
Women's accounts and caribbean history

Aleric J. Josephs



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/plc/698>

DOI: 10.4000/plc.698

ISSN: 2117-5209

Publisher

L'Harmattan

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 1997

Number of pages: 41-61

ISSN: 1279-8657

Electronic reference

Aleric J. Josephs, « Women's accounts and caribbean history », *Pouvoirs dans la Caraïbe* [Online], Spécial | 1997, Online since 15 March 2011, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/plc/698> ; DOI : 10.4000/plc.698

Women's accounts and caribbean history

par Aleric J. JOSEPHS
Ph. D. in History
University of the West Indies,
Jamaïque

There is a continuing discourse on the engendering of history of the Caribbean. As a part of that discourse, leading historians such as Bridget Brereton and Blanca Silvestrini suggest that the process should include the texts and testimonies of women¹. In this way the writers of Caribbean history can move beyond using a feminist construct to analyze traditional sources. Such sources are usually about men's lives and what they did in the public sphere. Examination of those sources invariably limits the findings to what amounts to contribution history²; women's role in society will continue to be judged according to the male derived instruments of analysis. Thus women's perception of their society is needed to give balance to the androcentric approach to the study of Caribbean history.

¹. Bridget Brereton, «Text and Testimony: Sources and Methods for 'Engendering' Caribbean History» in Verene Shepherd et al. : *Engendering History*, Kingston, Randle, 1995, pp. 66 - 93 ; Blanca Silvestrini, *Women and Resistance : Herstory in Contemporary Caribbean History*, Kingston, Department of History, Mona, 1990.

². Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Peterburg : Status and Culture in a Southern Town*, New York, Norton, 1984, XIX.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This paper is an attempt to explore the potential of using women's texts as sources of Caribbean history, building on the work of Bridget Brereton and Blanca Silvestrini. The use of the texts of women is only one of the methods being examined in the search for a new construct to engender history. Oral testimonies are also very important in the engendering process, especially in the Caribbean where oral tradition is a characteristic feature of life. Such testimonies are also vital to a fuller understanding of the historical experience of the Caribbean as women were not always given the same educational opportunities as men and so were less likely to have penned their views and recorded their experiences. And even when educational opportunities were provided for women, there were class differences that excluded a significant number of Caribbean women from being among the lettered.

Oral testimonies, however, by virtue of their nature are limited in application. They are only useful in reconstructing a more immediate past. Their usefulness diminishes as the more distant past is examined. It must be noted however that a more interdisciplinary approach, using historical anthropology may in fact strengthen the case for oral testimonies. Of course its application will be fraught with the limitation of recall / memory and feedback. In light of all this, the written text takes on added significance if the distant past is to be recaptured.

Caribbean peoples have the ability to live textured lives. Women are probably the best expression of this in the multifarious way they live their lives. They live multiple lives in unison³. That is the way of the Caribbean – its people are creative, using each aspect of their lives as drama, as story to be passed on / shared. The storyteller is oftentimes a woman. Thus the history of the Caribbean can not be written from a single gender perspective, male or female, or merely from the public sphere. The written history of the Caribbean, to be valid, needs to reflect this textured existence, especially when so many

³. Silvestrini, *op. cit.* p. 4.

non-government organizations and women have played significant roles in the evolution of the region.

Women's voices need to be heard. Despite the institutionalized invisibility imposed on women, there is enough material in the traditional sources to write about their role. Gail Saunders confirmed this for the Bahamas. She indicates that revisiting traditional sources with a feminist eye will reveal much about women⁴. At best, this can only produce contribution history, a male derived perspective of what women did and did not do. This study wishes to go further to show that women have left enough expressions of their thoughts on/observations of life in the Caribbean in several genre of literature to make a case for their texts to be included in the catalogue of sources. Readily available are some published texts for the twentieth.

These and other texts raised several questions about other possible accounts hidden away in some archives or in someone's personal library, the interest of women, the images that occupied their minds, women's perspective of the cultural and historical evolution of the Caribbean. In short, what ideas/views and concerns of women associated with the Caribbean are revealed in their own texts ? The surviving texts must be traced in the process of enriching the historical knowledge of the region. The evaluation of surviving women's accounts / texts as sources of Caribbean history will of necessity have to address the issues of theory and method in history as well as the question as to their historical value.

