

Tyrol Cot Museum and Heritage Village: Private Home and National Symbol

Penelope Hynam Roach

Executive Director, Barbados National Trust

It is a great pleasure to speak to you today and to have the opportunity to tell you about a project and a site that has occupied a great deal of the National Trust's time and thinking for almost a decade. We own and maintain eight other historic or nature sites and manage a hiking trail, but Tyrol Cot is our most ambitious and challenging project, and one that has taught us as much in its creation as it has been instrumental in teaching others.

Less than two weeks ago, on April 28th, Barbados celebrated its second National Heroes Day. The first such day on April 28th, 1998, was designated to fall on the 100th anniversary of the birth of one of the most remarkable individuals in modern Barbadian and indeed West Indian history.

Grantley Herbert Adams joined eight other outstanding men and one woman as the ten first officially recognized National Heroes for Barbados. Despite the inevitable controversy over the process by which the list was chosen, who was not on it and who was on it, which goes on to this day (and like every other Barbadian believe me I have my own decided opinions which I fortunately will not inflict on you), it was a most significant occasion in the evolution of our national consciousness and a national sense of pride and selfhood - a consciousness that we had been moving towards with a sometimes frustrating and occasionally even dangerous slowness before and during the years of Adams' childhood. The phrase "as slow as molasses" is peculiarly suited to the early social development of an island that was the main producer of the stuff for several centuries!

But from the turn of the century and especially at the end of the First World War, when our returning soldiers came home with new eyes and an expanded worldview, there was an inexorable movement towards a more democratic society. Grantley Adams' enormous role in this march towards adulthood and true democracy, which is still ongoing here as elsewhere, is the reason for the creation of the museum that you will be visiting today.

The Barbados National Trust is a non-profit NGO which has been fighting for almost forty years to preserve and conserve the built and natural environment that is so critical to our emerging national identity. More than ten years before the National Heroes Day, the Trust had put together a list of the Houses of Leaders. We urged government and the private sector that these national symbols, many of which were in bad repair, should not be allowed to fall into ruin. Rather they should be restored and turned into museums or at least identified in some significant way for Barbadians and visitors alike. Some five of these houses had been inhabited by those who were later identified as National Heroes. Among them was the mansion *Tyrol Cot*, the home of Grantley and his wife Grace for over sixty years.

We need to go back to the early history of this century to trace why his home has become such an important icon in the growth of nation, and why this site is so particularly suited to your conference theme of Museums, Peace, Democracy and Good Governance. I know that this is one audience that will not be daunted by a little history.

Then I will mention the challenges faced by the Trust in developing the project, challenges which I am sure will be familiar to many of you from your own work, especially in developing countries. Some we have not yet been able to overcome through a combination of lack of funds, sufficient human resources and our own inexperience in the field. But as you all know no museum is ever “finished” and our site is ever evolving.

In the first third of the 20th century Barbados stubbornly adhered to the old representative system of government established in the British West Indian colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries, one of the few colonies to resist changes in their form of government.

This system, to quote a distinguished Barbadian historian, “*had produced an oligarchy of white planters and merchants who successfully oppressed the Governor and the Colonial Office and maintained effective control of colonial affairs.*” The privileges of a small and selfish minority were well protected, but the average daily wages for the mass of the people were less than 30 cents a day, and only about one in a hundred had the right to vote. The economic and social conditions were, to state it baldly, appalling.

Grantley Adams grew up in this society but in a middle-class home, one of seven children. From early on he shows unusual intellectual ability. He became a Barbados Scholar and went to England and Oxford University, where he studied Classics and the Law. He returned home to Barbados in 1925 and built up a law practice that became legendary for his successful defences. He also closely observed his society and its ills and formulated his own strong political philosophy, moving slowly from a distinct conservatism in his first years back home to a much more radical liberalism.

He married Grace Thorne, a member of one of the elite white planter families of the island, and personally experienced the outrage and prejudice engendered by this mixed marriage in a society hardened along rigid class and colour lines. (In fact, Grace had to move from home for a few months before her marriage, and went to live with my father’s family, and it was my father who escorted her to the church.) In 1929, after their honeymoon they moved into their new home on Spooners Hill, called Tyrol Cot, bought by Adams as a wedding present for his bride.

