

## **Hidden Histories of Exploration: Project Application<sup>1</sup>**

### **Summary**

The project seeks to enhance knowledge and understanding of the part played by indigenous peoples in the history of exploration. It responds to the challenge posed by some historians to conventional accounts of voyages of exploration in which the role of local, non-western, peoples is consistently relegated to the margins. Where indigenous agency is treated explicitly, there has often been a tendency to accord a lower status to the contribution of 'local' assistants in the making of geographical knowledge. The project also has an important methodological component, involving an evaluation of the ways in which the collections of a major scholarly society (the RGS-IBG) can be read against the grain of conventional interpretation, so that marginalised voices can be heard. The project is designed to stimulate new ways of thinking about the geographical archive which will also have practical applications within educational and exhibition programmes. In relation to the latter, it is hoped that 'Hidden Histories' will also highlight aspects of the Society's collections of particular interest to minority ethnic communities which have diaspora links to the areas visited by explorers in the past.

### **Aims and Objectives**

1. To review the ways in which indigenous agency and knowledge have been considered within the historiography of geographical exploration.
2. To illuminate the methodological challenges posed by the idea of reading metropolitan archives 'against the grain', and to conduct experimental research within this archive in search of other voices.
3. To re-consider some of the most celebrated examples of indigenous agency in the history of modern geographical exploration (Inuit assistants in the high Arctic, the better-known companions of Victorian African explorers and the pundits in the Indian Survey), and to investigate lesser-known examples of indigenous agency, by conducting in-depth research using the RGS collections.
4. To provide frameworks, approaches and case-studies which will be of use in the Society's educational and community outreach projects, including an exhibition and online research resource.
5. To foster dialogue between curators and academics concerned with geographical collections, in order to highlight the opportunities for further research in 'public geography'.

---

<sup>1</sup> This text summarises two applications made to the Arts & Humanities Research Council to support research in 2005-7 (36 months), and an exhibition project in 2008-9 (15 months).

## Contexts

1. The *intellectual context* is provided by recent research in the history of geography, exploration and travel which challenges the standard accounts of exploration which perpetuate the 'myth of the heroic explorer' acting independently of local knowledge and circumstances. However, while there has been much debate, there have been relatively few scholarly accounts of indigenous agency. The same examples (notably the role of the pundits in the Indian Survey) tend to be cited repeatedly, and this in itself risks generating new myths. There is a need for a more considered treatment of the role and status of indigenous people and 'local knowledge' in projects of exploration and travel, embracing a wider range of contexts than that usually considered. This will involve evaluating the methodological challenge posed by working within British historical archives in a search for evidence of other voices. Fragments and glimpses of these stories may be found across the wide range of the RGS-IBG collections – in the making of maps, the taking of photographs, the manuscript accounts of expeditions, the writing of books and in the material culture of exploration. One important task will be to provide a context in which these fragments can be brought together in a bigger picture.

2. The *institutional context* of the research enables new questions to be asked of an extraordinary and unique set of collections. The Royal Geographical Society's 'Unlocking the archives' project, funded by a Heritage Lottery grant, has greatly enhanced the management and accessibility of the Society's collections, and for the first time has put the access agenda and education at its heart. Thus far, this initiative has been involved principally with collections cataloguing, management and out-reach, and the Society now aims to build on this foundation with, for example, more research-orientated projects which capitalise on the new infrastructure of support for researchers. The proposed research project will provide an exciting opportunity for intellectually vibrant research building links between the scholarly community and the collections work of the Society. The project will benefit from the existing links between a leading centre for advanced geographical research in the arts and humanities, and the Royal Geographical Society, which is effectively the public face of geography in the UK.

## Methodology

The primary source for the research will be the collections of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) itself. Given the extent of these collections, and the Society's public role in the history modern exploration, this provides an excellent focus, supplemented where appropriate by work in other collections. The concentration on London-based collections is justified, given that one of the goals of the project is to examine the extent to which such collections can yield insight into 'local' aspects of the history of exploration.

The project will involve a review and critique of existing accounts of indigenous agency within the historical literature on exploration; the development of alternative strategies of reading the archive of exploration (the term archive

used here to encompass visual images and artefacts, as well as manuscripts and published works); the selection of a series of case-studies, including both celebrated examples of indigenous agency and lesser-known examples of reliance upon 'local' knowledge and practice; research and writing of working papers, academic publications and associated literature for non-academic audiences; the preparation of some of these materials for an exhibition, in collaboration with professional designers, community consultants and staff at the RGS-IBG; and the creation of an online research resource catering for the needs of a variety of users. Decisions on the choice of case studies and the balance struck between use of manuscript, photographic, cartographic and other collections, will be made during the course of the project.

### **Timetable**

- Year 1. Literature review of scholarship on exploration and indigenous peoples/knowledge. Identification of potential case studies.
- Year 2. Research into better-known examples of indigenous agency; initial research into lesser-known cases. Preparation of working papers.
- Year 3. Analysis of further case studies, and completion of studies as part of a PhD dissertation; preparation of outline brief for research exhibition.
- Year 4. Appointment of exhibition design team; development of online exhibition architecture and features; approval of schedule for digitization; workshops with community consultants; preparation of materials for exhibition and publications.
- Year 5. Launch of exhibition and website; associated events; prepare academic publications (3 months).

### **Outputs**

1. Working papers and reports circulated to researchers and curators
2. Academic publications and dissertation
3. Research workshop on geographical collections
4. Public exhibition at the RGS-IBG, and associated travelling exhibit
5. Programme of community, enthusiast and educational activities
6. Website resource on Hidden Histories of Exploration