ISSUES OF THEORY AND METHODS

An anticipated difficulty in using these « new sources » has to do with the survival of texts. Is there an adequate number of surviving texts ? The suggestion has been made that not much of what women wrote survived⁵. The few surviving pieces tell their own story. The fact

⁴. Gail Saunders, *Bahamian Society after Emancipation*, Kingston, Randle, 1994, p. 19.

⁵. Bridget Brereton, *Gendered Testimony*, Kingston, University of the West Indies, 1994, p. 1.

that much of what men wrote survived as against the relative survival of women's texts speaks to the silence / invisibility imposed on women in western society. Any difficulty in tracing pieces, which may have survived beyond a mere catalogue listing, is indicative of the fact that women's accounts have been long forgotten and have been under utilized. It also speaks of the persisting androcentric approach to history.

The few surviving pieces of the writings of women take on greater significance. Jerome Handler⁶ suggests that even fragments can be useful to those seeking specialized data. My own study of the autobiography of a coloured Jamaican woman, Mary Seacole⁷, the coming to hand of a collection of poems by a early Jamaican feminist⁸ and the compilation of a collection of pieces from a number of periodicals by Linnette Vassell⁹ suggest that it was possible to amass a significant number of women's texts to examine the potential of women's writings as sources of Caribbean History.

An early survey of available surviving texts reveals that a number of women's letters have survived for the English speaking Caribbean. These letters were written to relatives, friends and business associates. Among the surviving letters are the published correspondences of four women associated with four islands in the English-speaking Caribbean¹⁰. Together these four women – Ann Brodbelt, Adele Hart, Elizabeth Fenwick and Ella Geraldine Rees Williams (Jean Rhys) provide information on Dominica, Jamaica, the Bahamas and Barbados for brief periods in these islands' history. The

⁶. Jerome Handler, *A Guide to Source Material for the Study of Barbados History, 1627 - 1834*, Carbondale, Southern University Press, 1971, p. xi.

⁷. Aleric Josephs, « Mary Seacole : Jamaican Nurse and 'Doctress' », *The Jamaican Historical Review*, Vol. xvii, 1991, pp. 45 - 65.

⁸. Una Marson, *Tropic Reveries*, Kingston, 1930.

⁹. Linnette Vassell, *Voices of Women in Jamaica, 1898 – 1939*, Kingston, Department of History, University of the West Indies, 1993.

¹⁰. There are four edited letter books : Richard Kent, ed., *Letters from the Bahamas*, London, Culmer, 1948 ; Francis Wyndham, and Diana Melly, *Jean Rhys Letters, 1931 – 1968*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1984 ; Geraldine Mozley, *Letters to Jane from Jamaica, 1788 – 1796*, London, 1948 ; A. F. Fenwick, *The Fate of the Fenwicks, Letters to Mary Hays, 1798 – 1828*, London, Methuen, 1927.

initial reading of these letters provide useful indicators of how women felt and acted in the past.

Identification of Surviving Women's Texts

The search for women's texts indicates that as early as the seventeenth hundreds, women associated with the Caribbean penned their thoughts and recorded their experiences. In the closing decade of the twentieth century women have become quite prolific writers. This paper focuses on letter texts written in the period 1788 – 1966.

The survival, accessibility and reliability of women's accounts are important issues in the discourse on using women's writing as sources of history. As published accounts, the letter books which form the primary material for the survey, raise these and other questions related to historical theory. How should these letters be classified ? Are they primary or secondary sources ? This question has particular relevance to the late eighteenth century letters from Jamaica which were edited in such a way that only excerpts were given from most of the original letters. However, since substantial extracts were provided, the historian using the texts will still find them useful. In any event since most sources used by historians are at best fragmentary, the extracts can only be seen as primary material.

