

Historians Doing Other Regions of the World | La Recherche d'autres régions du monde



When he first stepped ashore in 1867, Mark Twain found Britain's tiny mid-Atlantic colony of Bermuda a delightful place. Wearing by a long trip to the Holy Land, Twain found Bermuda's semi-tropical aesthetic immediately restful. "A few days among the breezy groves, the flower gardens, the coral caves, and the lovely vistas of blue water," he wrote in *The Innocents Abroad*, his memoir of the trip, "... restored the energies dulled by long drowsing on the ocean." Twain would return habitually to Bermuda - or "Berm-o-oda" as his stretched it out in his Southern drawl. "You can go to heaven if you want to - I'd rather stay here in Bermuda," he would quip from the verandah of his favourite hotel. Sadly, he failed to keep this promise; just weeks before his death in 1910 he was stretched in pain off the island to return to his Connecticut home. "I have no sorrowful associations with Bermuda," he remarked by way of consolation.

Twain's knack for foregrounding the essence of place paid handsome dividends to the island colony. A decade earlier Anthony Trollope had castigated "the backwardness of the island" and "the sleepiness" of its people. In that era, a Royal Navy base monitoring the pretensions of the young American republic sustained the local economy, while local farmers shipped succulent onions to North American green grocers. To this day, Bermudians call themselves "onions." However, the island's economy was in the doldrums: Americans were increasingly growing their own onions and Britain's frictions with the Yankees were abating after

the Civil War. Twain's infatuation with Bermuda thus luckily coincided with a recognition that the sunny, winter-warm island - a two-day sea journey from New York - might serve as a resort for well-heeled Americans. Here was a salubrious place, constantly warmed by the Gulf Stream, where the strained nerves of a society in the thick of the hurly-burly of industrial life might be restored. Enticed by Gilded Age largesse and facilitated by advances in ocean travel, Bermuda was strategically positioned to pioneer modern carriage-trade tourism. Soon, it was styling itself as "the Isles of Rest" and "Nature's Fairyland."

Twain was not alone in discovering the allure of the small (just 53 square kilometers and 12,100 people in 1871) island. In the late decades of the nineteenth century, other articulate, cultured Americans followed in Twain's footsteps. William Dean Howells, co-author with Twain of *The Gilded Age*, a stinging indictment of the materialism of the times, found respite in Bermuda, writing in *Harper's* that "there is more beauty to the square foot in Bermuda than anywhere else in the world." Painter Winslow Homer captured Bermuda's pastel softness on canvases that soon adorned the drawing rooms of the rich. Princess Louise, daughter of Queen Victoria and wife of Canada's Governor-General, spent the winter of 1883 in Bermuda. So great was her celebrity that the *New York Times* dispatched a reporter to track her every movement, thereby publicizing the island's charms. To this day, one of the colony's poshest hotels - the Princess - recalls that celebrity visit.

