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Secrets of the Prize Papers: Echoes of Empire

The National Archives holds over 4,000 boxes of letters, papers, and artefacts from ships captured by the British between 1652 and 1815.

Join us for the conclusion of our three-part series diving deep into the fascinating Prize Papers collection. In this episode, Chloe Lee takes a step back from the ship logs and scrawled letters to uncover the grand tapestry of colonialism, empire building, and trade. With insights from experts Lucas Haasis and Annika Raapke-Öberg, we explore the intricate and often surprising history of the high seas.

For more information about the Prize Papers project, visit <https://www.prizepapers.de/>.

For more information about the records covered in this episode, look at our research guides to [High Court of Admiralty](#). For help navigating our catalogue, you can watch our [top-level tips on using Discovery](#).

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Transcript:

When working in an archive, you sometimes encounter collections so immense, that they are hard to comprehend. The Prize Papers is one such collection, consisting of objects and papers confiscated from private ships captured by the British between 1652 and 1815.

The Prize Papers collection is so vast that it remained unexamined for years. However, we are now finally making progress on it. The work is expected to take a full team of people 20 years to complete! While we don't have that much time today, we are dedicating three episodes of our podcast to this topic.

I'm Chloe Lee, a Migration and Citizenship Researcher at The National Archives. I also host our podcast, On the Record at The National Archives, where we uncover the past through stories of everyday people.

In this episode of On the Record, I want to zoom out of the ships' logbooks and scrawled letters from the Prize Papers collection, and see the bigger, global context. The fact is that they reveal so much about how the modern world was developing between the 17th and 19th centuries - through colonialism, empire building, and trade.

Chloe Lee: We're all in different places today, reflecting the global nature of the Prize Papers project.

Hi Lucas and Annika. Let me know where you're joining from today.

Lucas Hassis:

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I'm at The National Archives. So that's a good thing.

Annika Raapke-Öberg:

Hello, I'm joining you from Sweden, from the Stockholm area where I'm currently waiting for a big snowstorm to hit.

Chloe:

Wow, oh, so you're wrapped up a bit like me in Streatham today, South London.

Annika:

Exactly.

Chloe Lee:

Thanks. Thanks so much for joining me. So yes, today we have Lucas Haasis, the research coordinator of the Prize Papers project, and Annika Rapke-Öberg from Uppsala University. Both specialists in the collection looking at different items and records, but with an eye on what they tell us about this bigger picture.

So Lucas, can I ask you what your interests are and how the Price Papers help you work on that?

Lucas:

Well, I began working on the Prize Papers 12 years ago, and I was immediately blown away by the abundance of opportunities for a wide variety of research. And then I developed my own research based on the first findings in the prize papers for my PhD thesis on letter writing, merchants, international trade, the materiality of the past and global lives. And since 2018 as you said, I've also had the privilege of being the research coordinator of the project and have been able to put

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all my efforts into facilitating international research on the Prize Papers. And it is my greatest pleasure to make people worldwide aware of the Prize Papers and to support them in developing research projects, small and bigger ones. And just to give you some examples, we currently have 130 different document types from all over the world listed in the collection.

So the research possibilities in connection with the Prize Papers are there for almost unlimited. The Prize Papers allow research in a wide variety of topics, including, for instance: global developments, seafaring, of course, migration, conflict, communication, even linguistics. So there are 19 different languages in the collection, including also rare languages, so languages that you cannot really find in other archives. Examples include, for instance, Armenian. We have a big collection of Armenian documents and letters, Yiddish letters, Basque letters. So in France at the moment, we have two large-scale projects on early modern French, for instance. And we have supported and contributed to an exhibition in Cebu in France, where a new project on Basque letters will begin next year. And in contrast to other archives, the Prize Papers represent a cross-section of many different societies and many societal groups. So the collection allows for a kind of a history from below, incorporating perspectives from a wide range of people, and, for instance, including the lower classes also, which is very rare. So there are, in for instance, also many letters written by illiterate people.

