



ONE BRITISH ARCHIVE

One British Archive: Archives of Dissent: Complicating Anti-colonial Histories through the Watson Commission (Gold Coast/Ghana)

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Abstract

This short article describes the content and impact of the files related to the Watson Commission, a commission of enquiry empowered by British colonial government officials to investigate the causes and consequences of the riots that rocked the city of Accra (Gold Coast Colony) in 1948. They comprise a collection of reports and testimonies from a wide range of people from across the social, economic, and political spectrum of the colonial Gold Coast. In a colonial archive that often privileges the voices of British government officials, technocrats, and African politicians, this collection of 32 files represents an unprecedented insight into the lived experience of a wide range of individuals and communities, and documents the processes that led to independence for the nation-state of Ghana.

On 28 February 1948 a group of ex-servicemen who had fought in the Second World War as part of the Gold Coast Regiment marched towards Christiansborg Castle, the seat of government, with a petition demanding the jobs and compensation that they had been promised at the beginning of the war. Gold Coast police stopped the soldiers, claiming that they did not have a permit for their march. When the protesters refused to turn around, Police Superintendent Imray opened fire. Three men—Sergeant Adjetey, Corporal Attipoe, and Private Odartey-Lamptey—were killed. Dozens of others were wounded. Outraged and frustrated, the people of Accra and other Gold Coast towns took to the streets, attacking European and Asian businesses. Nationalist political parties seized the opportunity, writing to the Secretary of State for the Colonies that “unless Colonial Government is changed and a new Government of the people and their Chiefs installed at the centre immediately, the conduct of masses now completely out of control with strikes threatened in Police quarters, and rank and file Police indifferent to orders of Officers, will continue and result in worse violent and irresponsible acts by uncontrolled people.”¹ The United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC), the colony’s dominant nationalist party, offered to take charge of government in the name of the people and called for immediate political reform and self-government.

The Governor, who was not prepared to accept what, to him, seemed like a sudden provocation, declared a state of emergency on 1 March, and the government passed a new Riot Act. Nevertheless, the protests persisted for several more days. Believing that the UGCC’s “Big Six” had orchestrated the protests, the Governor had the political leaders arrested.

¹ “The Riots of 28th February 1948,” Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Ghana, <https://praad.gov.gh/index.php/the-riots-of-28th-february-1948/>.

However, in the inquiry that followed the protest—the Watson Commission—extensive testimony from the community made clear that their frustration and motivations captured a much more popular and widespread sentiment. Concerned about the long-term consequences of the riots, the Governor appointed a committee on 7 April 1948, under the Commissions of Enquiry Ordinance “to enquire into and report on the recent disturbances in the Gold Coast and their underlying causes; and to make recommendations on any matter arising from their enquiry.” The committee, which was composed of Andrew Dalglish, a well-known British trade unionist; Keith Anders Hope Murray, head of Lincoln College, Oxford; and Andrew Aiken Watson, a lawyer and King’s Counsel, embraced the wide scope of their inquiry and investigated “every aspect of life in the Colony which we may deem relevant for our purpose”—from the activities of the UGCC and the details of the ex-servicemen’s protest to research on swollen shoot disease.²

The extraordinary testimony collected in the files of the Watson Commission is a widely cited but underexplored and under-utilized archive. It complicates our understanding of this dramatic moment of change, revealing the experience and operation of colonial power in Britain’s “model colony.” The Commission collected a wide range of evidence, at least a portion of which remains in the archival files of the Watson Commission that are housed in the National Archives in the file series CO 964. The Watson Commission files include perspectives from politicians and chiefs, goldsmiths and traders, Africans and Europeans. Their accounts furnish an unprecedented written record of experiences and perspectives from across the racial and socioeconomic spectrum of Gold Coast society in its capital city who otherwise are only obliquely referenced in the colonial archive. A veritable archival treasure trove, the testimonies and other materials found in CO 964 provide insight into a range of topics, including the persistence and power of traditional authorities, the political economy of colonial capitalism, the growth of nationalist politics, contestations over incarceration and criminalization, the fear of communism in the years immediately after the Second World War, and the role of women in nationalist organizing.

I approached CO 964 as part of a book I was writing on the history of urban development and regulation in Accra, recently published as *Making an African City: Technopolitics and the Infrastructure of Everyday Life in Colonial Accra*.³ I had hoped that the files would help me better understand the riots and protests that rocked the city and some of the underlying and persistent frustrations of its residents in the late-colonial period. What I learned significantly nuanced my understanding of this pivotal moment in the country’s history, as it sat on the verge of independence, and pointed to important lessons about the fragility of imperial power, the complexity of popular politics, the power of African urban residents, and the daily frustrations and indignities of colonial rule—all lessons that historians working in British imperial history should heed.

When I opened these files, I brought some of what I knew (or thought I knew) about these events with me from existing scholarship and popular political discourse. Colonial officials were convinced that nationalist leaders like Dr. J. B. Danquah and Dr. Kwame Nkrumah were behind the protests, and CO 964 contains numerous memos from Danquah refuting these accusations. But as the testimonies in the Watson Commission files make clear, ex-servicemen were not alone in their concerns about labor conditions and employment opportunities. Workers throughout the colony protested low wages and abusive work conditions. During the war, Gold Coast residents had willingly sacrificed to support the larger war effort, but now that the war was over, these sacrifices seemed more like exploitation and

² The National Archives (TNA): CO 964/1, “Commission of Enquiry—Composition of the Committee and Administrative Arrangements,” 1948.