Publication and Survival

Publication has aided survival and availability of women's accounts. But how available were publication opportunities for women in the Caribbean before the twentieth century ? Twentieth century material is readily available in most instances, but what of the earlier centuries ? Source guides surveyed suggest that some opportunities were available. A number of newspapers and periodicals were published since the nineteenth century. There was at least one in the English speaking Caribbean since the first half of the eighteenth century. These newspapers are useful sources for surviving women's

texts especially in the years before the 1900's. Some of the texts include poems, letters, speeches and articles. A survey of published speeches and articles reveal that these surviving pieces of women's texts are useful indices of the development of a feminist perspective in the Caribbean. These women were also aware of what was happening in the wider world.

Reliability

Any text used by historians has to be reliable. Reliability of texts surveyed rests on the fact that they can be authenticated by other sources. The editor of the 1948 letter book of Miss Hart's *Letters from the Bahamas* commented on the reliability of that set of letters :

« The descriptions of the island's life and scenery are proved by contemporary records to have been extraordinarily accurate.... »¹¹

Of particular significance is the fact that the letters surveyed authenticate each other by the many common features of life in the Caribbean written about in essentially private letters at different times in the history of the region and from different places.

WOMEN'S LETTERS

Women's letters are the primary materials for this study. Women's letters, most likely private letters, in the years before the twentieth century were the least likely to survive. It is therefore remarkable that ordinary family letters and those written to friends have survived at all. It may have been only the sentimentality of recipients, which offered a chance of survival. This appeared to have been the case of the letters from Jamaica written to Jane Brodbelt, a preteen girl attending school in England in the seventeen eighties. The editor of the published letter entitled *Letters to Jane from Jamaica*, made reference to the type of sentimentality which aided survival :

¹¹. Kent, ed., *op. cit.*, p. VII – VIII.

« ... a packet of letters fastened together by the little school girl with a silk thread, now broken, lest they should be mislaid. »¹²

The letter book *Letters to Jane from Jamaica* was published in 1948. The letters were edited by Geraldine Mozley, a descendant of the addressee. She reported that she found the letters in a drawer, apparently forgotten¹³. Most of the letters were written by Ann Brodbelt, a native of Jamaica who lived with her husband, Francis Brodbelt, a physician of Spanish Town, the capital town of the island at the time. The recipient of the letters from Jamaica was Jane Brodbelt, the youngest of three children of the Brodbelt family. At the time the letters began, the other two children, Nancy and Rigby, Jr. were also at school in Britain.

The letters, written between 1788 and 1796, not only provide information on a Jamaican family, but tell of events at a crucial time in the history of the Caribbean. They tell of the extent to which the Caribbean was locked into the world system ; the region's people were clearly not insular. Ann Brodbelt's letters tell of the extensive travel between the colonies and England and the impact of international events on the movement of people. Her letters gave an insight in the leisure activities of the town and the way middle class white women lived their lives in eighteenth century Jamaica.

The Fenwick letters, the next in chronology, picked up on some of the themes of the Brodbelt letters. These letters were written from Barbados between 1814 and 1821. Elizabeth Fenwick, with her son-in-law, operated a school for elite children. She wrote to her friend, Mary Hays, about her experience in that island. Fenwick's perspective can be seen as that of a long term Caribbean resident who was forced to adapt to a new climate, a new way of life and a new country. She spent seven years in Barbados, and her letters end with plans to move on to the United States of America. Her letters plot change, in her own life and in the life of the colony as she experienced it. They are useful indices of such themes as female friendship, family life, education in Barbados and economic patterns in the region. They project an understanding of

¹². Mozley, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹³. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

slavery from the perspective of someone who was not at first involved, but who was forced to accept the system as the only way to get the servants needed. The contradictions of the system were clearly presented in her responses over time.

The Hart letters were written from the Bahamas to a friend in the United States of America where the letter book was first published in 1827. Adele Hart, the writer, was a visitor whose perspective was that of the tourist seeking the curative and rejuvenating qualities of the region. She accompanied her convalescing mother to the island and appeared to have known very little about it when the decision was taken to go there. Her letters detailed her activities, give rich information on the social and leisure time activities in that family of islands in the first half of the nineteenth century. She described the Bahamian landscape. Her descriptions point to a possible theme for exploration in the history of the region environmental history. Many of her letters make reference to aspects of the built and natural environment.

