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Supplementary Paper

# THE PROVISION OF RAW MATERIALS FOR AFRICAN HISTORY

by

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I would like to preface this paper with a few remarks concerning the Library of which I have charge and in which the University's collections of Africana are housed.

Rhodes House was built by the Rhodes Trustees and opened in 1929: it was designed by Sir Herbert Baker who was Cecil Rhodes's own architect and was erected to serve three main purposes: firstly, to stand as a memorial to Cecil John Rhodes in the University which he greatly loved and to which a large part of the inspiration of his life may be traced; secondly, to serve as a centre for the advanced study of the social, political and economic development, past and present, of the British Empire and Commonwealth, of Africa and of the United States of America; and thirdly, to provide the Rhodes Scholarship system with suitable headquarters and the Oxford Secretary of the Trust with a residence. It is to the second of these functions that this paper is mainly devoted. The contribution of Rhodes House to the needs of Oxford as a place of education and learning is represented by its library, reading room, lecture hall and seminar rooms: nowhere are there more ample facilities for Commonwealth, African and American studies.

The Library contains some 450,000 manuscripts, books, periodicals, government publications, microfilms and maps, and is a department of the Bodleian, the University Library. Accordingly all material dealing with the Commonwealth (with certain exceptions), with Africa and with the United States has been transferred from the Bodleian to Rhodes House, and all new British publications relating to these areas are similarly transferred as they are received at the copyright library. Rhodes House thus enjoys the privilege of receiving copies of all books published in the United Kingdom within its own field, with the added advantage of having the books concentrated instead of being dispersed in a general collection. Material published outside Britain is purchased from University grants made for this purpose.

I will not detail the types of printed material of which we are in regular receipt, nor list the collections of such material which we consider of prime value and importance as I am anxious to proceed to the main purpose of this paper - a brief survey of the archival collections in Rhodes House and the mechanics now being employed to augment normal intake by the inception of a University Project designed to obtain what diaries and papers still remain in the personal possession of former administrators of Britain's colonial territories so far as they relate to Africa.

I want to lay the emphasis on the word "provision" in the title of my paper. The function of the Oxford University Colonial Records Project is to provide. Material cannot be provided unless it is first obtained and this involves a great deal of detective work. Search, discovery, rescue and administration - all these are essential parts of the Project Organiser's work.

The Director is a former administrative officer in Tanganyika who was later the editor of "Corona", a colonial service journal: his Assistant has seen service in Malaya, the Gold Coast and Cyprus. While I am ultimately the custodian of this material, you will understand that I work in the closest co-operation with the officers of the Project and I speak now in the voice of us all.

The decision to set up an organization to find and preserve papers on the British colonial period was taken after much thought by many people over a considerable length of time. They realised that the speed with which British colonial rule was ending might endanger the supply of historical material in the years ahead.

In many of the countries concerned, written evidence might be scanty and what there was might well disappear in places ill-equipped with, or totally deficient in, archival skills and public record offices. Many official papers would, of course, remain in the safe custody of the Governments concerned; many would be found in Britain - in the Colonial Office, for example. But inevitably much that was not thus secured would be lost for ever unless action were taken to arrest processes of deterioration and destruction.

Where else, then, apart from Government and other institutional centres, where one was entitled to presume a large degree of safety, might material for history repose? The answer was obvious: in the hands, or the minds, of those who had actually been part of the colonial period - the men and women who had lived and worked in the colonies. There were still thousands of them alive and comparatively easy to trace. Would it be worth while trying to tap this potential source of historical material? Here let me say that although the Project has at present means only to seek for written material, we are aware of the potential value of recording reliable oral memories and we hope that it may be possible to set up a subsidiary organization for this purpose.

As I have said, many people were asking themselves if it would be worth while to look for material in private hands and at the end of 1962 a small but useful meeting was held in London, attended by - among others - Dame Margery Perham and Lord Boyd, then Chairman of the Royal Commonwealth Society and a former Secretary of State for the Colonies. The result was that the present Director was asked if he would see what could be done over an experimental period of six months, working from Oxford.

