

Lifestyles

Highfield's 'Companion Guide' puts V.I. culture at our fingertips

By ELIZABETH REZENDE
Special to The Daily News

As any student knows, writing a paper for a Virgin Islands history class has never been an easy task. For high school and college students, material on particular topics is scattered in a host of secondary sources that, with use during the writing process, will become marked up and then tented open on the side of the desk.

For the researcher of scholarly papers, primary sources are located either in repositories miles away from the islands or in databases and websites written in Danish. At this point in the research process, the writer throws up his hands and wonders why can't the topics of Virgin Islands history be in one place?

Released last week is Arnold R. Highfield's "Cultural History of the American Virgin Islands and the Danish West Indies: A Companion Guide." This 600-page volume, which he calls a tome — a large, scholarly work — explains, defines, and delineates the cultural history of these islands during the course of their existence, past and present.

In more than 900 topics, Highfield refers to these as "articles" and not "entries." In his introduction he stresses that this work is not an encyclopedia. It does not take a topic and write every fact about the subject.

Over the 40 years, during which he has lived and worked on St. Croix, Highfield, professor emeritus of linguistics and social sciences at the University of the Virgin Islands, has collaborated with others in producing works of cultural studies.

His continuous writings, which number over 50, started in 1976 and span up to the present. They are listed in the source references in the back of the volume and relevant writings are listed at the end of each article.

In this large volume, which he calls a "Companion Guide," is the culmination of decades of reading, collecting material and analyzing the facts by a single dedicated scholar.

While in 1975 historian Ira Berlin was hailed for his forward thinking in perceiving slavery in terms of human lives and their activities in the U.S., Highfield in the Virgin Islands was working on a parallel trajectory. Through his research (mainly by translating various primary sources such as diaries, research articles, and government documents written in Danish), he uncovered the importance of the everyday activities of the enslaved.

Explaining the relationships between masters and slaves was part of the revolution in interpreting the full history of the subject. The point was to move the discussion of events and happenings from the realm of the higher authority, such as the king or the government, to that of the people themselves. This was a complete turnaround from institutionalized to social history.

Another movement of the time was the process of applying the concept of creolization to cultural and social activities and lifestyles. Creolization formerly was limited to marking the merger of two languages to create a third hybrid one. Social historians of the late 1970s then applied the concept to two different sets of lifestyles and activities, and in the case of the Danish West Indies, they were the European and the African. What emerged was recognized as a creation of cultural variation.

Throughout his "Cultural History," Highfield shows the reader and applauds that cultural mix that pervades Virgin Islands' life, past and present.

The concept of "slavery" is a topic that receives the largest focus of the volume — five



Arnold R. Highfield

continuous pages. Within the article there are 26 cross-references or sub-texts indicated in small capital letters. These act as links to satellites of further information, to flush out for the reader additional clarifying information on the topic.

As one topic, the text follows the institution of slavery from the origin of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the Middle Passage, to the slave codes, the work of the enslaved, resistance and revolts in the islands, to the Emancipation revolt. In the satellite articles listed at the end of the article, the reader is guided to 20 topics that are designed to enhance the discussion of the issue.

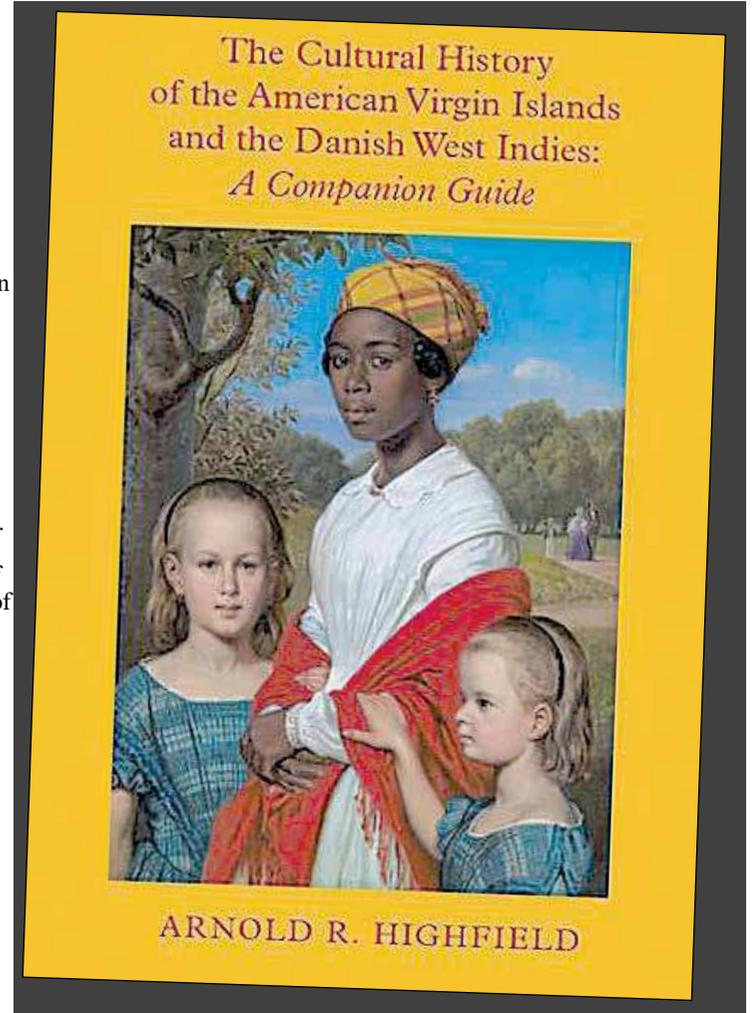
The next topic in the "S" section of the work is "Slave Trade," which discusses the subtopics of "Capture," "Transport and Sale in Africa," "The Middle Passage," "Auctions and Plantations," "Slave Traders," and "Resistance and Revolts." With the preceding factual information presented, Highfield often gives "A Final Word," a summary, which he calls "an interpretive section." This is the point at which "the analysis and interpretation usually occurs."