Ella Geraldine Rees Williams, more commonly known as Jean Rhys wrote the most modern set of letters surveyed. Born in Dominica in the late nineteenth century, she spent her formative and teenage life in that island. She migrated to England in the early twentieth century and so most of the letters in the published collection were written from outside the Caribbean to friends, business associates and her daughter. The significance of her letters rest in the fact that her perceptions were shaped by the Caribbean and that bits and pieces of her letters recall her Caribbean experience. These bits and pieces raise the question of the relationship between memory and history. The letters are valuable as sources of information on Rhys' Dominica, the folklore of Antigua, travel, tourism which was taking root in the Caribbean then, the Caribbean landscape and environment. They suggest a theme of alienation of the Caribbean emigrant, which is worth exploring as part of a broader theme of Caribbean Diaspora. The opposite perspective found in Fenwick's letters, the perspective of the Caribbean immigrant and her sense of alienation, allows for useful comparison of responses to the Caribbean.

WOMEN'S LETTERS AND CARIBBEAN HISTORY

This initial survey of women's letters indicates the usefulness of women's accounts to the writers of Caribbean History. The letters of these four women in particular are valuable sources for the study of Caribbean history, a Caribbean outside of the plantation. They are valuable for a study of the essential fabric of Caribbean life. While each set of letters provides useful information on specific islands at specific periods in their history, they also suggest some common features of life in the Caribbean.

Broadbent, Fenwick, Rhys and Hart reveal much about attitude to race and complexion, domestic service and slavery, domestic life, celebrations, movement and travel and women's lives. Their letters thus suggest many themes in Caribbean history, which may be explored from women's perspectives, not merely in terms of their role in and contribution to the evolution of the Caribbean.

Issues of Colour

The letters indicate that women were preoccupied with colour, which in the context of Caribbean slave society is not surprising. However, there is an unexpected treatment of the issue by these women. The response of new arrivants like Fenwick gives an insight in the difference between England and the colonies on the colour issue :

« An impassable boundary here separates the white from the coloured people (many of whom are a fair, light haired people) ; and those Creoles whose wealth would introduce them to the first circles in England a white beggar would not speak to here. We cannot admit a Creole pupil, yet some are very rich. I would wonder they do not remove to England.¹⁴ ».

Her comments indicate that the colour divide was very obvious to the new arrivants and imply that there was greater racial tolerance in England than in the Caribbean. Mary Seacole's experience as recorded in her 1854 autobiography suggests other wise :

¹⁴. Fenwick, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

«I shall never forget my first impression of London... some of the most vivid of my collections are the efforts of London street-boys to poke fun at my and my companion's complexion »¹⁵.

How is this difference in impression explained ? The answer may rest in the dichotomy between the periphery and the centre in colonial experience. The dichotomy is suggested in other instances in the letters and suggests a major theme for exploration in the process of engendering Caribbean history.

The insight given by these letters is not only related to the issue of class/race divide. There is also a clear indication that women's preoccupation with colour went beyond race/class issue. The preoccupation with colour/complexion included a concern with beauty and health. So Ann Brodbelt was concerned that her daughter Jane had not yet acquired the « complexion of an English girl ». As late as the 1930's Rhys seemed astonished that white children had acquired a brown complexion from the sun but were still pretty¹⁶. There was an obvious change in attitude since Rhys' childhood when her mother protected her complexion by causing her to wear a hat against the sun. In 1949 she was still passing on this advice to her daughter for the benefit of her granddaughter.

For these women, it was not desirable to be too brown, yet to be too pale could indicate illness. Ann Brodbelt was sometimes worried about her son's physical appearance and Fenwick described her daughter as pale and sickly with her complexion a 'ghastly yellow'¹⁷. The preoccupation with colour and complexion was part of the women's general concern with physical appearance, including dress and posture. Brodbelt wanted her daughter to have an erect posture. Fenwick was impressed with the dress and posture of female slaves who attended the white students at her school while being disgusted with the general attitude and conduct of the blacks as she saw them :

« ... it would be an extraordinary sight to pass through the ante-room and see it lined with female salves, attending with their young Ladies' breakfast, mostly attired in picturesque costume,- white muslim petticoats,

¹⁵. Ziggi Alexander, and Audrey Dewjee, eds., *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole*, Bristol, Falling Wall Press, 1984, p. 54.