The collection also preserves the voices of men, but also a lot of women and even of children from a multitude of societies, and it particularly puts the focus on marginalized voices, which is again crucial for research on colonialism. And just recently, we opened an exhibition in Berlin on prize papers and slavery, and we entered into a cooperation with the Slave Voyages Project to fulfil our responsibility to address colonialism and slavery in the project. So in short, you can say, in many ways that the price papers will change the way we see the past.

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Chloe:

Wow, there's so much going on. Thank you for telling us of just, I guess, a little window into your world as Research Coordinator, Lucas. Annika, what's your interest with the Prize Papers collection?

Annika:

Well, I'm a Caribbean historian, and you could say I've become one through my work with the Prize Papers and focusing mostly on 18th and early 19th century colonial histories. And I too have been working on the Prize Papers since 2012 when I started at the same time as Lucas we started together. And I love how this collection challenges old narratives of coloniality and of colonial lives by basically hitting us in the face with the ubiquity the everywhere-ness of coloniality in our past. The Prize Papers will show you the scale of involvement in colonial affairs by states who were supposedly not colonial powers, by private individuals who were not merchants or had no obvious links to colonialism, by trading companies, trading companies and merchants, obviously, but really, by all kinds of seemingly unconnected individuals, groups, states. And I also love how the Prize Papers will sometimes just spring other voices on you, like Lucas already said, they will suddenly show you oppressed voices, voices that are usually seemingly lost or muted. And you have to be prepared for basically anything when you work with the price papers. And that is amazing.

Chloe:

I mean, in our very first episode, Oliver, who also works on the project, showed me some of the records in the collection, and the kind of unexpected and vicarious way that things show up is so interesting. So thanks for drawing attention to that.

In my work at Kew, we are the Archive for State. And so often we look at, we're looking at the high-

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level kind of records. So this collection is really unique in that way, and kind of following on from that. Lucas, I want to ask you what items have impacted your view of history and changed the way that you see the past through working with this collection?

Lucas:

So let me start again, saying that the Prize Papers never fails to deliver an unexpected surprise. So basically, every time you visit The National Archives, and I'm here for this week, so I will find something new, a new and exciting find awaits you. What blew me away, above all else, was the large number of letters written by women, which already shows in correct research that many more women were able to write actually than we have long assumed.

One particular letter that fascinated me is that of a poor barber's daughter whose husband had left her and gone to America, and she writes in her own handwriting, although she comes from a from a poor background, and begs her husband, in the most touching and prayerful tone to bring her and the children to America too. Many letters in the Prize, Papers written by women, by mothers, daughters, wives, open up completely new perspectives on women's history and women's writing in particular.

We also find letters written from written by children, from children, and they provide insights into family history, but also love and affection, but also sometimes show global perspectives. So as some of them were exchanged between continents, for instance, in one letter sent from the Cape of Good Hope to the Netherlands to Amsterdam, where a daughter asked her father for toys. So even you have these two continents, you would write about something which stays in the family, so to say. Literacy in general is an important area of study in the prize papers, particularly with regard to seafarers and their skills, which we have underestimated for centuries. So to say, again, I'll give you just one more example, I found a small notebook of a simple sailor, in which he

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learned to write by practising the alphabet first and then practising religious texts only to arrive at a single continuous text in this notebook, a Christian poem for his daughter for her baptism. Which he was unfortunately unable to attend because he was in Saint Eustatius. Last thing I wrote my dissertation on a merchant's entire archive, which I found in the Prize Papers, the Lutkins Archive, which contains over 2400 letters from this merchant, that allowed me to write a micro-history of this merchant and his life during his establishment phase in France.

Chloe:

Thank you for that. Lucas, yes, I remember in episode one, we had a little look at some poetry that Oliver pointed out, some sailor's poetry. And it was, it was quite, quite fun to read. But, you know, some people might think, Well, why is it important to get into those finer details of some someone's history, one person, when you're looking for insights into a big historical picture, why is that important?

