'From Jamaica to England Part 2: The secret of the secondary source'

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From Jamaica to England – Part 2: The secret of the secondary source

The Roving Reader Files

The next instalment in our Roving Reader’s journey from Jamaica to England, through the primary and secondary sources in our library collection.

Delia Jarrett-Macauley unearths Una Marson

When you’re planning a journey, what do you do?

Some people just throw a few things in a bag, jump on the first train and go to sleep. Others want to look out the window, take in the scenery and understand what they’re looking at. If this is you, you’re just the candidate to dip into a secondary source.

Secondary sources are wonderful things. Some are huge and fat, others quite slim. Nearly all are written by kind souls who love to inflict on themselves the hassle of assembling and making sense of piles of information, just so people like you and me can become enlightened. Secondary sources give us firm foundations for understanding the context and broad issues of a subject.

Massive, densely written tomes with very small print are available (we have a few in the Centre). They’re great if you like that sort of thing, but I have to admit, they’re not always that entertaining. I like to start off with well-written, well-researched biographies. Biographies are secondary sources, because they’re written by someone about someone else. The best do all the contextualisation we need, whilst at the same time holding our interest by focusing on the life experience of a particular individual.
For our journey from Jamaica to England, there can be few better starting points than Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s *The Life of Una Marson, 1905-65* (published 1998).

As it happens, Una Marson was quite a woman. A pioneer on many fronts, in the late 1920s she was the first Jamaican female editor and publisher and by the early 1940s the first Black female programme maker at the BBC. An accomplished playwright, poet and journalist, she rubbed shoulders professionally with literary giants like George Orwell and TS Elliot, whilst at 1930s feminist conferences she was usually the only Black female colonial subject in a sea of white faces.

Una even acted as exiled Ethiopian Emperor Haile Salassie’s secretary at the League of Nations in 1936, as he begged in vain for help against the might of Italian dictator Mussolini’s Fascist troops.

Una Marson had a very public profile in her lifetime, but little was known about her as a person. That didn’t deter Delia Jarrett-Macauley, who interviewed anyone she could find that had known Una, and scoured the world to unearth overlooked Una-related material. See what I mean about hassle? What she found was fascinating.

The resulting book not only brought Una to life, but also charted her footsteps through key events in the ongoing development of the troubled relationship between Jamaica and Britain through the first half of the twentieth century. By learning about Una, we learn about Jamaica, and how it was that so many of its people were driven to find their way so far overseas.

This contextualisation is what is of most interest to us just now, in preparing for our journey. So what kind of things do we learn?

Central themes recur again and again, including the distinctions between city and countryside; rich and poor; educated and uneducated; black, brown and white. Because Una was a journalist she witnessed and wrote about the consequences of the great economic depressions of the 1920s and 1930s - the mass unemployment, riots, strikes against big sugar interests, dire circumstances of the rural poor. With her, we find ourselves in the thick of agitation towards political and land reform, leading up to the push for independence, finally achieved in 1962.

Through Una, we also come to see more clearly the structural bonds linking the intellectuals, as well as the labourers in colonial societies, to what was optimistically called the ‘Mother Country’. We learn that experience in England could inflict incapacitating psychological wounds, yet for many it was the very process of struggling with and enduring the emotional, spiritual and physical tests thrown up by migration that finally brought a sense of pride in being Black.

Yes, secondary sources are wonderful things. Books like this biography of Una Marson can equip us with what we need to make the most of our journey.
Next time we’ll get to grips with primary sources and look at a Jamaican autobiography. Hold onto your hats!

The Centre has an excellent collection of secondary sources covering Jamaican history. Come in and take a look. Incidentally, Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s *The Life of Una Marson, 1905-1965* was published in 1998 very close to home, by Manchester University Press.