets of London drop passengers at such picturesque local establishments as The Pub on the Mall at Freeport/Lukaya.

The buses - with signs of their English destinations and British advertisements still intact – and London taxicabs are part of the truly English spirit revealed in this sunny playground”

These photographs can be seen as simple documentation of the tourism industry in the Bahamas, but are more accurately seen as part of a deliberate carefully constructed creation of the image of the Caribbean as a vacation paradise, “a welcoming Caribbean, far removed from life’s pressing anxieties”(Walvin, 1992). The history of the Bahamas is clearly presented as not only sunny and relaxing but also safe and familiar yet different, a little England for American tourists.

An photograph of tourists at the cannons at Nassau is encaptioned “Ancient cannons none of which was ever fired in anger everywhere to be seen as Fort Charlotte, built in 1787 by the then Royal Governor”. The suitably attired guide “regales his audience with a narrative never lacking in humor and witty observations”.

Looking at a selection of photographs from Guyana (ICS 97/8/13) we start again with beauty queens, in this case Jennifer Evan-Wong, Miss Guyana 1970.

Depicted not in swimwear, costume or evening dress, Miss Evan-Wong is shown working on the National Hinterland Self-help Road Project at Mahdia. Accompanying the Presidential party on its tour of the project this photograph and those which follow must be seen not only as documenting the achievements and progress of the self-help movement but as a form of propaganda, within Guyana and nationally, promoting the self-help movement of Guyana’s Co-operative Republic.

Co-operatives, the self-help movement, and later programmes including the Guyana Youth Corps and the National Service programme were emphasized as important instruments in forging a departure from the colonial order and achieving social and economic development, and as pragmatic approaches to socialism. (Lutchman, 1974, 244, 249)

Projects included house construction, building roads, erecting schools, clearing jungle for schools, land settlement and farming, busting open the interior, constructing bridges over creeks and rapids, and establishing youth camps. The first phase of the National Self-Help Road from Mahdia to Annai was completed on 30th December 1971, one year ahead of the original schedule. (Burnham, 1972) The project was one of the most ambitious and prestigious development projects in the Caribbean, and volunteers who worked on project included local high school students, members of the Guyana Defence force, students from universities and colleges in the Caribbean and England, teachers, civil servants, government ministers, the President and the Prime Minister of Guyana. Some authors have noted that the effect of the presence of the Prime Minister inspired and encouraged participation. (Matthews and Danns, 1980)

Conclusion

It is hoped that these examples illustrate the potential value of photographic collections for historians and other social scientists. As documents they provide rich and vivid documentary evidence of not only what happened and how people looked, but also how events and circumstances were depicted and conveyed to audiences. Photographs are documents that have been “created by a will, for a purpose, to convey a message to an audience” (Schwartz, 1995, 42). In reading photographic images their context is crucial to their interpretation. Photographs can not be understood at a single point in their existence, but need to be examined through the processes of production, exchange and consumption; and processes of selection, evaluation, approval and collection, that Barthes has described as the “passage through the filter of culture” (Barthes, 2000, 16)

There are problems associated with working with photographs: photographic collections relating to the Caribbean are dispersed across a large number of archive collections; in many cases, the provenance of the collection, and its history of acquisition by the organisation or person with whom the collection is associated may also not be known; often photographs are not yet listed individually, and at a collection or album level descriptions may merely name a country and an approximate date period. But while the processes of interpretation may often be incomplete, restricted or limited, we should not lose sight of these visions or let them remain hidden.

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