



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Hidden Histories of Exploration

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Speaker 1: Welcome. This is a podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Interviewer: I'm here at the Royal Geographical Society at the launch of the 'Hidden Histories of Exploration Exhibition, and I'm talking to Felix Driver principal investigator of the AHRC funded research project of which this exhibition is a part.

Felix, thanks very much for the sneak preview of the exhibition. It looks fascinating. What was the principle question or questions behind your research project and this exhibition?

Felix Driver: I guess the principle question was 'Can we think about the history of exploration differently?' Think about what those great feats of exploration and discovery depended on, especially locally. And the answer is a whole range of kinds of support and guidance and mediation, and enabling activities. But also, in a sense leading and guiding activities that enable explorers to do their exploration.

Interviewer: What comes across in our exhibition is the importance of these explorations for ethnography, for botany, for zoology, geography,

linguistics and so on. These were important partnerships between Western explorers and local inhabitants weren't they?

Felix Driver: Absolutely. One of the things that we wanted to do was the show that exploration was a shared venture experienced very differently by different people, in which people engaged for very different reasons and in which there were often unequal relationships. But this was a collective venture and not the work of lone explorers as they often like to portray themselves.

However one of the things that emerged through the research was that these people weren't in fact always local. That they may have been represented as being local but often they came from very different parts of the country that were working in. And so in a sense they were exploring as well.

Interviewer: Another thing that comes across very strongly is that there were very different kinds of representations of those helpers if you like. Some were depicted as faithful followers, others with quite romanticised views, and others as hindrances to the explorers. There was a whole range of representations there aren't there?

Felix Driver: It obviously depends on the kind of material you're looking at and there were some very strong, simple stereotypes of, on the one hand, the faithful follower. The servant or sometimes the officer. So these kind of ideas taken from other contexts applied within the context of exploration. Talking about loyalty, faithfulness and so on. On the other hand there was the stereotype of, if you like, the unfaithful, the deserter, the betrayer.

Those figures were very important in the way that exploration was represented in literature, in expedition narratives but also visually. But once you look at other kinds of materials; perhaps diaries, perhaps letters, perhaps sketches, perhaps photographs as well – especially the ones that weren't published, you can gain access to a whole variety of figures which don't necessarily correspond to those easy stereotypes.

Interviewer: Of course this whole issue in a sense is really coloured by our post-colonial views now, deeply problematic some of them, some of these explorations and the depictions of them. You have a very interesting section in your exhibition about Stanley's explorations in the Congo which really shows that counter-currents were actually there, here in the UK, at the time.

Felix Driver: That's absolutely right. I think in my work previously on Stanley and in this exhibition I'm very interested in the fact that there was a diversity of positions and views. The fact that people argued about exploration, what it was for, what its effects were. What the relationship between exploration and empire was. And also what were the rights, as they were understood, of local people. And this very hotly debated in the case of Stanley. And the exhibition tries to talk about some of the materials here at the Royal Geographical Society that allow us access to understanding the different positions taken up.

If I can give one example of the sort of material that exists here in the Society. There's an extraordinary manuscript containing Henry Wellcome's notes for a speech that he made in December 1890 in defence of Stanley. As far as I know this speech wasn't published although there were reports of it and gives an insight into the thinking of one of Stanley's most loyal defenders, Henry Wellcome.

Interviewer: The exhibition is full of lots of examples and lots of colourful stories. What's your favourite?

Felix Driver: Well to identify one item out of the hundred that we've got in the exhibition is quite a challenge but if I start with the image on the poster; this is a painting by Thomas Baines. It's an oil painting and the title is, "A Malay Native from Batavia at Coepang (Kupang). And it depicts a local official. Now we know nothing else about him from the painting and until now we've known nothing about him but through the research that we've been able to do – myself and Lowri Jones, research assistant and Royal Holloway, we've been able to identify him as a Muhammad Jen Jamain and he was a subject of another painting, this time a watercolour by Baines.