It is at this point that we appreciate the balanced, measured judgment that comes from Highfield's infinite readings and constant thinking on the subject. He looks directly on the roles of all those involved in slavery and assesses their

roles "in this tragedy."

With this same measured examination in most of the selections, Highfield provides an overview, challenging the reader to think of what has been presented. For example, after a lengthy discussion on the struggles Jackson had encountered in organizing the strike in the entry "D. Hamilton Jackson," Highfield directs the reader to the controversy regarding Jackson's legacy to Virgin Islands history. Highfield ends the discussion with a challenge: "It is for that achievement that he is today celebrated, even though the story has

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not yet been completely told.”

Likewise at the end of the entry of “St. Croix Labor Union,” Highfield leads us to a general summary by stating that regarding the gains achieved by the strike, “they should be considered in the large historical narrative in order to understand their real meaning.” His words encourage the reader to create his own questions.

At the same time, Highfield writes as a poet. Regarding the freedom won by the laborers, Highfield assesses the situation: “The Emancipation was therefore only the first step in a long, arduous journey away from the stain of slavery and toward the grail of real freedom.”

While the cross-references are integrated well with the main topic of slavery, navigation through other topics takes a greater effort. The pathway to locating the explanation seems to require the reader to use synonyms to locate the information.

For example, when readers want to know more about the riot of 1892 in St. Thomas, their procedure for accessing information in the “Companion Guide” is not as clear. Starting the search by looking under the term “riots” or “St. Thomas Revolt” proves unsuccessful. When reading through “Harbor, St. Thomas,” readers again come up short — especially if they lack the background knowledge to know the event is referred to as the “Silver Riot.” Highfield himself, however, in his introduction to the leader of the riot, Coziah Hannah, refers to the event as the “Mexican Silver Riot.”

If we take an alternate pathway to the topic through the term “Queens” or “Coziah,” we are rightfully directed to “Hannah, Coziah,” which was her full name. In reading about Coziah, we are encouraged to link up to the satellite entry “bamboula.” After scanning that topic there is, however, no direct written connection of Coziah to bamboula, unless the reader knows that information previously.

Highfield, a linguist, reminds us that “Crucian” is officially called “Virgin Islands English Creole” and appears under the category “Creole Languages.” In the “Companion Guide,” this official name also is a stand-alone entry where more information is given.

“Crucian,” as the name of an individual born in St. Croix, is found in the

“Companion Guide” under the article “Native Virgin Islander Controversy,” referring to a major aspect that arose during the Referendum of 1994.

Highfield gives a measured tracing of the origin and outlines the historical development of the term “native Virgin Islander.” He summarizes by saying, “the controversy and debate, has, however, exposed a demographic conundrum whose emergence has marked a significant turning point in the Islands’ history.” He leaves it to us to think about this significance.

But the reader’s lack of the precise name of a term should not keep him from eagerly plowing through nuggets of information that we knew, or thought we knew, or that we did not know. The reader randomly starts somewhere in the volume and then fulfills his need for further information on a particular topic, and thus follows the suggested further readings. Despite whatever small oversights exist in the process of getting to the information, the quest for the information should initiate the reader to think of a different angle. This is the same thinking process that the Google user employs daily.

Even though the volume is already in alphabetical order, probably an extensive index would have been helpful in locating not-so-familiar terms.

The volume is written not in a scholarly manner, but in a friendly, inviting tone.

It offers new information for the seasoned reader of Virgin Islands history and culture and is a reference for the student. Its wide variety of topics brings the reader up to the present day. For example, the entry “Newick, Richard” offers invaluable information about a designer of modern-day vessels that plied the waters to Buck Island.

“The Cultural History of the American Virgin Islands and the Danish West Indies: A Companion Guide,” published by Antilles Press, can be ordered from Shirley Ziegler at Shirley@antillespress.vi, or through Undercover Books in Gallows Bay on St. Croix.

This volume demonstrates the richness of Virgin Islands history and culture. It engages us with a remarkable breadth of information that instills in us a pride to be a part of these islands.

— Elizabeth Rezende is a historian and writer who lives on St. Croix.

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