Lucas:

Well, it's, it's easy because the individuals collectively make up the broader historical narrative. And the distinctive feature of the prize papers is that we get 1000s of these individual stories, all of which shape the structures in which these people lived in the past. So this is what we in research call global microhistory. By zooming in and out on individuals, we can understand how societal structure shaped their lives, and vice versa, how individuals impacted larger historical trends. And there's a quite apt quote by a historian I really like Giovanni Levy, to describe this approach. And it says, "even the apparently minute action of say, somebody going to buy a loaf of bread actually encompasses the far wider system of the whole world's grain markets". And that quote encapsulated the very characteristic of the price papers. They are global in scope, but always also micro in character. So that is the price papers allow for both perspectives. So we have, you have the panorama and you have the portrait. But in the end, particularly when speaking of the archival

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experience, speaking coming here. It comes down to meeting the individual people of the past, which sometimes even extends to meeting families whose lineage still exists today. So you also can find them in the price papers.

Chloe:

I see, I love that idea of portrait, and what was it panorama?

Lucas:

So you have both, you have big panorama, and then you have the portrait of every single actor in the Prize Papers.

Chloe:

That's a really helpful metaphor. And you just mentioned about tracing an individual. Have you managed to meet any modern descendants of the people you've studied?

Lucas:

Yeah, but basically, they found us. So they found our research, and then they contacted us. So I had the privilege of meeting descendants twice, of two of my research subjects. First, we had the privilege of meeting Friederike Tellis descendants, the women I was talking about before. The letter I told you about, the tragic letter. And the tragic background is that Friederike's husband actually started a new life in America, so he wouldn't bring them to America. The positive consequence, however, is that we were able to welcome this family, the Millers, who were really kind and grateful from Utah back in 2019 at The National Archives and show them the letters. So it was very, very emotional for all of us.

The second encounter with descendants was even more emotional for me personally. I recently

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met the descendants of the merchant, I spent 10 years researching for my dissertation, and they found my book on the internet and contacted me. So I invited them to London, and we looked at all the documents of their ancestor, and in return, they showed me his original seal, which they still have, which they brought and which matches the letters that have survived in The National Archives. So what a coincidence, though, it was just very emotional to bring it together. And this also shows the importance of the Prize Papers for family history and for genealogy, for instance.

Chloe:

That's so interesting, and it must be so gratifying as a researcher to kind of make that living, breathing example and bring that, bring that into your research.

Lucas:

Definitely and just welcoming the family here at the National Archives to give them the full experience and to see these documents written by their ancestor, that's just amazing.

Chloe:

I think it shows a level of care as well that you yourself have taken in your own practice. Lucas, so, thank you for sharing that with us so generously. And Annika, you told us about how the Prize Papers can give us insights into empire and colonialism and everyday people. Do you have an example you could share?

Annika:

Yes, of course, lots, for example, have been using the prize papers to study the lives of free black women in the colonial Caribbean. And I'm mostly interested in free black women that worked in small trade. And I've been basically tracking and tracing them through a variety of documents, sales, books and accounts and letters from the prize papers, and to uncover the stories that are

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hidden in in these documents

Chloe:

I see. And so what are these stories Exactly? And can you help me with the kind of context we're in? You said free black women, this is at a time of slavery, right?

Annika:

Yes, it is a time of slavery. If you look at the history of enslavement in the Caribbean, then you have from the beginning, a new population group that comes up when white colonials and enslavers are living together in close proximity with enslaved people, especially enslaved women. And there is a lot of sexual exploitation that happens, but especially at the beginning of European colonialism, these rules that we know that become so characteristic of slavery characterised societies such as segregation, very strict segregation. They are not as strict at the beginning. So in the beginning, we really have families forming that of a white, European man and an originally enslaved woman that then is many admitted through, marriage. So in the beginning, we really have legitimate families forming that of mixed backgrounds that produce children of colour that are then free. But there's also lots of children that are born of enslaved mothers who are then... I have to say, that slavery is matrilineal, so if the mother of a child is enslaved, then the child is also born enslaved. But then sometimes these children are freed by their by their fathers, or through other circumstances. So there is, from the beginning, a very, very mixed population group of free black people that exist on a very wide social spectrum, from quite wealthy, very well educated people and families to people who really have nothing but their own freedom.