And Baines tells the story in his journal of how he came to paint first the watercolour and then to ask Muhammad Jen Jamain to return on the Monday after the weekend for an oil painting wearing appropriately Malay costume. And so what Muhammad did was to go out and acquire some apparently authentic costume for the portrait. And they're both wonderful images. Each slightly different.

The oil painting a little bit more formally composed obviously. But they have one thing in common and that's the shoes. Muhammad is wearing European shoes and this was one thing that Baines complained about on both occasions. So I think this is probably my favourite image. In terms of the exhibition it shows us something about the different kinds of encounters that took place and the different kinds of connections that explorers and travellers would have locally.

Interviewer: The video of the 1922 expedition is really fascinating and I suppose Everest looms large in the exhibition doesn't it? Because of the importance of the Sherpas to the final ascent to the summit of Everest.

Felix Driver: That's absolutely right. The history of mountaineering and the history of exploration are tied closely together. The Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club combined together to mount a whole series of expeditions from 1921 through to the 1950's and the successful ascent of Everest. And the materials in the archives here are really quite extraordinary. There's a huge volume of correspondence, of objects, of photographs, and also of film which is part of the RGS collections but looked after by the British Film Institute. And it's through the BFI that we've been able to show extracts from this extraordinary film made in 1922 that really gives an insight into the experience of this expedition and its representation in film at the time.

Interviewer: You mention the archive here and that's been crucial of course to your research project. It's a vast archive isn't it? There are some two million maps and artefacts of all kinds. Tell us, how did you begin to unlock that vast archive for your purposes here in this exhibition?

Felix Driver: Well that's a very good question. I mean two million or so objects, half a million photographs. We can't really relate to these numbers. They're vast. One of the means, one of the enablers of research in this area and this institution today is the fact that the catalogue has been put online. That we now have, for the first time, a kind of handle on a lot of these materials that we simply didn't have before.

There's also an online catalogue of the manuscripts as well. And partly because of that we can begin to search through these vast warehouse of materials in a coherent way but it's still an enormous task. And for this exhibition we're essentially scratching the surface in one way, in the sense that we wanted to take a very wide range of different kinds of expedition, different kinds of place, different kinds of period.

Different kinds of situations in which explorers and locals and intermediaries interacted. And that required us to look at a variety of contexts from the Amazon to the Arctic, from Africa to India and the Pacific. And we deliberately wanted that wide range of situations so that we'd get at the different contexts. But also the similarities. The fact that, for example, one of the things that emerges through the Everest material, but also in the case of African exploration, and also to some extent the case of the Amazon, is that the same guides would work for very different expeditions over time, perhaps over decades. And in a sense would have a kind of career as a guide or as an interpreter. Those kinds of themes drove our research. We followed those themes through the collections, across different kinds of materials. So if you like it's a preliminary survey that we've done rather than the final answer to the question.

Interviewer: The exhibition is now open to the public. It's free. What other outputs of your research project have there been?

Felix Driver: Obviously the exhibition is a major venture but it is over in December so the first thing we wanted to do was have a travelling exhibit that would tour different venues, and that will be available in 2010 onwards. The second thing and very important part of the project is the website which is partly an online version of the exhibition, very nicely designed by Daniel Stoker. But partly it also contains many

more images that we can fit in to the exhibition in different galleries. And it contains also a lot of research resources for other researchers be they students at school or university, or researchers. So it contains a whole wealth of other materials that will survive the end closure of the exhibition itself in December. And the Society will use this I'm sure as a platform for developing other kinds of research materials on their website.

In addition to that we have a book, an illustrated publication, 'Hidden Histories of Exploration' that's available. It has a full catalogue of the exhibition as well as an interpretative essay. And there are also various kinds of events including events engaging with the wider public, but also a specialist research workshop that we're holding later this term. So a range of different sorts of activities connected with the exhibition.

Interviewer: Well best of luck with all of that. Many congratulations on a terrific exhibition and thank you for speaking to us.

Felix Driver: Thank you.

Speaker 1: That was a podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. For further information please go to www.ahrc.ac.uk. Thank you for listening.

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