³ Jennifer Hart, *Making an African City: Technopolitics and the Infrastructure of Everyday Life in Colonial Accra* (Bloomington, 2024).

oppression as African merchants and traders “still suffer unnecessarily and Government has been (quite) recently looking on with complacent reserve.”⁴

As the testimonies detail, Ga traditional leader Nii Kwabena Bonne III had begun collecting information and organizing out of frustration with these economic conditions. He, like many others, concluded that the high cost of the imported goods most commonly consumed by Africans were unnecessarily inflated and constituted an undue hardship on the people, and that prices were deliberately raised to an “unbearable high level” in order to generate more profits for the consortium of European and Asian traders who controlled the import/export market. As women retailers at Makola Market explained to the Commission, the Association of West African Merchants earned as much as 75 percent profit on all commodities, and petty traders, who were subject to more government regulations and realized no profit while rents doubled.⁵ Bonne approached the Ga Native Authority with this information and, with their support, launched an anti-inflation campaign in Accra in October 1947. What became a colony-wide boycott in January 1948 brought trade to a near standstill. Protesters looted European and Syrian stores, and unrest spread into the colony’s prisons, where protesters passed alcohol and food over the prison walls as those held in the prison began to agitate for their release. In Bonne’s words, “the spirit of unity which pervaded the whole campaign in the colony and Ashanti were simply national, and the public demonstrations conducted nonviolently to the end were testimony of our being inherently law abiding people.”⁶

Increasingly concerned about the unrest, the colonial government negotiated an agreement for a reduction in the price of textiles and the institution of effective price controls for general goods. A mass meeting was called on 26 February 1948, in which Bonne announced that the consumer had won and the boycott would end on 28 February 1948. The government gave chiefs and native authorities great power to address black markets and profiteering, and prices were reduced by 50 percent.⁷

The testimonies documented in the Watson Commission files demonstrate that 28 February was thus a confluence of several major events that exemplified the economic discontent of the people and their protest against the unevenly distributed power and protection of government. Far from an uncontrolled mob, individuals submitting memoranda and testimony to the Commission and writing into the newspapers demonstrated a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the issues at stake in the Gold Coast. In the hours-long sessions in which the commissioners heard testimony from any individual or organization “wishing to give evidence concerning the causes of the recent disturbances in the Gold Coast,” and in follow-up meetings they conducted on special subjects, the commissioners noted “the high minded purpose and obvious care with which the views of youth organizations, students and last but not least the Ex-Servicemen were presented.”⁸ The larger events regularly invoked in relation to the riots were amplified by smaller indignities—discriminatory statements by the Chief Veterinary Officer, the construction of a Europeans-only school, the unfounded dismissal of African employees—that exacerbated frustrations and highlighted the systemic nature of the concerns.⁹

As an article mourned in the *West African Monitor*, “in a few years this God given land of ours will slip away altogether into European hands.”¹⁰ But the testimony collected made clear that the power of the colonial state was waning. As the commission noted, “the spread

⁴ TNA: CO 964/15, see “Memoranda received from members of the public—Accra and district,” 1948.

⁵ TNA: CO 964/15, Nii Kwabena Bonne III Osu Alata Mantse and Oyokohene, 30 April 1948; Madam Eugenia Kai Sasraku and Madam Dora Afuah Quarshie, representatives of the women retail traders at Makola Market, conveyed by Ako Adjei in “Memoranda received from members of the public—Accra and district,” 1948.

⁶ TNA: CO 964/15, Nii Kwabena Bonne III Osu Alata Mantse and Oyokohene, 30 April 1948.

⁷ TNA: CO 964/5, “Mass Meet Calls Off Boycott,” *The Spectator Daily*, 3 March 1948, 1.

⁸ TNA: CO 964/1, “Commission of Enquiry,” 1948.

⁹ TNA: CO 964/5, I. Enoch, “Gold Coast is Slipping Away,” *West African Monitor*, 2 March 1948.

¹⁰ TNA: CO 964/5, Enoch, “Gold Coast is Slipping Away,” 1948.

of liberal ideas, increasing literacy and a closer contact with political developments in other parts of the world” required a new approach to self-government and an increase in the pace of Africanization.”¹¹ What was once—and was still imagined to be—an elite movement (i.e., the “Big Six”) was now increasingly “popular,” incorporating individuals from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds, and with highly varying levels of political power and social authority. That market women, merchants, ex-servicemen, chiefs, and educated elites were united in expressing their economic discontent represented the emergence of a new national consciousness, which was firmly rooted in a desire for economic opportunity, and constituted a direct attack on the foundations of colonial rule.

The politics detailed in this archive have enormous implications for our understanding of the importance of popular politics in the Gold Coast/Ghana’s movement toward independence. The Watson Commission also highlights the deep historical processes that underlay these contestations—grievances that are connected to some of the fundamental structures of British colonial governance in the Gold Coast and elsewhere. And, importantly, it foregrounds the various ways in which the social, political, and economic history of African cities like Accra are fundamental to interpreting processes of world historical importance, including the rise of the Cold War and the spread of global capitalism. The Watson Commission files provide an unprecedented insight into the contradictory and complex ways that popular politics operate by giving us a window into one particularly volatile moment, understood from the perspective of many different actors.

Yet, despite their significance, these files are physically deteriorating inside Britain’s national (and thus imperial) archive; they have not been digitized or preserved. When I last used them in 2019 some were falling apart in my hands. The Watson Commission archive thus serves as a synecdoche for the persistently marginalized place of African history within the broader profession and within British imperial history, in particular. It is replete with documents that provide important lessons for all historians as we seek to better understand the politics of the past—but you need to get them while you still can.

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¹¹ TNA: CO 964/32, “Report and Statement by HMG on the Report,” Gold Coast Commission of Enquiry, 1948.

Cite this article: Hart J (2024). One British Archive: Archives of Dissent: Complicating Anti-colonial Histories through the Watson Commission (Gold Coast/Ghana). *Journal of British Studies* 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2024.60>