

Searching for Sugar in Archives: Summary of activities and outcomes

Working as a research assistant on *the Living Histories of Sugar in Scotland & the West Indies* project, I have collated materials related to sugar and the slave trade from different archival sources. For the Scottish side of the project, I have used the School of Scottish Studies Archive (University of Edinburgh), and their online collection – Tobar an Dualchais – to find sugar-related songs, stories, and recollections of Gaelic-speaking and English-speaking Scots. I have collated materials from Am Baile, an online collection of images of life in the Scottish Highlands, managed by High Life Highland, a registered charity in Scotland. The collection contains excerpts from Scottish newspapers, and images of ‘sugar silverware’, such as bowls, casters and tongs. I have also used SCRAN, which is an online database of images, films and sounds, funded by the Scottish government. On it, I have found historical photographs of sugar-related work processes in Scotland, such as jam making in the Keiller factory in Dundee, and sugar refining at the John Walker refinery in Greenock. I have also found historical photographs of sweets shops in Scotland. I have also used the online collection of the MacLean Museum and Art Gallery Inverclyde Archives. I have found photographs of the items in their collections, including the uniform of a worker at the John Walker sugar refinery from the 1960s, sugar tongs from the late 18th century, a model sugar cube making machine from the 19th century and a model sugar crystallising pan from the 20th century. The collections also include historical photographs of Greenock and its sugar refineries. The University of Edinburgh Collections online contain the letters of Rev. Ralph Wardlaw, an anti-slavery campaigner, while the Laing Manuscripts, also available online, contain a correspondence between Lewis Gordon and Sir Robert Gordon. The former wrote to his father to inform him of a slave uprising in Jamaica, where he was working on a sugar plantation, in 1760. All these archival sources have been useful in terms of collating material relating to the sugar trade. I have also used the National Library of Scotland online collection of documentaries (the Moving Images Archive). It contains films of sweet making in the McLean sweet factory in Edinburgh (1940s), of the John Walker sugar refinery in Greenock (1960s), of sweet making in the Thomson’s factory in Aberdeen (1940s), and of sweet making in the Birrell’s factory in Glasgow (1950s). All these show the place that sugar had earned in Scottish society by the 20th century.

For the West Indian side of the project, I have consulted the Association for Cultural Equity/Alan Lomax online archive. It contains slavery songs but also what is called ‘nation songs’ from different Caribbean islands. I have also been in contact with the curators of the Alma Jordan Library of the University of the West Indies. We have also had our attention drawn by a singer to a slave work song held in a manuscript belonging to Granville Sharpe, held in the Gloucestershire Archives (head of archives: Julie Courtenay). Work with these different archives is ongoing. The songs collated from the different archives used will be compiled on a USB drive, which will be sent to the performers involved in the project. We are writing an informative leaflet that will accompany the USB drive, which will contextualise the songs compiled. This and other materials will be used as part of the website created towards the end of the project, which will showcase the creative outputs, with links to the archives that inspired them.

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