Mr. John Tawney had been for over 30 years in the Colonial Service and had been lucky enough to make a great number of contacts among people likely to provide material. He was given a chance to see if these contacts would 'pay off' when asked about any papers in their possession.

They did. I do not think any of us were particularly hopeful at the start, but in fact a surprisingly large number of people declared themselves as having papers of some sort.

After three months in a borrowed room at the Oxford Institute of Commonwealth Studies it was possible to report encouraging results to a conference held at Nuffield College in April 1963. This conference was attended by representatives from other Universities and institutions and it was agreed that Oxford would be a suitable centre in which to set up a University project for discovering papers in private possession and preserving them for use in research into the history of the British Colonial Period.

Now, at this stage I must make it clear that although Oxford has been approved by representatives of many interests as a centre for this work and has now indeed become such a centre, it lays no special claims to colonial papers. Of course, we hope that people will deposit them there; of course, researchers will be helped most if they can find comprehensive collections in a single place and are thus saved the costly necessity of pursuing clues here, there and everywhere; of course, also, the Project, existing for the purpose of finding papers and getting them, does have machinery which enables it to concentrate on just that job. But if people wish to deposit their

papers in some other safe depository where they will become available to research, well and good _ but we do ask that we should be able to exchange information, receive photocopies and so on. In short, we want to be co-operative with every other responsible body interested in the same field.

So then, the Project was conceived but its birth depended on funds. The first grant came at once, through the generosity of Lord Boyd, subsequently backed by certain British institutions such as the Goldsmiths Company. Then the African Studies Association of America gave greatly appreciated help and the Rhodes Trustees made it financially possible for us to employ three Archivists. Finally - finally to date, that is for we are still both needy and hopeful - the Nuffield Foundation and the British Academy have done what we most urgently required, given us the means to expand ourselves to a size more compatible with the amount of work to be done.

Now, before you pick on the word 'expand' and begin to murmur "Empire-building" or "Parkinson's Law", let me put the matter into perspective. We are dealing with some 15,000 known names. Although this paper refers to Africa only we are, in fact, covering all former colonies with one or two exceptions. Our territorial range is matched by our appetite for subject matter; we are omnivorous - diaries, reports, correspondence, memoranda, minutes of conferences, everything that is likely to assist research in this particular field. We are as ready to take in the papers of a farmer as those of an administrative officer, of an agricultural expert as of an educationist, of missionaries as of traders. And although our searches are largely in the United Kingdom, trails often lead us overseas.

For some two and a half years we operated on this scale with one organiser and one secretary. Now we have doubled ourselves, but perhaps you will agree that two organisers and two secretaries are still a fairly modest staff for this vast field. We have increased our archival staff to cope more quickly with the accumulations awaiting preparation. With these essential increases in staff we may face difficulties of accommodation and nothing is more calculated to stop the Project in its tracks than a failure to house it properly.

But now let us go back to the birth of the organization, at the time of the Nuffield conference in April 1963.

Here was Oxford accepted as a centre for a project. Here was the Institute of Commonwealth Studies agreeing to house it and help it in various ways, and here was the Committee for Commonwealth Studies as the University body to which it was responsible. And here were the people to be most closely associated with it in all its undertakings - Dame Margery Perham, the Beit Professor and the University Reader in British Commonwealth History. Add the name of the Rhodes House Librarian and you have the Working Party available at short notice to decide upon day-to-day problems.

The repository for the Project's acquisitions is the Rhodes House Library, a dependant, as I have said, of the Bodleian Library.

If speed is necessary in preparing papers <u>after</u> we have got them, how much more is it essential <u>before</u> they are obtained - in our searches, in fact. The whole essence of this operation is speed and the widest, fastest possible casting of the net, before people die, before papers are lost for ever. We continue to receive letters which say: 'If only I had known of the Project before we moved into a smaller house and had to destroy all our papers because there was no room for them', or 'When my husband died I felt I must destroy all his diaries because I did not think anyone would be interested in them', or 'Your letter arrived just too late. I had just finished burning forty-five years of personal history in three African

territories'. If such letters do not spell out the need for speed, what does? We have money enough at present to keep us going for about three years: we have indeed got to hustle.

