Confidential Print: North America, 1824-1961: Canada, the Caribbean and the USA

Review Number:
910
Publish date:
Tuesday, 1 June, 2010
Editor:
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Date of Publication:
2009
Publisher:
Adam Matthew Digital
Publisher url:
http://www.amdigital.co.uk/collections/Confidential-Print-N-America/default.aspx?collectionSection=detailed
Place of Publication:
Marlborough
Reviewer:
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This is a digitised, full-text searchable collection of the Foreign and Colonial Offices' entire *Confidential Print* [2] series relating to North America (Canada, Caribbean and the USA) for the period 1824–1961, an initial batch launched by The National Archives (TNA) with Archives Direct and Adam Matthew Digital. The *Confidential Print* series was a distillation of what the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office considered to be the 'most important' papers emanating from their offices and was distributed widely, usually in pamphlet form, both internally and to Cabinet and leading officials abroad. The pamphlets contained minutes, memoranda and other official material and correspondence on the major subjects of the time and provided a convenient and at times insightful narrative of British diplomacy on a range of issues, large and small.

Anyone who has conducted archival research using documents from these two Whitehall departments will be familiar with the utility of the *Confidential Print* series, popping up as it does in the odd folder or box of archived material in various government and personal papers. Indeed, over the years efforts have been made to bring selections of these condensed tablets of official wisdom together in one place as published collections by Kenneth Bourne, Donald C. Watt, David Keith, Michael Partridge and George Philip (their efforts also targeted North America as well as Latin America). As the introductory remarks and the short essay by Abi Husainy (Kew) and John Trumpbour (Harvard) attached to the collection highlights, the *Confidential Print* series has been a valuable source for researchers in evaluating official policy towards a specific region of the world – the unbiased view 'from the horses mouth', so to speak. In this sense one may agree with Husainy and Trumpbour's assessment that the 150 year long series represents 'one of the fundamental building blocks for research', even more so when *Confidential Print* embodies – as is the case in some areas – all that remains of since 'lost' original documents. *Confidential Print*, it must be remembered, was a *selection* from what was often a vast swathe of material of what these two government

departments considered were the most helpful documents in briefing leading officials and politicians. It is not the full, unabridged story, and doubtless leaves out countless minutes and commentary that so often decorates the dust-jackets of subject files – often hand-written and quite colourful – as the papers were passed from one desk to another of the various departmental personnel. Still, there is no doubt that an early trawl of the relevant *Confidential Print* series is a must for anyone setting out to investigate British foreign or colonial policy as it will inevitably guide them down fresh avenues of more detailed study of the original sources. As Husainy and Trumpbour suggest, historians and archivists have found the series 'one of the most valuable weapons in their research arsenal'.

So, enough of the superlatives: what does Adam Matthew Digital actually offer? In short, it offers the entire *Confidential Print* collection available on-line and fully searchable: in other words, access from anywhere to the documents in unadulterated form. Few researchers would swap such comfortable access for the more laborious, time-consuming and expensive option of viewing the documents *in situ*, or for that matter sifting through the bound collections in a draughty library. Access is enabled through a password login window on the Archives Direct website, and from there one is offered a simple drop-down menu of options to begin a search. In addition to the short introduction and essay mentioned above, one's actual search is offered assistance through a couple of pages of small 'summaries' of each record group (two Colonial Office and three Foreign Office) assigned to each *Confidential Print* series. These read much like the descriptions of contents attached to finding aids that are commonplace in archives today that provide a short, selective overview of document headings but are not intended to be extensive. In addition, and in my opinion just as useful, are the bullet-pointed versions of the record group contents supplied in a single page option devoted to outlining the 'nature and scope' of the collection. This is followed by a very brief selection of 'highlights' from the collection designed 'to illustrate the fascinating and diverse nature of the material', which indeed they do: racial segregation, McCarthy, prohibition, the Second World War. Needless to say the editors have put some effort into facilitating, and promoting, the value of the collection.

The effort spent on fairly and accurately representing the impossibly broad scope of the contents of the *Confidential Print* is laudable and one can expect little more in terms of direct help from such a finding aid. Still, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and naturally the usefulness and ultimately the success of this sterling effort to digitise such a vast body of material is in the functionality and usability of the search facility. In this regard the software is a triumph. Individual *Confidential Print* volumes are listed in an identical fashion to that of hardcopy archive listings, and once selected an entire page is devoted to facilitating a closer examination of the chosen document. A long description of the selected document is given much like that in the finding aid, with the rest of the page devoted to a variety of pre-selected search headings and topics grouped into categories labelled 'places', 'people' and a large sample of 'topics'. All of these headings, once clicked, direct the researcher to the relevant page of the *Confidential Print*. Once the PDF image of the document appears, to the side a separate window lists the 'hits' present on that page – all placed within their host sentences for context. All the documents I opened were scanned to a very high quality and allowed for unhindered reading. Customized searches using words not already pre-selected can be made and allow for interrogation of the PDF by page or 'image', though most of the *Confidential Print* were released with their own contents page which I found by far the most useful. The text size of the PDF, although the default is small, can be enlarged for ease of reading. Basically, anyone familiar with PDF reading tools will feel comfortable browsing the actual document.

In addition, for those looking for a little basic help in contextualising their studies, the website provides a huge 'chronology' (or timeline) for the period covered by the *Confidential Print* series which is pretty comprehensive and offers a single sentence of explanation for each year covered. More helpful as a finding aid is the 'map' facility. This directs the user to a colour-coded world map broken down into regions covered by the *Confidential Print* (and other digital) series. One click on the 'Caribbean' portion of the map and one is immediately confronted with a list of all the documents in the *Confidential Print* series that refer to the 'Caribbean', and not solely those that have the word 'Caribbean' in their title: the West Indies, individual islands or countries, or any document that refers to the Caribbean is listed. I have to say this feature saved me some considerable time; however, this device was less useful for the region 'North America' which has a

far larger number of documents (no less than 32 pages worth), that also relate, naturally, to the 'sub' regions of Canada and Mexico. Working through this mass is helped by a search filter that allows entry of any word, but perhaps these larger regions could be broken-down even further into their own country-specific sections, or better still provide a function that allows for a thematic or chronological search of a specific region. In all this is a pretty sophisticated, and user-friendly, search engine that incorporates search methods, layout and terminology by now familiar to all researchers.

Digital downloads using the *End Note* software, plus the now commonplace ability to 'share' the document through social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook and Twitter is possible, as is the ability to print a 'reasonable portion' (though I struggled to find what this actually meant in the small print), for paying subscribers. And here lies the one major rub. It would be nice to imagine this type of primary document access was available in most research institutions. However, weighing in at an advertised single payment of £20,000 this facility is not for the financially squeamish, and in these straitened times I struggle to imagine this product will be widely acquired beyond the largest and richest higher education institutions. This may be true even of American universities, where the value of electronic access to British documents is obviously magnified. This is a shame. While I appreciate the creators of the website have no doubt invested a lot of time and money in bringing this facility into being – and in their advertising blurb claim they are willing to 'negotiate' on an individual basis 'discounts and payment plans' – I suspect for the mass majority of institutions the arguments for buying a costly package for intermittent use by mostly postgraduates and research active staff will be hard to promote, no matter how good the product or potentially cost-saving for researchers.

Other reviews:
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