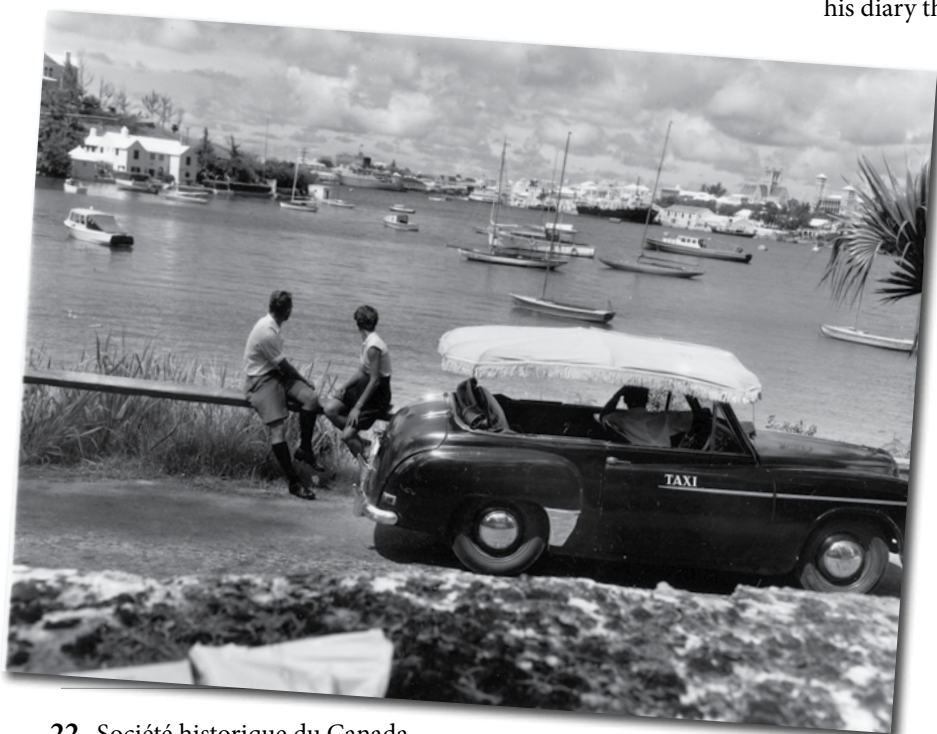


In the early twentieth century, Bermuda's reputation blossomed. The colonial government meticulously 'groomed the bloom,' hiring New York advertising agents, doling out steamship subsidies and inducing seasoned hoteliers to Bermuda's shores. Bermuda became the place to be. Princeton University President and soon-to-be-American president Woodrow Wilson regarded "dear" Bermuda as "a chance to flower and be natural and follow your own thought!" Twain and Wilson were, for instance, instrumental in convincing Bermuda's Assembly to ban automobiles – "snakes in paradise" – from their roads, a ban that lasted until 1946. While a straight-laced Presbyterian such as Wilson would never have admitted it, many Americans came to Bermuda to escape Prohibition. Bermuda was not only pleasantly "British", as the tourist literature stressed, it was also "wet" well inland from its glorious pink sand beaches.

By the 1920s, the New York steamer was delivering a weekly cargo of illustrious North Americans to Bermuda. The memoirs and biographies of literati including James Thurber, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, E.B. White, Eugene O'Neill, Hervey Allen and Sinclair Lewis are punctuated with Bermuda interludes. Thurber and Benchley, for instance, helped shape the birth of the colony's first magazine, *The Bermudian*, in 1930, impregnating it with the style and wit of *The New Yorker*. To this day, *The Bermudian's* "From the Crow'snest" monthly column mimics its mentor's "Talk of the Town." For his part, E.B. White bought a bicycle to explore the island's oleander-lined roads: "It does seem odd that people should fly here at 250 m.p.h. in order to ride a bicycle."

Georgia O'Keeffe came to restore her nerves and paint the semi-tropical flora, as did such Canadian artists as John Lyman, Yvonne McKague Houser, André Biéler and Jack Bush. Even Canada's stuffy Prime Minister Mackenzie King liked the place; it was, he wrote in his diary on a 1930 visit, as beautiful as Italy but "without smells and dirt." Over the years, Britons also discovered the island. Noel Coward lived there in the 1950s, writing in his diary that it was "a sweet island, much, much nicer to live on than I expected." Bermuda's seduction of off-shore sensibilities perhaps peaked in 1980, when Beatle John Lennon escaped New York to reconnect with his muse. He found it in Bermuda's Botanical Garden, where his eye fell upon a beautiful *Double Fantasy* bloom, a sight that would inspire his last album. Unlike the dying Twain, Lennon left his Bermuda "paradise" rejuvenated. He would soon meet his death on the streets of New York.

My own discovery of Bermuda in 1976 was far less dramatic than the above encounters. In my childhood, Bermuda made cameo appearances. My father, a destroyer captain in the Canadian Navy, engaged in Cold War exercises off Bermuda and returned to Halifax with tales of pink sand, rum swizzles and the Union Jack in mid-Atlantic. Later, as a Canadian attending a British public school, my English godfather sent me weekly updates from his winter home in Bermuda – about Gulf Stream warmth and flowers



in February. But it took my fiancée, Sandy Campbell, a doctoral student in Canadian literature, to actually get me to Bermuda. Sandy suggested – aesthetically and intellectually mesmerized by an earlier visit – that we honeymoon in Bermuda. Honeymoons had long been a mainstay of Bermuda tourism, a kind of economic loss leader for the tourism industry aimed at stimulating lifelong return visits. We thus stepped onto a well-worn and happy path, renting mopeds to explore the island and having an obligatory photograph taken beneath a Bermudian coral moon gate. And return we did!

I was immediately fascinated by the intricacy of Bermudian life. Its size, beauty and social subtlety sat in stark contrast to my doctoral research back in Canada, a study of Sir James Dunn and the Canadian steel industry. Steelmaking and entrepreneurship are undeniably crucial to national prosperity, but Bermuda offered something that seemed much less prosaic, something very seductive to the historical mind. How so?