I told you that we had some 15,000 names to work through. The great majority come from lists of Colonial Service pensioners, plus a considerable amount of 'snowballing' - people giving us the names of others. You may wonder why we plough through them all when obviously many will be unproductive: how can we know who will be unproductive until we ask them? We have been lucky in that the Directors know a large number of the people approached and some, of course, are obvious targets while thousands are just names - Mr. Brown from Nigeria, Mr. Smith from Tanganyika. What are they? Former Provincial Commissioners, Sanitary Inspectors, Secretaries to Ministries, Policemen ... ? We do not know until we hear from them (and not always then!), but we do know that material often lies in the hands of those whom we had no reason to suspect of having it.

Perhaps I ought to give you an idea of the mechanics of the work. They are quite simple. A name becomes a card in an index cabinet and the card becomes a dossier, leading step by step through the hunt to the kill - the kill being the final deposit of the papers concerned in my Library.

The clerical work is formidable. Do not imagine that it is just a question of a couple of letters and here is a nice bundle of papers in the Project office. For a single individual there may be pages of letters in our files, a trail of telephone calls and visits to his house (visits, incidentally, are an essential and rewarding part of the job, quite apart from their use in jogging memories, because a personal touch, a willingness to listen to other men's talk, and an offer to transport material in one's own car, there and then, are potent factors in attracting papers our way). In one year the Director drove some 3,000 miles and visited 125 people in their homes.

But parting people from their papers often promotes procrastination. Recently we received a quite useful set of papers: they had been offered a year ago, but after the offer it took six letters, two telephone calls, a rather sharp postcard and a couple of visits to Sussex to collect what the donor had promised to send off at once. The sudden paralysis which can descend on those who have made enthusiastic promises can be very saddening.

Name cards are filed in their respective cabinets - awaiting a first reply, eliminated where a reply has shown there is no material, comfortably reposing with a red C on them to indicate that they have been completed and the papers have gone into the Library, or stacked with the several hundreds on which action is proceeding. All 'live' cards must, of course, be reviewed at regular intervals to bring them up to date. Incidentally, when material goes to the Library the Project Office enters up a running list of accessions under different subject headings. This allows prompt information to be given to enquirers that they may know in advance if papers are open or restricted, either from legal necessity or in accordance with donor's wishes.

We are now nearing our 1,400th deposit in Rhodes House Library - that means 1,400 separate hunts brought to the kill through all the different processes of our search. A single deposit can range in size from several packing cases of papers to one solitary item, from a long run of diaries to a few personal letters.

How do we choose what to take and what to reject? We act on the principle that rejection is tantamount to irrevocable loss, and that we ought to leave it to the historian of the future to decide what is valuable. Of course, we do reject everything that is patently unsuitable and to save extra work and expense we try to do the rejection before material reaches us by asking for details in advance.

I think we have taken in very little dross. Of course, we can make mistakes. There was the man who told us he had diaries with which he would not part. From what he said in his letters, they sounded valuable. We held out the bait of a place in Rhodes House Library. He took the bait and showered upon us a series of little notebooks saying that he felt honoured to think that his diaries would be preserved for posterity in such a place. Well might he feel honoured. After many blank pages we found the most exciting entry: it read - "Had a puncture, very muddy but managed to change the wheel". We were committed now, so we took the diaries and placed them under complete embargo so that no-one would ever discover our mistake. I wished the donor no ill but I must confess to a certain relief recently to see his obituary notice.

Among the papers we receive, some go elsewhere. Purely Palestine material is channelled to St. Antony's College Middle East Centre. We co-operate with the British Association of Malaysia which has the Royal Commonwealth Society Library behind it. The University of London's Institute of Commonwealth Studies has taken over the search for and collection of Ceylon papers. We keep in touch with Durham University which has a Sudan archive. On the comparatively rare occasions when we find we have taken in scientific material, we steer it to the appropriate branch of the Bodleian Library.

The number of people asking about our acquisitions for work of their own, books, theses, guides to manuscripts and so on, is increasing and this, of course, is the ultimate justification for the Project's existence.

So there you have some idea of what we are trying to do and how we do it. May I finish by telling you of a few of our finds, but firstly let me remind you again that not all of the papers are immediately open for use.

