The Sugar Heritage Village and Museum Project: Salvaging the History of the Trinidadian People

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ABSTRACT
This paper briefly summarizes the history of the sugar industry in Trinidad, an industry which has culminated into the Sugar Heritage Village and Museum Project. The industry played an intrinsic role in the lives of all the people of Trinidad and in shaping the course of history for the island. With the ending of an era which was Caroni (1975) Limited, this paper seeks to highlight a Project which seeks to salvage the remnants of a rich past in the form of archival documents and heritage material emanating from over a century of toiling on the Trinidad’s sugar estates.

Keywords: Karen E. Eccles, Sugar Heritage Village and Museum, Archives and Records, Sugar History, Tourism.

INTRODUCTION
The sugar industry in Trinidad has had a tumultuous past and some may say came to a tragic end in 2003 with the closing of Caroni (1975) Limited. The latter was successor to the original Caroni (1937) Limited established by the English investment company, Tate and Lyle. The story of this industry, which is indeed the story of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and the rest of the Caribbean, is being sustained by a project called the Sugar Heritage Village and Museum Project, which was chaired by eminent historian, Professor Brinsley Samaroo from 2011 to 2015. The Project which is currently “located within the Brechin Castle compound in Couva, a compound that served as the once bustling administrative nucleus of the sugar industry” (Ministry of Tourism [2011], 6) utilizes the 530 acres of space. It has an archives and research centre, a museum and an area intended for the creation of African, Chinese, Portuguese and Indian villages to highlight the various ethnicities whose history is embedded in the sugar plantations.
The project launched in 2011 in a formal ceremony by the then Prime Minister Kamla Persad Bissessar, seeks to preserve the heritage and the memory of the sugar industry. According to the Ministry of Tourism ([2011]) publication on the project, “[t]he Sugar Heritage Village and Museum Project is aimed at capturing, archiving, preserving and showcasing the documented and remaining legacy of the industry within the context of the multiplicity of its operations. It also aims at recreating a living legacy of the many traditions that characterized the soul of the industry and of those who laboured from generation to generation during its existence” (6). This article provides an overview of the Sugar Heritage project inclusive of the archival collection which is being managed by the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago. It also gives the background to the sugar industry of Trinidad and Tobago to allow readers to appreciate the scope of the materials held in the collection and note the potential areas for collection development.

**Background to the Trinidad and Tobago Sugar Industry**

The sugar cane plant was first planted in South East Asia and spread to the Middle East and the Mediterranean, where the Moors eventually took it to the Barbary Coast and Southern Spain (Sheridan 1974, 99). From the Canary Islands, where the plant was introduced by the Spanish around 1480, Christopher Columbus took the first sugar cane plant and cultivators to the island of Hispaniola in 1493 (Sheridan 1974) . However it was under the Dutch in Brazil where the plant was introduced around 1520 that sugar-cane production in the Americas was hastened, quickly spreading by Dutchmen who were expelled from Brazil, to the English and French islands of the Lesser Antilles (Sheridan 1974). Of all the English colonies, it was in Barbados that the plant was first introduced and its raw sugar successfully marketed internationally. Sheridan makes the assessment that “Barbados was the first English colony in the Caribbean to launch a successful sugar industry. From an island of yeomen farmers and small planters, Barbados in the course of two or three decades became an island of numerous sugar plantations, each of substantial acreage, capital, and slave labour force, and supplying sugar to Europeans on a scale sufficient to affect the level of world sugar prices” (Sheridan 1974, 128). It was Barbados, ‘the
Brightest Jewel in the crown of the British’ which became the “mother colony, the centre to which newly-formed colonies looked for labour, experienced planters, capital, and leadership in matters of imperial politics and trade” (Sheridan 1974, 124).

‘Compared to many of the English-speaking, former British Caribbean colonies, the sugar industry in Trinidad had a very late start. Its history dates back to 1783 when Trinidad was under Spanish rule, and the Frenchman Roume de St. Laurent, who represented a group of Grenadian French planters, made an agreement with the Spanish Governor of Trinidad, known as the Cedula of Population. The Cedula allowed for these wealthy French planters to bring their expertise on plantations, their slaves, and their wealth to the underdeveloped neglected Spanish colony, and in return were given generous concessions of land (of course they now had to pledge their loyalty to Spain and had to be Roman Catholics). It was this agreement under the Spanish monarchy and these French planters which saw the beginnings of the sugar plantation system in Trinidad. The establishment of a number of estates began in 1784 and by 1787, Picot de la Peyrouse had established the first sugar mill at Tragarete estate (Iloo 1992). By 1797 when the British took over the island there were over 150 sugar estates with about 130 mills already established (Iloo 1992).

Forced African labour was crucial for the success of the industry in the early 19th century. However with amelioration and full emancipation of slaves in 1837, planters turned to Chinese and then East Indians from Asia in 1845. East Indian indentureship for work in the sugar industry continued almost unabated until 1920 when pressure groups from India heightened their opposition to the system and on the 1st January that year, indentureship came to an end. East Indians, in Trinidad however constituted the labour force of the sugar industry, in fact until its final closure in the 21st century.