One of the benighting characteristics of modern cruise ship tourism is that it promotes only superficial understanding of places visited. Hurried walk-about shore visits by cruise ship passengers seldom impart any intrinsic sense of the host society. As early as 1961, American historian Daniel Boorstein warned that mass tourism was “a stage for pseudo-events.” A week on a moped scooting around Bermuda in 1976 told me that a complex and long-standing heritage lay behind Bermuda’s touristic quaintly British facade (tourism theorists would soon apply the term “the gaze” to this phenomenon). The colony had had, for instance, representative government since its Assembly first met in 1620. Yet, Bermuda’s democracy was also stunted by slavery until emancipation in 1834 as well as by a white, male patriarchy that denied women the vote until the mid-twentieth century. Full universal suffrage only emerged with the 1968 constitution. Like many British colonial societies, there was a long-dominant white mercantile class – the so-called “Forty Thieves.” Paradoxically, it had been that elite who had masterfully engineered the brilliant rise of Bermuda tourism with its powerful trickle-down benefits for *all* Bermudians in varying degrees. Today, for instance, Bermuda, now an “overseas territory” with a population of 66,000, enjoys the third highest GDP per person (US\$97,553 in 2015) in the world.

Other things intrigued me. Like Canada, Bermuda has long wrestled with the “race” problem: in its case, how to balance the interests of a black majority with those of a sizable and entrenched white minority. Where did expatriate workers, so crucial to the success of tourism and off-shore companies in Bermuda, fit into this society? And what explained the deeply conservative nature of island society? There is to this day no gambling and an embarrassingly recalcitrant attitude to gay rights. Why is there no income tax? So many historical question marks punctuated my initial interrogation of Bermuda.

In short, for four decades I have enjoyed a busman’s holiday in Bermuda. A superb national archives coupled with a world-class national museum at the old naval dockyard, a national gallery

and a rich tradition of local history – along with a deep well of oral history – have at times given me a sense that I too am vicariously “an onion.” Three books have emerged from this. The first, *Another World: Bermuda and the Rise of Modern Tourism*, was published in 1999 by Macmillan in London. A second, *Short Bermudas: Essays on Island Life*, appeared in 2015 with the National Museum of Bermuda Press. Co-authored with my wife Sandy Campbell (a women’s studies specialist), the book presents twenty-one topics as varied as Sandy’s exploration of Susanna Moodie’s transcription of Bermuda slave Mary Prince’s autobiography and my reading of the 1920s expropriation of black-owned farms in Tucker’s Town to facilitate an enclave of *ne plus ultra* white tourism.

The latter essay addressed a memory of displacement long suppressed in Bermuda – long considered too racially touchy to acknowledge in Bermuda. When asked to give a public lecture on the subject, I was warned by some to steer clear of the topic. One of my abiding memories as a historian is therefore the presence of over four hundred people crowding into a hall at Bermuda College and a local church the next night, not just to hear a professor pontificate but, more importantly, to engage in a multiracial dialogue among themselves about their past. A forthcoming third book, *The Old Bermudas* (National Museum of Bermuda Press, 2019), a folio-sized volume on the life and times of Canadian modernist artist John Lyman (1885-1967) in Bermuda in the 1910s, is the product of joint scholarship with an architectural historian, a prominent Bermuda archaeologist and an American material historian. In Bermuda, Lyman, a student of Henri Matisse and Wilson Morrice, affirmed his modernist *métier* on canvas while at the same time embracing the traditionalism of Bermuda’s vernacular coral stone architecture.

Beyond the books, Sandy and I have published many articles in *The Bermudian*, the *Bermuda Journal of Archaeology and Maritime History* and in local newspapers, along with lecturing and supporting exhibitions. The real joy of all this has been that we have really connected with a gratifying cross section of Bermudians thereby popping the academic bubble which all too often constrains the reach of our work back home.

I sometimes describe Bermuda as my “academic counterpoint.” It has indeed provided a second rich focus of learning, for which I am eternally grateful. I also reflect on the wry irony that it took an island in the mid-Atlantic to wean me from the insularity of home-grown history, something which has made me a better historian. As the island’s motto -- *Qua Fata Ferunt* (“Whither the Fates Carry Us”) – suggests, the fates have carried me to a fruitful shore.

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