During the 1930s economic and social conditions across the West Indies finally brought the explosions that had been simmering for decades. Clennell Wickham was a prescient journalist whose writings in the newspaper the Herald were a major catalyst for change. He had his finger more closely than most on the pulse of the people and had warned that “*an inarticulate majority brooding over unredressed wrongs and unventilated grievances is a serious menace.*” Strikes and riots occurred all over the British West Indies and Barbados was no exception, with the frightening Riots of 1937 that shocked the nation and forever changed our perception of ourselves. This was well documented in a temporary exhibition by the Barbados Museums last year. By the time the

riots were quelled fourteen people had been killed, forty-seven wounded and hundreds arrested. Because of Grantley's so called "subversive" championship of the people and of Clement Payne, whose speeches and subsequent hasty deportation had been the detonator of the riots, shots were fired repeatedly at Tyrol Cot, and the family with their baby son Tom were forced to sleep on mattresses in the basement, with relays of workers set up around the house to protect them.

In 1938 Grantley was one of the founding members of the Barbados Progressive League (also known as the Barbados Labour Party, which is still one of our two major political parties and the part in power today, the other being the Democratic Labour Party). He was the President until 1958, for almost 20 years. The Labour Party had much in common with the programme of progressive thought laid out by the earlier Democratic League, and was able to take their principles much further.

Adams has been called the architect of a movement that was to produce the most far-reaching changes in the political, economic and social life of Barbadians on every level of society. The Barbados Labour Party articulated its position on a number of pressing issues, a policy they called democratic and socialist: it maintained that the resources of the island should be used for the benefit of all "in equitable proportions" and that the wealth produced in Barbados would not be "equitably divided" until the resources of wealth were owned and controlled by the government on behalf of the community. This was heresy to a certain segment of the governing elite, and inspiration to the great majority. When in 1940 the Labour Party first campaigned as an organized party and gained five seats in the House of Assembly with Grantley as their leader, they were able to consolidate their demands and get them implemented. These included a Workmens Compensation Act, a Labour Department Act and Minimum Wages Act, the registration and supervision of factories, slum clearance and housing schemes, free compulsory education up to 15 with free books and a daily milk ration, and perhaps most importantly, in 1950, a Representation of the People Act, which finally gave us universal adult suffrage. With the formation of the Barbados Workers Union with Adams as President General, the Labour Party was then able to concentrate on its major goal, "a living wage for all workers."

In 1954 when the ministerial system of Government was introduced, Grantley became the first Premier of the island, and Barbados attained virtually complete internal self-government. When in 1958 the tragically short-lived Federation of the West Indies was formed, the now Sir Grantley Adams became the first, and as it turned out, the only Federal Prime Minister, as the bold experiment collapsed in 1962.

To quote one of his closest colleagues and a National Hero as well, Sir Hugh Springer: "*He was ready when the people needed a leader who would be both the symbol of their emancipation and their leader out of the wilderness. They called him Moses. It was his inspiration always that put heart back into the rank and file.*"

Grace Adams in her own right was also a beloved figure, a teacher for years at two pre-eminent girls' schools. Tyrol Cot was also connected to another key political figure of the independent nation, the charismatic and brilliant Tom Adams, Grantley's only child. He followed his father's footsteps as a Barbados Scholar to Oxford. In the 1970s he became Leader of the

Opposition and then the second Prime Minister of Barbados. The first Prime Minister was the equally charismatic Errol Walton Barrow, who was the leader of the Democratic Labour Party and was the architect of our independence from Britain in 1966. Prime Minister Barrow's birthplace is another one on our Houses of Leaders list, but that is another story.

Forgive the rather long history lesson, but it was necessary in order to demonstrate why the home Tyrol Cot is so significant to Barbadians, and why the Trust understood all the ramifications of the site as a symbol of democracy and good governance.

The creation of the Museum and Heritage Village has faced three major challenges which I think are particularly germane to any such museum of its type, briefly summarized in three words, **money, politics, and interpretation**. Unfortunately I have not been able to join you for any of the sessions in the last few days and learn from your discussions, but I am pretty confident that these words must have come up again and again.

When Grantley's widow Grace died at Tyrol Cot in 1990, the issue of what would happen to the house and grounds became paramount. Their son Tom had died suddenly in office five years before, and his two sons, her grandchildren, were pursuing their own lives and interests abroad. It was a choice piece of land in a central location, and the house was in a very bad state of repair – all indications that the property could be snapped up and turned into a commercial site. The then President of the National Trust, Dr. Henry Fraser, was approached by Sir Hugh Springer, Grantley's life-long colleague, and asked if the Trust would consider a campaign to raise the money to buy the property. It was a daunting thought – as a private non-profit agency the Trust had done wonders with its several historic sites – but this was a far greater financial challenge than had been undertaken before. It was a leap of faith when the Trust said yes. Sir Hugh became Patron and the campaign was launched with the realization that it would have to involve the whole nation, as well as donations by non-Barbadians who made the island their winter home. I won't go into the details of five years of constant campaigning, just to say that by 1991 we had bought the house and by 1995, the date of the site's official opening, we had raised a million (Barbados) dollars, part of it through a bank loan, but the majority by hundreds of donations that ranged from \$50,000 to \$5.00. Although by 1993 we only had part of the funds for the whole site, we began with the restoration of the main house with the blind faith that the rest of the money would come as we worked on. We could wait no longer, as the structure of the house was rapidly deteriorating, and sections of the roof had started to fall in.