“Between 1783 and 1970 the sugar industry was a bastion of private enterprise not only in Trinidad but throughout the Caribbean” (Francis 2012, 41). Early in the 20th century the giant British company, Tate and Lyle, which was involved in many aspects of the world sugar trade
and whose “global experience included transportation companies, shipping businesses, engineering companies producing machinery for the global sugar industry, technical services companies, bulk storage companies, molasses and rum interests and sundry others” (Francis 2013), had bought all of the larger companies on the island. In 1937 Tate and Lyle purchased the Caroni Sugar Estates (Trinidad) Limited, which had owned the Caroni and Brechin castle estates and later the company also acquired the Waterloo Estates and the Ste Madeline Sugar Company. Francis (2012) claims that between the birth of Caroni Limited in 1937 and 1962, the year Trinidad and Tobago became independent, “this company almost single handedly engulfed the entire sugar industry with the exception of two very small companies...Interestingly the financial prowess of this company was such that, according to French historian Phillip Chalmin, it was able to purchase virtually the entire milling section of Trinidad’s sugar industry in the absence of any monetary assistance from its parent company” (Francis 2012). Nevertheless, at the end of this period there were only three companies left, two minor companies, the Trinidad Sugar Estates Limited at Orange Grove in northern Trinidad, Forres Park in southern Trinidad, and the third dominant company which was Caroni Limited (Francis 2012).

By 1975, Caroni Limited was completely nationalized and the Trinidad government acquired full ownership of what was then known as Caroni (1975) Limited. Interestingly one of the reasons presented to the public for this deal with the British former owners was a “deft government manoeuvre to repatriate to the nation a central part of its history and heritage from a hated foreign owner” (Francis 2012, 64). The successor to Caroni Limited was what survived into the 21st century. From the onset of this acquisition, the government was faced with recurring and new hardships. Francis (2012) itemized these as labour problems, rising production costs, teething difficulties associated with the nationalization process and poor harvest due to bad weather. He also indicated that the state would have accepted the burden of a financially weakened sugar industry. This was in the midst of Europe’s increasing beet sugar production and the lowering of prices worldwide, as well as the 1974 oil boom which stimulated an increase in wages and other costs in Trinidad which “fermented worker unrest amongst Caroni Limited’s workers” (Francis 2012, 55).
One advantage of the acquisition of Caroni Limited company was the 75,000 acres of prime arable land which the government inherited (Ministry of Tourism [2011]). This served well for other ventures which were attempted in an effort to revive the company, such as a diversification programme into agro and animal farming which began in 1982. Much of the land, as well as the properties were also given out to staff and management with the closure of Caroni (1975) Limited in 2003. Many of these properties are located within the Brechin Castle compound which later became the site of the proposed Sugar Heritage Village and Museum Project. One condition of acquiring these properties was that the owners had to maintain the original state of the houses and there were to be no extensions or renovations to the original structures without prior approval. So much of the original architecture remained intact.

The Sugar Heritage Village and Museum
The Sugar Heritage Village and Museum project entails utilizing the remaining properties and land space at Brechin Castle for the creation of a centre reflective of the history of the industry and the people whose history is embedded within it. The Project is an initiative which started in 2011 by the government of Trinidad and Tobago. It was led by the Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with the Ministry of the Arts and Multiculturalism, the Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, and other Governmental Ministries. Offering support were past staff of Caroni (1975) Limited, the University of Trinidad and Tobago, The National Gas Company (NGC), the National Energy Company of Trinidad and Tobago (NEC), the University of the West Indies, and the European Union (EU). The multi-faceted aim of the project is for the creation of a Sugar Museum at Sevilla House, the estate house where the manager once lived. There are also plans to create a sugar heritage village, comprising artefacts, rolling rock and railway lines, an archive and documentation centre, a replica of a small functioning sugar factory at the Brechin Castle factory, a handicraft and artisan centre, sporting facilities utilizing Sevilla Club, the social club which was strictly only for white management and their friends and families. The master plan includes an auditorium and cultural centre, a conference centre, a small guest house facility, a visitor information centre, restaurant facilities, as well as small plots of land for agricultural
activities and horticulture (Ministry of Tourism [2011]). Of these however, to date, only the Museum at Sevilla House and the Archive and Documentation Centre have been completed.

The Sugar Archives Centre, Brechin Castle Couva

The Archives and Documentation Centre, now named “The Sugar Archives Centre” which is open to the public for research, houses a rich collection of print resources related to the sugar industry in Trinidad. Since 2005 The University of Trinidad and Tobago had undertaken the task of collecting the records of the industry and storing them at the Brechin Castle factory in Couva. The main sources for the collection of these records have been:

- the Usine Ste. Madeleine factory, operational since the 1870’s under various British ownerships,
- The Brechin Castle factory, opened by Tate and Lyle in 1940 under its nomenclature, Caroni (1937) Limited in time for the 1940 sugar-cane crop harvest,
- The Waterloo Estate, which was an experimental station which functioned as Tate and Lyle’s sugar brain, conducting experiments in molasses and rum production, pest control, and varieties of cane, animal production and other scientific work,
- as well as sources from an oral records project, which was conducted in 2011 and 2012 among various categories of sugar workers.
A great deal of the work done to preserve the records collected from these sites involved the task of cleaning and sorting. The task was started with volunteers from the University of Trinidad and Tobago and On-the-Job-trainees under the direction of Professor Samaroo. Two Caribbean archivists were hired to do a short project and produced an initial report on the state of the records along with some recommendations. Eventually, the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago was invited by Professor Samaroo to take responsibility for the archives and records of Caroni. They have retained this responsibility (Belfon, 2016).