As I said earlier, we cast our net widely and one of the exciting things about the job is that we never know when we shall get a fish or what sort it may be.

We could hardly believe it was true when we found that Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen had not made any previous arrangement for the disposal of his remarkable collection which includes some 70 years of diaries of service in Africa, Palestine and India, and told us we could have them if we would send a decent van to pick them up. We sent a most respectable van and the volumes, most beautifully bound, are now safely tucked away in Rhodes House. It was also exciting to find that statements that no Kenya diaries of John Ainsworth still existed were false and to get them, with other papers, from a Lancashire address. Exciting, also, to find the whereabouts of original Samuel Baker diaries (though so far this news is as far as we have got). A 1905 diary written by Howard Ross when he was chasing gun-runners in an area now drowned by the Volta Dam came to us after a lunch with this fine old man (who, alas, has since died) in a pub at Thame. Highgate Hill supplied the collection of C.A. Woodhouse's Nigerian letters. A timbered house in Herefordshire yielded a set of early 1900 letters covering a famous row over a grant of land in Kenya, and Sussex produced (incidentally, from a grand-daughter of Sir John Kirk) an original journal of Pringle written when he was surveying the Uganda railway in 1891 and a fine set of photographs of the completed line in 1903. Sussex also gave us a file on the 1906 Satiru rising in Nigeria with letters by Lugard and Burdon.

We have all Sir Philip Mitchell's, Sir Thomas Scrivenor's and Sir Edward Denham's diaries and also 12 volumes of unpublished autobiographical material of Sir Claud Hollis, a large collection of the papers of Sir John Chancellor and Sir Bernard Carr's unpublished Nigerian reminiscences, 1919-49. The hand-list of Sir Gordon Lethem's large collection has just

been completed by our Archivists. There are many district reports, handing-over notes and memoranda on different departmental activities and also a number of unpublished autobiographical works. Letters from a woman welfare worker on the West Coast and a great and growing mass of what we may call 'settler' papers from the East. Only recently we received what was described as a 'thumping great steel trunk' with the initials E.G. upon it. What travels that trunk may have seen, for it once belonged to Ernest Gedge and inside were his papers on Uganda with letters from Portal, Bishop Tucker, Macdonald, Emin Pasha, Lugard and others.

The Coryndon papers are with us and we have recently received those of Arthur Creech Jones, a former Secretary of State for the Colonies.

Our Index includes the names not only of those from whom we know we shall get material during their lifetime but of several well-known persons who have bequeathed their papers to the Project.

I must here emphasise that I have referred so far only to material acquired by the Colonial Records Project and deposited in Rhodes House Library during the past 4 years. For 35 years previously Rhodes House has been quietly building up its archival material and already possesses such collections as the archives of the British South Africa Company from 1890-1903; those of the Anti-Slavery Society since 1820; the correspondence, papers or diaries of Horace Waller, Sir John Molteno, Richard Thornton, F.G. Hall, G. Cawston, of the Royal Niger Company from 1888-1930; of Lord Lugard, Sir Gerald Portal, E.J.H. Russell, Sir Richard Bourke, George, Lord Macartney, Sir Godfrey Lagden, to list just a few of those of mainly African interest.

Funds at the moment are insufficient to launch a full programme of oral recording of memories, but we have received invaluable advice from Professor Allan Nevins who was responsible for the establishment of the Oral History Collection at Columbia. It is unfortunate that we have not yet acquired the means to mine this field which is subject to continuing and rapid erosion, but the financial resources needed for this work have to be viewed in relation to the life of the Project as a whole.

I end as I began. The work of the organization is to provide material for history and we hope that historians will find that our detective and rescue operations have been of value to them. And I would add just that if any organisation wishes its name to be added to our mailing list for the lists of material received and which are compiled three times annually, or would like to have copies of the 12 lists so far issued, I shall be pleased to ensure their receipt of these if they will give me their addresses. And if this is an occasion for reciprocity, I need hardly say that similar lists from them would be warmly welcomed at Rhodes House Library with the ultimate aim of initiating an exchange of photocopies of our respective holdings.