



Hugh 'Tommy' Payne, Moray House, Georgetown, Guyana. (PHOTO: STEPHANIE MCKENZIE)

The Importance of GUYANA'S ARCHIVES

TOMMY PAYNE
Former/Retired Archivist, National Archives of Guyana
"Archival Sources in Guyana and their Significance"
February 28, 2014
Moray House, Georgetown, Guyana

Reviewed by
Stephanie McKenzie

"My task is to tell you about the value and importance of historical archives in Guyana," Hugh 'Tommy' Payne began his lecture "Archival Sources in Guyana and Their Significance."

Tommy Payne is the retired archivist of Guyana's National Archives. Born and raised in Buxton, Guyana, Payne attended Buxton Congregational School and pursued his secondary education at Queen's College (1951-61). In 1961-62, Payne taught at Tagore High School, No 63 Village, Corentyne, Berbice, and, then, attended the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, 1962-65, taking a degree in History (Hons). In November 1965, he joined the National Archives of Guyana and served as inspecting officer from Nov 1965 to May 1970 and, then, as archivist from June 1970-May 1988. Payne worked as a consultant for the Archives (History) from June 1988 to Sept 1993 and the Caribbean Development Bank from Nov 1994 to Aug 2007. He was vice-president of the Caribbean Archives Association (CARBICA) from 1979 to 1992 and president from 1982 to 1985.

Although Payne's lecture seemed geared for an audience "in-the-know," with many first-name references and references to

Guyanese politics which only people with local knowledge or experts might hold, Payne's talk was informative and provocative. He seemed to be making four main points to those gathered at Moray House, a place governed by the mission's Trust: "a private, non-partisan, not-for-profit, cultural initiative to foster national pride in Guyana's diverse heritage, to enable all forms of artistic expression, to promote conservation, civil liberties and sport in [Guyanese] society, and to stimulate the sharing of knowledge and ideas within a vibrant public sphere" (programme notes).

Speaking of his initiatives as national archivist, Payne noted he took the position when the general understanding was that documents which had been sent abroad (often to the United Kingdom) were most important. Payne contended that local knowledge/archives are equally rich and that they offer different perspectives: people tend to send documents away that keep foreign offices happy and quiet, Payne suggested. He had long hoped local documents could help create a different and systematic catalogue that didn't spell typical reliance on foreign holdings.

Payne's convictions about local knowledge were supported by memorable examples. Reading a 1988 cartoon about the garbage problem in Georgetown, a challenge which has changed the name of the former "garden city" to what many today call "the garbage city," Payne noted that if one were to go back to early maps of Georgetown, one might see why there is such a garbage problem in today's trenches. Pavement or streets have simply been put on top of a lot of the canals which had been constructed for the outflow of water, Payne explained. Payne also recalled

that, in 1981, he had written to then president of Guyana, Linden Forbes Burnham, regarding renewed tensions between Venezuela and Guyana when Venezuela refused to renew the Protocol of Port-of-Spain (signed in 1970 when a 12-year moratorium had been invoked on a persistent border dispute between the two countries). Payne noted in his letter that Guyana needed to establish a grouping of locally reposed archives as this was the only information, or records, Venezuela had not seen, though Venezuela, according to Payne, had been working on the problem for a long while. The importance of local history and knowledge was assiduously underscored throughout Payne's talk. "What about the village offices?" Payne asked. "If records exist, they might be seen as part of the local patrimony. What about ecclesiastical records? Not enough attention is given to them," Payne said. "What about business archives?"

Payne also claimed that archives "ought to be the preserve of every citizen". In an interview with me after his lecture, Payne indicated that though the archives had always technically been open to everyone, there had been no real encouragement to use them before his time. Payne started to do a series on the air called *Today in History* (the radio programme also produced several booklets), in which he underscored the importance of archival records. Payne had tried to use archival data to explain to the individual his/her rights, and Payne said that this belief led to the opening up of/wider encouragement to use the archives.

Payne suggested local knowledge could be easily augmented. He noted that while many people held important institutional memory which needs to be kept for

posterity "very few people tend to leave exit reports". Payne pointed to AJ Seymour's *Thirty Years a Civil Servant* (self-published in 1982) which, for Payne, functioned as a sort of exit report and said it should be modelled by those who hold positions in civil offices.

Question period raised other issues; notably, several individuals queried what could be done with the case of records that had deliberately been destroyed. In interview, Payne maintained, for one, that many documents from Burnham's administration had been destroyed when governments shifted. Payne's lecture indicated he had been a Burnham supporter, and Payne, in interview, said Burnham recognised Payne's research as something he could build policies on. For example, Payne noted that when Burnham was going to repeal the law on obeah, Payne did the research. Payne's lecture indicated he believed his role necessitated he report to someone high up. Payne also said in interview, however, that he accepted the fact Burnham wasn't God; his lecture recounted one instance when he wrote to Burnham, indicating institutional reorganisation was needed and saying he was going to write a document. Burnham stopped talking to him for a year, Payne said, then added, "Let's debate the myth about Burnham not being able to be censored."

Payne spoke to his audience about his greatest grievance as an archivist. Former Archbishop of the West Indies and head of the Anglican Church of St George's, Georgetown, Alan John Knight, had approached Payne and offered him all the records from the Anglican Churches in Guyana. Payne was unable to take them.

The archives remain largely undigitised, Payne pointed out, but his lecture drew attention to the National Archives Digitisation Project ("coordinated by the Ministry of Culture, members of the National Archives and Dev. Information Technology of North America," according to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports' website). The first phase of the digitisation of East Indian immigration records was intended to coincide with the 175th anniversary of the first arrival of Indians in Guyana (May 2013), though it had to be pushed back until recently. Payne recognised the endeavour as valuable but noted many other documents need protection.

Near the end of questions, Payne asked, "How many can tell me the significance of May 26, 1954 in terms of local history?" There were several whispers. "That was when Victoria was blown up," Payne answered. Payne was referring to the statue of Queen Victoria in front of Georgetown's law courts whose head and orb-bearing left hand were blown apart by dynamite 12 years before Guyana's independence. "The archives are all around us," Payne concluded.

Tommy Payne is the author of *10 Days in August 1834: 10 Days that Changed the World* (Caribbean Diaspora Press, 2001). He is currently working on a book on Angel Gabriel (James Sayers Orr).

Dr Stephanie McKenzie is an associate professor, English Programme, Grenfell Campus, Memorial University, Newfoundland, Canada.