Chloe:

Thank you. That's really helpful to clarify that for us. So the prize papers, they reveal something about the connection that these women had to the authorities.

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Annika:

Yes, they do, they do show. They show, very, very, a great variety of aspects about the lives of free black women. And I would like to weave in a tiny thing here. The thing is that these things have never been hidden in a way. But due to... but they have never really been seen until a group of very, very important Black feminist scholars started to really draw attention to how we actually tell the stories of free black women. Either ignoring them or only seeing them in very, very limited and almost fetishising ways. And thanks to the work of these Black feminist historians, we can now really look at archival material in a different way and see how many free black women actually are there. And there are lots.

So in this way, it's the archive that has hidden these stories. But historians themselves have not really helped uncover them, until relatively recently, and now we can see that, for example, free black women were really... had quite... made quite big impacts on the communities in which they lived. That they had quite interesting relationships with the colonial authorities at times that they actually knew how to handle the colonial authorities quite, quite well, in quite, in quite smart ways, and that they lived really full lives, even though the cards were stacked against them in many ways. And they lived in societies which were shaped by what we today would call really extreme and horrible racism and sexism, but they still managed to create these networks, these families, to sometimes thrive, really thrive economically. So we have very full histories there, but we need to want to find them and in the Prize Papers we can.

Chloe:

So through what you've found in the Prize Papers collection, or maybe what you found is not a very helpful lead in Annika, I bear in mind what you just said. But what do the letters reveal about these women? Is there a particular incident or story that you can tell us?

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Annika:

Well, I can give you two of my favourite stories, which show what the Prize Papers have to offer, both in stories and histories a little more extreme, and in everyday history, which is really necessary also for us to balance our historical storytelling. So my, my absolute favourite Prize Papers story is actually not based on letters. Well, there's one letter, but it's mostly sales documents. And it's the story of a group of free black women in the French colony of Saint Domingue, which is today Haiti, and which was one of Europe's most brutal and horrifying colonies ever you could say. And it takes place in the harbour, poor city of Cap-Français, in April 1777 where European ships' captains have landed to sell their wares. And it was quite normal that all kinds of sale sales, and basically shopping was done on credit. So people would give their names and addresses and then they would just sort of buy, buy stuff on credit, and at some point return to pay. And in April 1777 a group of free black women came to one of the European ship's captains, and they buy lots of very fashionable consumer goods. It's like printed fabrics and salted meats and all on credit, and then they go away. And it's all quite normal, until several months later, where we learn that the ship is about to leave, but only two of the women have shown up again to pay and the other ones have just disappeared. And they've just, they just vanished together with all the goods. And then the one letter that we have here is written by the captain. It's actually a letter copy where he tries to explain to the owner of the goods that these women have taken that well, you know, they have disappeared. The authorities can't find them. And the thing is that they've pulled the same stunt with 31 ships' captains in the same boat. So they have really pulled a major heist on 31 European ships' captains and just run away with a huge mountain of European Trading goods. And you know, you have to keep in mind that we don't know why they did it, but we have to, we have to acknowledge that these women were extremely competent and knowledgeable to be able to pull this off in this very dangerous societal context.