¹⁶. Letter to Maryvonne Moerman, July 10, 1949.

¹⁷. Letters to Mary Hays, December 11, 1814.

colored jackets, colored cotton or silk Handkerchiefs on their heads most fancifully put on, and very frequently coral and gold Necklaces of a value and beauty that a London Belle might envy. They always attract my eye from the symmetry and beauty of their forms as well as their fantastic attire¹⁸. ».

It would appear that for Fenwick, coloured or creole persons in Barbados were admirable, but blacks were certainly not her favourites. She shared this attitude with some whites who had coloured favourites. White male visitors were often in praise of the coloured female they encountered in the Caribbean¹⁹.

Black Slaves, Servants and Female Domesticity

Fenwick's attitude to blacks could be due to the frustrations she encountered in attempting to run a household with Caribbean blacks as servants. She tells of her struggles to get jobbing slaves to work without physical punishment. She complained to her friend of heartaches in this area, and even while giving a rhapsodic description of her charges' slave maids, indicated the strength of her distaste for blacks. Her view of them was not very positive :

« In their manner they have a polish civility that frequently exceeds the good breeding of their owners, but except in demeanor and out ward form they are a detestable set of people – idle, ungrateful, dirty, dishonest and profligate in the extreme »²⁰.

In the process of describing these blacks, she gives an intimate account of slavery not readily found in plantation records and highlights the contradictions whites faced in using slave labour. Fenwick acquired slaves but persisted in referring to them as servants. This tendency is probably reflective of the difficulty she had accommodating herself to the infamous institution. The letters from Jamaica also paint a picture of servants rather than slaves- Ann Brodbelt made mention of Tabby, Jane's dry nurse who was still with

¹⁸. Fenwick, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

¹⁹. Barbara Bush, « White 'Ladies', Coloured 'Favourites' and Black 'wenches'... », *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 2, n° 3, 1981, p. 245.

²⁰. *Op. cit.*, p. 167.

the family, as if she was a long-standing family retainer. However, the racial tension suggested in the Fenwick letters was not found in the letters to Jane.

Fenwick's attitude to blacks may be reflective of her own frustrations with domestic activities. The letters in fact give a perspective of female domesticity through the eyes of the women. The texts not only provide an understanding of domestic life during slavery, but also give an idea of how women viewed domesticity. As a working woman, Fenwick did not seem to handle household matters very well and her daughter clearly found it difficult to cope with household duties and childcare. The domestic struggles of that Barbadian household are not reflected in the letters from Jamaica. The Brodbelt women seemed not to be bothered by domestic matters. There is in fact a silence on domestic matters, which could be due to the fact that unlike the letters of Fenwick, which were written to an adult friend, the letters from Jamaica were written to a child. However there is a picture which is painted in the very silence on the matter for Anne Brodbelt and her cousin Anna Millward. They are seen as leisured women. Ann Brodbelt is presented as a woman taken up with her cat and canary and Anna Millward's main preoccupation was with her children. These women had servants to assist with childrearing. Rhys was explicit in her position on domesticity – She felt that it was not for the creative, a form of slavery²¹. Clearly there was no uniformity in the attitude of women to this area of life that was traditionally the domain of women.

Celebration

The softer impression of slavery in Jamaica could be due to the fact that Jamaica was not beset by the tension of restless slaves in the seventeenth eighties as was the case of Barbados at the time of writing of the Fenwick letters. Her letters cover the period of the nineteenth century rebellion in that island. It could also be due to the fact that the women of the Jamaica letters were clearly leisured women, more concerned with the leisured life of the town and their families than

²¹. Letter to Maryvonne, Aug. 16, 1949 and Oct 1949.

with earning a living. They helped to paint a picture of the texture of Caribbean life away from the plantation and race conflict.

The letters give information on the leisure activities available. There were balls, dances, horseback riding and sailing in the Bahamas. Dancing was a major past time, which could last until the wee hours of the morning. Any opportunity was used as an excuse for celebrations- in honour of Rodney who saved Jamaica, the King's birthday, the quartering of a regiment in town, the opening of the assembly, the return of a resident from abroad. The leisured lifestyle portrayed included celebration of the absent daughter's birthday by the slaves of the Brodbelt / Millward family.

