

INSIGHT



Big tree country.

Scripturient

Conservation through generations



What does it mean to meet your kin for the first time in a colonial archive? I was overcome with irreconcilable emotions.

I FIRST met my maternal grandfather in 2020 – not in Nagercoil, southern India, which was his home, but in the Asian and African Studies Reading Room at the British Library.

He died in 1957. The stories passed down about him have a mythic quality, larger than life and yet somehow insubstantial. Two details have stuck with me. One: he traveled from the then south Indian state of Travancore to the University of Edinburgh in the early 1930s. He studied silviculture, the art and science of managing forests. He returned to India a well-trained subject of the British Empire, managing the extraction of south Indian timber and other natural “products” for imperial use.

There is an image of him in Scotland’s “Big Tree Country”, north of Edinburgh, in 1934, among a group of shirtless, ruddy men. My eye is drawn to his inky skin, the lock of hair falling onto his forehead, the gleam of the sickle against his collarbone. What was he thinking in this picture?

Caretakers

There’s one other fact I know about him. By the time he died, he had the same title as I do: conservator. While I am a conservator of archaeological objects, a carer of items belonging to the ancient dead, he was a conservator of forests, a caretaker of living, growing beings.

My time is spent among archaeological items from Greece, Rome, and Egypt. I study and conserve them for evidence of the people who made, used, and were buried with these objects thousands of years ago. I have the privilege of feeling how they rest in my hand, as they once did in someone else’s. I see up close the exquisite craftsmanship and the evidence of use that made these surfaces the way they are today. To be a temporary steward of archaeological items is also to be aware that many of them are funerary, placed in loved ones’ graves to ensure safe passage to the next life. It is intimate, emotional work.

While my grandfather spent his days in tropical forests, I spend much of mine in the dense thickets of digital databases and internet servers. Many of us cultural heritage professionals do this mundane, often thankless work: checking paperwork, updating records, writing reports, tracking items from one place to another.

Because of such work, I found a catalogue record in the British Library –

the passport for someone with the same name as my grandfather – which found me in London in February 2020.

A reader, not a relative

The news was filled with talk of a strange virus but within the quiet Reading Room, time stood still. Waiting to receive the item, I felt excitement, dread, and regret. Dread, because what if this was not my grandfather’s passport? Regret, because I’d been in this room before, not knowing that this document, once perhaps in my grandfather’s pocket as he made the journey to Scotland, was within reach. It arrived in an envelope labelled “please use this to issue passports to reader.” I had become a reader, not a relative. The cover gave nothing away but the catalogue information. I forced myself not to rush to the photograph page in case it wasn’t him.

On the front page, embossed with “Empire of India,” was my grandfather’s name and his status: “British protected person, native of the Indian state of Travancore.” The document held intimate details of his life, body, and birthdate, which none of my family remembered or even knew.

Then came the photograph. The relief of knowing his face from features I recognise in my mother, aunts, uncles. Here he was, at the tender age of twenty, alone. His own self.

What does it mean to meet your kin for the first time in a colonial archive? I was overcome with irreconcilable emotions. Anger and grief: for the loss of my family member, his life marked by the violence of colonialism, and the ongoing loss to my family, two generations later. But also, gratitude towards all those who cared for this object and brought it to me nearly a century later: my professional kin. How to make sense of this embeddedness of harm and recovery, disconnection and reunion?

Part of me wondered what it would feel like to walk out of the library with my grandfather’s passport. Surely it belonged more to me than an archive where anyone might request it, touch it, read these intimate details? Family members asked me the same question: why do they have it when we should?

What do I owe the families?

Our professional literature is finally beginning to urge us to “decolonise” our institutions and practices. I find myself at a loss as to what that would mean for me. I am the descendant of British



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colonial “subjects” and an immigrant and settler on Native land in a place now called Baltimore, the ancestral homeland of the Susquehannock people, a place of gathering and stewardship of the Accohannock, Piscataway, Nanticoke, Lumbee, and Cherokee peoples.

I have trained and worked in a discipline and in institutions built on colonial, imperial, and white supremacist ideologies. Every decision I make preserves the vestiges of those histories and legacies. What can I decolonise without losing part of myself and my family’s story? What does repatriation, return, or reunion mean for me, and for the work I do?

As a carer for items that are thousands of years old, separated from descendant communities by millennia and geographic distance, I’ve long worried about this question: what do I owe the families and loved ones of the ancient dead?

I am a conservator. I believe in the value of repair. When repair isn’t possible, I believe in the potential of care, to care long enough that the person who needs to find these items will someday find them, just as a long line of anonymous carers did for me.

During lockdown, working remotely, I took daily walks in a small urban forest, footsteps from where I live. It’s nothing like south India’s forests; still, I wondered about my ever-growing attachment to the trees I met regularly, whose small changes I noted day after day. I thought about the funerary items I care for, that eased the passage of loved ones from one life to the next, just as a passport eased my grandfather’s movement from one world to another.

What if it’s these items that witness our transitions, mark our time, ease our passage from one way of being in the world, into another, more caring one? **IP**