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And the other story, which I love very much, is actually a letter, and it's a letter written by a woman called Claude, and she is a free black woman from Saint Domingue, from the same colony. And she writes her letter from France at the time where the French Revolution is starting to turn really nasty. In 1793 and she writes to her mother, who's still in Saint Domingue, and her mother's name is Julie Chatular, and she finds herself also in the midst of a revolution, the Haitian Revolution, where the enslaved population manages to shake off colonialism and free themselves. But of course, in 1793 it's not clear yet that this is going to go this way. So basically, Claudine, sitting in the middle of a revolution, writes to her mother, who's also in the midst of a revolution. And she hasn't heard from her mother in a long time, and she's super worried, and she is in France with her little daughter, and in the letter to her mother, she writes, have you forgotten that your granddaughter misses you little or sends her hugs and Claudine tries to send money to her mother. She actually does not send this letter. She gives it to a woman who's supposed to travel to the colony on a ship. Of course, the woman is captured alongside the ship, and this letter, in a way... Lucas will know that this is a very the content of this letter is very common. But what we see here, which is what is unfortunately uncommon, is that we have a testimony of a black family, and one of history is probably most tumultuous times, just being a family, just trying to keep in touch over long distances in times of really grave danger, and just showing love, caring for each other at grave distances. And of course, they would have done that, but these kinds of testimonies are unfortunately, really rare for black families, and that's why it's such a classic price papers treasure this letter.

Chloe:

Thank you so much. Annika, I think yes, trying to trying to think through that idea of one person being in the midst of a revolution, writing to another, and also these stories from people that we don't usually see that much in traditional history, keeping practices right is fascinating. And so I really want to know how you work on piercing those stories together.

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Annika:

Well, that is mostly our work of context. And I have to say, unfortunately, I have to out myself here that this is not these, these stories... if you really want to have more than just a tiny glimpse, then you will have to go outside of the Prize Papers too. Because the Prize Papers do too. Of course, they are extremely... they are basically archives of chance. They just happened. You cannot because of this. This the nature of this archive, how it came about. We can or don't have context information. We have just slight glimpses and windows into people's lives. So if you want to find out anything else, you will have to go into other archives as well and really do detective work there. So you find amazing stories and Prize Papers, but then you will have to get out, take them, take them, sort of outside, to make them even more amazing.

Chloe:

Yes, and that's often what we have to do when we're working with archival collections. Generally, you know, we can look at one record, but that doesn't reveal the whole story. Actually, it's more of a gateway into a bit more of a maze. And yeah, and kind of on that. I want to bring Lucas back in and hear you both talk together about your experiences working on this collection. What's it like when it does just seem so vast and so overwhelming?

Lucas:

Yeah, I can start, of course, sometimes I have to admit the collection overwhelms you, because there's simply so much, but then the collection also surprises us again and again with every document. And we've just given you some examples, it's always just one document, giving a whole story around it. And this makes it very exciting to work on this project. And at a recent event, together with colleagues from the Faroe Islands, we cut open, for instance, sealed parcels containing clothing, grain and coins, and together, we found the red jumper that our conservator

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Marina must have also told you about in her episode. So it is important to us that we work together in the team, with the different teams, but also with researchers from the societies of the document's origin. And we also depend on this collaboration, because we are just a few people, so we are dependent on collaboration. And the whole point of my position is the need for this international collaboration, which is not just a hope, but a necessity. So to say in the project, given that we are dealing with a vast amount of highly diverse documents. So as you can see, Annika is working on it, I am working on it, but a lot of other people are working on it too, and this is very important. So we aim to become a point of contact for many projects, individuals and institutions from around the world, both now and in the future. And we have this funding, hopefully we have the prospective funding period of 20 years. So we are presented with a unique opportunity of being able to establish a network, a sustainable network of researchers working with the collection, spanning the globe, not only today online, but in all the research, and bringing together people from multiple countries and contexts, including also the wider public, which is very important. So I hear not only speaking from my perspective or my own position in the project but in general terms. So collaboration, I can only say, is an important aim of the project, which we hope to expand more and more. This is why such a podcast here is so important for us. So thank you so much.