In Jamaica there was a season of gaiety when the young ladies from the rural areas would « visit the metropolis », Spanish Town, the then capital of Jamaica. It was a time when both young and old would enjoy themselves. These recreational activities were enjoyed by the visitor, long time or returning residents, and the young seemed to live for the 'gay season'.

Movement and Travel

Any student of Caribbean history is aware that the region experienced constant traffic from across the Atlantic and from its shores to the Atlantic. We know that there was much maritime trade and movements of troops into the area. These letters reveal other aspects of this movement into and out of the Caribbean, the dangers of that movement and the way it affected the daily lives of the people who resided in the region. Throughout the letters one gets a glimpse of the impact of wars – the lost packet and the letters, delays of ships' departure because of fear of attack and the need to travel in convoy. There is much information on the general quality of travel. It could be tedious and disagreeable due to bad weather or the skill of the ship's captain or the route taken. A direct journey of 6 - 9 weeks could take up to eleven weeks if the route involved moving among the islands.

The letters provide information on the relocation of Caribbean residents to other areas. Jean Rhys left Dominica, her birthplace, for England as a teenager, returning to the beloved island for a brief spell over three decades later. Fenwick planned to move to North America some seven years after her arrival to set up school in Barbados. She never seemed to have really « settled » in the island. Relocation for both Fenwick and Rhys seemed to have resulted in a sense of alienation and loneliness. Rhys' letters suggest the theme of the West Indian in exile and suggest that it was difficult for such exiles to break links with the Caribbean. She wrote of how possessive she felt about her island of origin²². Fenwick's letters suggest the opposite experience – the English relocating to the Caribbean, having difficulty in developing a sense of belonging ; she felt as 'a stranger wandering in a foreign land'²³. Rhys' nostalgia for the Caribbean echoes these sentiments :

« I've learnt to do without mountains, seas (*blue* sea), bright colours, everything I love.' Tough I still obstinately hope that I will get away to die. Bury me under the ole flamboyant tree every time.Talking of blue seas I have such a comic picture near my bed – Patrick Trench did it for me.. I asked him to paint me some thing to remind me of my native land and my God, he's got everything into that picture – from a whale to a butterfly²⁴ ».

The Brodbelt family and their associates seemed to have moved back and forward across the Atlantic. Ann Brodbelt went to visit her beloved daughter Jane, her daughter Nancy returned to Jamaica after her studies. Other associates went to England because of ill health. Movement in and out of the region was not reserved for the residents but for visitors. As early as the eighteen twenties, the Caribbean was a tourist destination, offering quiet refuge and rest for those of the colder climes. Miss Hart who wrote from the Bahamas went to the Bahamas with her mother who needed to convalesce in the warm clime. Jean Rhys' letters made mention of other tourists such as Somerset Maugham and another lady writer who she encountered on her holiday in Dominica²⁵.

²². Letter to Evelyn Scott, « Hempstead », Dominica, 1936.

²³. Letter to Mary Hays, March 21 and April 12, 1815.

²⁴. Letter Peggy Kirkaldy, Feb 11, 1946.

²⁵. Letter to Evelyn Scott, Dominica, 1936.

The accounts of the movement of people not only tell of the problems of travel. They also reveal that the inhabitants were always looking out and with the constant movement and with friends and relatives separated, communication became an important need. This accounts for the letters sent across the Atlantic, by the packet. Even Rhys who went to Dominica for a short visit in 1936 had to write her friend Evelyn Scott to tell about her experience. That letter provide important fragments of information about Dominica in 1936 – the presence of aspiring female writers and others who apparently visited the island to write about them, the hideaways, the condition of the roads, and environmental conditions are but a few of the interesting fragments.

This need to keep in touch with the outside world made the Packet an important part of the life of the residents and visitors alike. The Captains and their ships carried information about the tropics, the letter writers' anxiety, hopes, attitudes and values. Many of these were passed on unintentionally but were recorded and so are useful sources for the historian wanting to learn about those aspects of Caribbean history beyond the plantation.