The building being used as the Archival and Documentation center at Brechin Castle was once the estate clinic for workers. Under Professor Samaroo’s chairmanship the building was renovated, cleaned and air-conditioned to house the documents and to provide an area for researchers. The collection, preservation, sorting and organizing of these records will make it possible for a rich collection of organized material to become available to scholars conducting research on all aspects of the sugar industry. Some of these resources include the following:

- Scientific records of experiments done at the Waterloo Station, including books, journals and newspaper clippings all pertaining to the work of that station
• An extensive collection of photographs, documentaries, pamphlets, newspaper clippings and ephemera such as advertisements for cultural celebrations, invitation cards and signatures of visitors over the years.

• Estate records, showing the names of workers on various estates, job specifications, rates of pay and attendance registers.

• Trade union negotiation documents such as minutes of meetings, records of negotiations and litigation procedures since the 1930’s when Tate and Lyle invested in Trinidad

• Documents on the relations with the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture and its successor The University of the West Indies, relating to joint experimental work and the training of St. Augustine students particularly in agriculture and sugar technology, as well as the reports generated by ICTA and UWI academics over the years.

• Documents relating to the cane farmers negotiations with Caroni Limited and issues of the journal produced by the cane farmers, called The Canefarmer, which was published after the formation of the Trinidad island-wide Cane Farmers’ Association in 1957.

• Books on the sugar industry, international sugar conferences, records of visitors to Brechin Castle and reference papers for use by administrators and managers of estates.

• Medical records of thousands of patients who regularly visited the estate clinic at Brechin Castle

• Records of major institutions which were set up at Brechin Castle for example the Sevilla School, an exclusive primary school established for children of managerial staff and Sevilla Club which was an entertainment centre for Caroni’s mainly expatriate staff. There are also records related to the Manager’s House and Office which was Sevilla House, the site for the Sugar Museum.

• A rich resource of land utilization maps and reports such as sugar railway maps and general transport arrangements on various estates.
Professor Samaroo was able to salvage the documents, photographs and museum pieces which were literally strewn about. The project to save the Caroni archives has engaged several partners inclusive of the University of the West Indies. There has also been close collaboration between the Sugar Archives Centre and The Alma Jordan Library at the University of the West Indies in which hundreds of photographs were digitized by the Digital Library Services Centre of the Information Technology Services Unit, the Alma Jordan Library\(^1\). The photographs from this digitization project are available for public viewing through The University of the West Indies institutional repository, UWIspace. A number of other endeavors were undertaken such as the creation of a documentary called “King Sugar” to promote the project; and the refurbishment of two other abandoned buildings to house the sugar records. In addition a website was also created to highlight the Sugar Heritage Village and Museum Project.

\(^1\) The Collection is available at the link: [http://uwispace.sta.uwi.edu/dspace/handle/2139/14668](http://uwispace.sta.uwi.edu/dspace/handle/2139/14668)
Despite the herculean efforts by the initial committee, since the launch of the project in 2011, the major aspects of the project have been halted and are currently under review. The construction works on Sevilla House, the only estate house of its kind left in Trinidad have been discontinued until a review has been completed by the current government of Trinidad and Tobago. However, staff under the direction of the National Archives are still involved in cleaning the paper documents to prevent further deterioration. There is optimism that there will be the re-commencement of the project and execution of the master plan which includes commercial spaces for rent, boutique hotels, the revival of the sporting activities on the compound, and the completion of Sevilla Club for rental purposes, and the other vision for the 530 acres. The effort was to create a space where the rich legacy of the sugar industry and the different ethnicities of people who toiled on the estates can be captured and remembered, as well as to provide an historical space for tourism.

The grand vision of the project when completed has the potential of placing Trinidad as a central location for the re-creation and the re-living of an era that had so defined the entire Caribbean. Walking through the corridors of Sevilla House, where the museum is now located, and glancing at where acres of sugar-cane once grew or where barracks were once established in a location that forced them to always look up at the Great House, causes one to appreciate what our forefathers endured. The establishment of the villages of the various ethnicities would be a reminder to all of the relevance of the sugar industry to their present lives.

The salvaging of the records and documents dating back to the early 19th century has been fortunate, a major contribution for research into the cultural heritage of Trinidad. A rich resource has been made available for delving into various aspects of this foundational industry, an industry responsible for shaping the course of Trinidadian history and people, and hopefully with the accessibility of these resources, new studies will emerge on the sugar industry in Trinidad.
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