Although the government at the time, the Democratic Labour Party, had given us moral support through its then Minister of Culture, their support did not translate into dollars, and this brings me to the second hurdle, the **political** aspect. Politics will affect any museum devoted to peace, democracy and good governance to a greater or lesser extent, and we are no exception. The site was an icon of the Barbados Labour Party, which had fought for decades for governing power with its political opponents the Democratic Labour Party, in almost alternating success. Party politics and its loyalties are a powerful and emotional force in Barbados, possibly only matched by our passion for cricket. Although the Trust had from the beginning recognized that the site was of national importance, transcending political allegiances, the determination of some to see Tyrol Cot as only a political statement was what Dr. Fraser has called "a tragic betrayal of justice and

nationhood.” The fear privately expressed by many prominent local businessmen of making a contribution hampered our funding efforts in the first four years. When, in 1994, the Barbados Labour Party returned to power, the government made a very generous contribution which, along with a bank loan, allowed us to complete the site. The government has also adopted Tyrol Cot as the venue for many of its official functions, but the issue of politics remains. Should the opposition regain power, inevitable given our political history, will we and they have grown enough in political maturity to continue to treat Tyrol Cot fairly as a national non-partisan symbol?

The third major challenge is the one of **interpretation and presentation**, one which is still an ongoing debate. This was inevitably tied to financial considerations. For us to maintain the site over years, we understood that we would have to depend heavily on site admissions, primarily from the tourist market, given the limited scope of visits possible from a relatively small local population.

The house itself is an important building in its own right, a solid Caribbean Georgian structure. Designed and built in 1854 by William Farnum, one of our most prominent architects, it is a delightful combination of classical and tropical vernacular architecture, with its profusion of Roman arches, double wooden Demerara windows and coral stone walls. We had procured it with furnishings intact and so we restored it to the 1930s era, complete with the Adams’ furniture, books, antique glass and ceramics and 60 years of memorabilia.

But these were on a more modest scale, not to be compared to the great houses of other countries or even to the grander style of other historic houses on the island open to the public, like Sunbury or St. Nicholas Abbey. Although of great national importance to us, the house alone was not going to attract foreign visitors to whom the name Grantley Adams was unknown. So we expanded our concept from just the house to a more comprehensive interpretation of the life and times of Sir Grantley by using the acres around it to build a chattel house craft village and museum, a tribute to the people for whom he had fought all his life. The chattel houses, reproduced rather than transplanted because of the age of the originals and the problems of termites, pay homage to the harmonious proportion and elegant decoration of these unique indigenous buildings. Within each house artists and craftspeople produce their work for sale on site. The rum shop, one of the central hubs of Bajan village life (the other being the church), here too is a central building. The museum section features a 1920s chattel house furnished in the typical style of the era, a working blacksmith shop of the same period, and a reproduced 1820s slave hut, the first of its kind in Barbados.

The house is presented as so many thousands of people remember it, as if Adams had just stepped out for a few minutes. But by making this decision it means that you have no room for interpretation, for displays, for fully telling the story of why the house is so important. So the story has to be told by a hand-out or in the guide’s brief explanation. The impact is not as great, so we have looked at alternative ideas. One was establishing a Museum of the Rise of Democracy in the legendary basement, but this has been constrained by lack of space and would be more appropriate and dignified in a larger purpose-built building. Another is the use of audio tapes to take you through the house, but this is an expensive proposition and one that does not work so easily with large tour groups on limited time.

The heritage village itself is still in development, and one of the issues there is the fact that the chattel houses are rented out to individual independent craftspeople who do not always share your vision for the site, for example in the wearing of period uniforms or regular demonstrations of their work for visitors. So the several alternative options to this system of management are being explored.

At the opening of the site in 1995 our Deputy Prime Minister, Miss Billie Miller, gave the feature address and pointed out that *“for many of the older folk in Barbados this is virtually sacred ground.”* She also quoted Confucius – *“The strength of a nation is in the integrity of its homes.”* I hope that when you visit this afternoon that you will share in this sense of the strength of a nation. Thank you.