Environmental Issues

Plantation history has in one sense dominated the history of the Caribbean and will continue to do so if the preoccupation with traditional sources, written by men, continue to be the focus of research. But even in those plantation focused sources there are other aspects of the Caribbean past that are not adequately explored. One such aspect is climate or environmental issues. To read these letters is to understand the fact that environmental conditions in fact shaped lives, that there is a relationship between history and environment that needs to be explored.

The women whose letters form the basis of this paper in many little ways suggest the close link between environment and Caribbean life in the period in which they wrote. They paint a picture of the environment, which should prove a useful starting point for a historical study of the environmental history of the region. They suggest that the Caribbean environment was one of contrast – the beautiful picture painted through Miss Hart's description of the flora of the Bahamas contrasted with diseased conditions of Barbados as described by Fenwick. The Bahamas thus offered conditions suitable for rejuvenating the convalescing, while the hot debilitating conditions of Barbados and Jamaica could cause illness. These unfavourable environmental conditions often resulted in children being sickly and adults were known to return to England because of ill health²⁶.

The environmental conditions often preoccupied the women as the conditions adversely affected the children. So when the town became distressingly hot, the women had to think about moving the children to cooler areas to avoid the illness which came with the excessive heat. Along with the excessive heat there was the rain, which for Rhys would protect Dominica from 'vulgar loves'²⁷. The cockroaches unnerved Rhys even in her beloved Dominica !

²⁶. Letter to Jane, Nov 25, 1793.

²⁷. Letter to Evelyn Scott, Dominica, 1936.

Rhys' letter from Dominica also made reference to the built environment – the houses, [Hampstead, Calibishee and Melville Hall], Lady Nichols' boarding house, and the Hotel St Antoine of St Lucia, English Harbour of Antigua and the bad roads. These references are only indications of some of the possibilities of material culture of the architectural type which may or may not have survived in the physical form but in the textual descriptions which the historian may find useful. These women's accounts point the way.

Women's Lives

These snippets of different aspects of Caribbean life over the period 1780 - 1966 point to the multiple interest of women who were associated with the region as visitors or residents. The letters tell of the value of women's account in furthering women's contribution to the writing of Caribbean history. However Women's History, as a new variant of the discipline, is moving beyond the contributions history of the early years to include a perspective of women's lives through their eyes. These letters from three different centuries indicate that using women's accounts is a very useful way of furthering this process. They give insight on the relationship which developed among women as friends, between mothers and daughters and with other women. Two of the three collections were devoted to friends, the writers detailing their experience in a new environment – the letters to Mary Hays from Elizabeth Fenwick and the letters of Miss Hart to a friend. All four collections reveal much about mother/daughter relationships.

From the letters, one gets a clear picture of the several layers of relationships forged by women. In the letters from Jamaica the women were sisters, relatives, friends, mothers and daughters. Friendship sometimes seemed to have taken precedence over familial relationship. Fenwick revealed the deep relationship which was forged with friends, beyond that of the natural one with children: she wrote of the deprivation she felt at the separation from her friends even though she was with her children²⁸. These women as friends were the confidant of

²⁸. Letter to Mary Hays, March 21 and April 12, 1815.

each other and were not hesitant in expressing the bond they felt. Hart wrote to her friend telling her 'how truly' she loved her and « how sincerely » she « confided » in her friendship²⁹. Friendship also developed among relatives ; Anna Millward and Ann Brodbelt were cousins, but the relationship seemed to have gone beyond the family link.

The letters provide an opportunity to see the women at work as mothers. These women tell of what it meant to be mothers. Separation from children offered special challenges to these women, especially young children who had to be committed to the care of a surrogate mother. This was the case of Jane Brodbelt who was sent to England to school at an early age as her sister before her. Her mother, Ann Brodbelt, nurtured her from a distance ; she took time to guide her in how she was to deport herself in different situations. The letters were also a means of nurturing her daughter's affection for her. While she was concerned that her daughter should be well behaved, she worried about her eldest child, a son who was studying medicine in Britain. Not only was she concerned about his health, but she was also concerned about his safety as he travelled in France during the upheaval there in the late eighteenth century. Fenwick was worried about her son's unemployment and her daughter's ill health. They were with her in Barbados and she knew first hand what difficulties they faced. Rhys, like Brodbelt, was separated from her daughter and granddaughter and strove to keep the relationship going at a distance. She was careful to send tokens of her care to them from time to time.