Chloe:

No, you're welcome. It's been so great to have you as a guest and hear more about that idea of collaboration, and you touched on Marina and her work. And yes, it's not just historians, maybe like myself or Annika or yourself Lucas, but actually, this project seems to cross lots of different disciplinary boundaries, right? And that's why it can bring us new insights. Annika, what's it like to work on such a big collection?

Annika:

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Well, I'm running the risk of sounding a bit romantic here, but I've, over the years, I have developed the feeling that the archive, this collection, is basically like a living creature. Sometimes it's playful, sometimes it will tease you by not really showing you what you need. Sometimes it's very loving and just opening up amazing things. And sometimes it's just stubborn and won't, won't give you anything. So it's, it's because of its, I think, because of its nature. You cannot really plan on finding things in the Prize Papers. There are things that you can plan. If you go through the court records, for example, the ship's papers, you can be fairly certain that you will find certain things and information and, yeah, just aspects that you can really be certain that you will be able to find answers for. But there's so much that you just cannot plan. And, for example, these, these, these things that I've presented that is something you find when you're lucky, but you will get that lucky quite often when you work with the Prize Papers. So yeah, it's to me, they're quite alive.

Chloe:

There's something in the slow work of the project, isn't there, Lucas?

Lucas:

Yeah, yeah. This is also why it takes so long. But this is, this is not only a challenge, but also this gives us perspective all the time.

Chloe:

Thank you. Thank you both and I want to maybe push you a bit further and ask Lucas, what's your hope for this work?

Lucas:

I hope that we get many more contacts and people interested in this collection. So we as a project, but also each of us working in the project and as associated researchers, we bear an important

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responsibility due to the diverse, this multilingual, 19 languages, and the global nature of the collection of the Prize Papers. So in the near future, we hope to extend our activity, activities and collaborations to more non-European partners, because, as I said, it's it's global in scope. And of course, I hope that over the next 15 or more years, more people will become interested in the collection and start their own research projects. There are smaller research PhDs, but larger projects. Also for me personally, I aim to finish my second book next year. So wish me luck for that. But I won't reveal the content yet, so maybe, maybe next year, working on that now. So this is what I'm working on now. So there will be more and more research, and we hope to support it wherever we can.

Chloe:

Thanks, Lucas, yeah, we may, we may bring you back. What about you? What are your hopes for this project?

Annika:

Well, Lucas, now you see it. I'm also going to publish my second book next year on the Prize Papers. So let's, let's do a joint book release or something. But my hope is that which makes the Prize Paper so charming that they're hard to control. That they are somehow alive, that this will be through the digitization project in the database, that this will be limited somehow because while the charm is, of course, charming, it also makes it harder for people from around the globe to do research. Because, of course, research funding is often tied to a guarantee of results. So for a proper decolonization effort. It would be great if people didn't have to come sort of and just hope for the best. So I really hope that with the cataloguing, with the fantastic work that is being done at The National Archives and an old book, that it will be a more reliable resource for people to use so that all these so that in its in this way, the archive can become more can become decolonized, in a way, and more open to people from really around the globe like Lucas says, that would be my

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hope.

Chloe:

Thanks Annika and Lucas.

So that’s it - the end of our three episodes on the Prize Papers, and we’ve barely scratched the surface of this vast collection.

We’ve heard about the size and significance of the collection, how they are being analysed scientifically and with historical expertise, and what they tell us about how the world came to be the way it is.

You can find out more about the [Prize Papers Collection on the project website](#). There you can search the documents and even read and analyse some of the ones we’ve discussed in this series.

The Prize Papers project is part of the Göttingen Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Germany, based at the University of Oldenburg and here at the TNA, working with the German Historical Institute London, and the VZG. As of 2018, the project has been part of the Academies Programme of the German Union of the Academies of Sciences and Humanities.

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We'll include that link in the episode description and on our website. You can also share your feedback or suggestions for future series by emailing us at OnTheRecord@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

Finally, thank you to all our experts and guests who contributed to this episode. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Tash Walker and Adam Zmith of Aunt Nell, for The National Archives.

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