These mothers also felt grief/pain at the suffering of their children as was the case of Fenwick who found it difficult to countenance the struggles of her daughter to be wife and mother in an unfriendly climatic environment. She must have found it difficult to deal with the sudden passing of her teenage son. Ann Brodbelt shared in and expressed the grief of Anne Millward at the lost of her child.

Motherhood thus clearly had its joys and sorrows, but these women found ways of coping with the more unpleasant aspects of motherhood. Ann Brodbelt no doubt found it difficult to send her daughter away from her, but as other women at the time in the

²⁹. Miss Hart, *Letters from the Bahamas*, Philadelphia, 1827, p. 10.

Caribbean, she was willing to do so in order that her children could get the life skills they needed. For the girls, it may have just be finishing school, not education for employment, but no less important. For the boys like Rigby, Ann Brodbelt's son, it was training for employment, which could not be had in the Caribbean at that time.

There was the joy of having the affection of their children. Harts mother desired 'no more of heaven'³⁰ and for Brodbelt it was her 'sincere prayer' that Jane continued to love her³¹. What is clear from these letters is that there was a special bond between mothers and their children and among women – a theme that needs exploring for the Caribbean past. While we accept that women were mothers, probably naturally so, there has been little examination of what it meant and women's accounts provide the source needed to explore the phenomenon for the Caribbean.

CONCLUSION

Is there a case for using women's text to write Caribbean History ? The four sets of letters surveyed in developing a case for using women's accounts as sources of Caribbean history cover significant periods in the evolution of Caribbean. They provide a long-term perspective, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. They provide a vision of several territories in the English-speaking Caribbean through the eyes of women. They give significant details from which aspects of the Caribbean past can be reconstructed – their connection to the wider world patterns, the non-plantation features of Caribbean life and experience and women's lives.

These letters facilitate an understanding of the qualitative response to local and international events such as the 1816 Barbados Revolt, the French Revolution and the wars which followed, the 1812 war between the United States and England. They tell of women's

³⁰. Ibid., p. 6.

³¹. Letter to Jane Brodbelt, April 12, 1789.

fears for loved ones in Europe and the impact on travel and communication in the Caribbean.

So, of what value are women's accounts ? How strong is the case for using women's accounts as sources of Caribbean history ? More detailed study is required to fully establish the value of these underutilized accounts, but the four sets of letters examined to make the initial case suggest that it can be done. Closer study may reveal that there is no mark differences between the lenses of men and women, but the conclusion can only be drawn if women's accounts are examined to compare with the long established accounts based on a male derived perspective.



Résumé

Un discours se développe sur la prise en compte de la différence des sexes dans l'étude de l'histoire de la Caraïbe. Des historiennes de premier plan comme Bridget Brereton et Blanca Silvestrini suggèrent que la méthodologie à suivre devrait inclure les écrits et témoignages de femmes afin d'explorer leur perception de leur société. Dans le cadre de la Caraïbe anglophone, beaucoup de lettres écrites par des femmes à leurs amis, parents et associés d'entreprises ont été conservées. Parmi les sources ayant subsistées, on compte la correspondance publiée de quatre femmes ayant vécu dans quatre colonies britanniques de la région. Elle donne des indicateurs utiles sur les sentiments et les comportements des femmes d'autrefois.

Mots-clés

Canevas de vie - Diaspora caribéenne - Envoi - Exil - Genre - Histoire des femmes - Invisibilité - Masculin - Recueil de lettres - Vies diverses

Abstract

There is a continuing discourse on the engendering of history of the Caribbean. As a part of that discourse, leading historians such as Bridget Brereton and Blanca Silvestrini suggest that the process should include the text and testimony of women. In this way they can include women's perception of their society in the study of Caribbean History. For the English-speaking Caribbean, a number of their letters written to friends, relatives and business associates have survived. Among the surviving sources are the published correspondences of four women associated with four English colonies in the region. Their letters provide useful indicators of how women felt and acted in the past.

Keys-words

Androcentric - Caribbean diaspora - Engendering - Feedback - Gender - History - Invisibility - Letter books - Multifarious lives - Textured lives