

Waiting for the Ark

By Anna Feign



My first day at the Walter Rodney National Archives was shared with my grandmother, who settled in with the latest newspapers while I turned to the List of Holdings and requested British colonial-era papers from the 1930s. This project examines how extractivism and climate change come together; the archive offered a historical lens on the emerging oil industry and histories of climate. My work in Guyana this summer included visits to the Walter Rodney National Archives and the Parliamentary Library, along with preliminary interviews across organizations and stakeholders. The day before, the wet season’s heaviest rain flooded streets and roadside trenches, briefly submerging the city, a recurring refrain on a coast that sits roughly six feet below sea level.

“And the Rains Descended”

The realities of sea tides and flooding are a persistent feature of Guyana’s low-lying coastal landscape. In 1934, a major flood affected Georgetown and the entire East Coast – wiping out crops, threatening a food shortage, killing sixteen people, and causing \$1.5 million in property damage – all news which made the [New York Times](#). In the British Guiana colonial newspapers writers discuss the impacts of this flood in-depth in many long-form columns, but something else caught my attention. In the January 7, 1934 edition of the British colonial newspaper, *The Daily Argosy* an illustration titled “And the Rains Descended... and the floods came” stood out to me.

ASSOCIATED CONGRESS OF W.I. CHAMBERS.

Sixth Meeting To Be Held Locally.
 Hope Sir Edward Davson Will Attend.

Coinciding With Agricultural Show.

With reference to the holding of the sixth Congress of the Associated West Indian Chambers of Commerce, which was postponed last year, the following letter, under date December 23, 1933, received from the Secretary of the Association; was considered at the fortnightly meeting of the Council of the Chamber of Commerce held on Friday, Mr. H. G. Seaford, President, presiding:—
 The Honorary Secretary,
 The Georgetown Chamber of Commerce, Guyana.

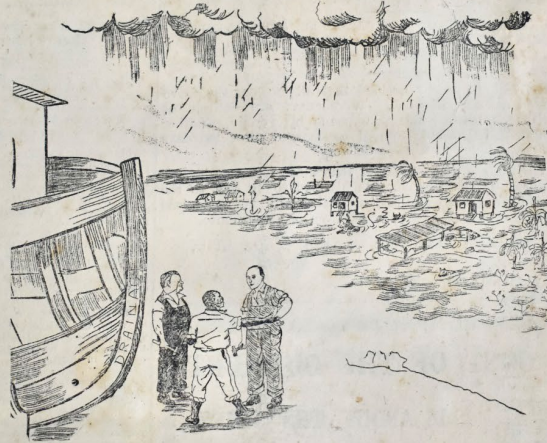
Dear Sir,—I am directed by the President to acknowledge and thank you for our letter of the 12th instant, suggesting that the 6th Congress of the Association chambers be held in Georgetown in the month of April, 1934.

Your suggestion meets with his entire approval and I have communicated with I constituent members advising them at it is proposed to hold the meeting in our colony early in April, and asking whether they have any resolutions or objects to submit for the agenda and whether they would be prepared to send agents.

The early part of April would appear to be the most suitable time for holding the Congress, as, owing to vacation arrangements interfering, there might be difficulty in getting delegates to attend if it is convened later, and it is hoped that it will also be a convenient time for Sir Edward Davson to attend.

Mr. Huggins has been advised in a separate letter from Sir Edward that he will be attending the Congress.

AND THE RAINS DESCENDED.



AND THE FLOODS CAME.

Disconsolate Villager: Boss look whah come pon we now. Ah did read in de Bible say no mo' flood.
 Eddie, the optimist: Cheer up sonny. We will have the Ark finished before the next Deluge.

OF INTEREST TO HOUSEWIVES.

Cost of Local Foodstuffs.
 Ruling Prices for the Week.

TOPICS OF THE TIMES.

UNCLE STAPIE 'PON DE PEOPLE.

By "THEO."

Well de New 'Ear open in true an' ancient form—rain, rain, an' mo' rain. Ah tells you ah dunno is whah kine ah weather dis. Sun peep out lil bit an' den

gwine call dem name, but I will always remain—Your dear nephew. "FARGIE."

"MARCUS AURELIUS."

Well de bes' ah frien's mus' part, so we has to mek up we mine to part wid Marcus Aurelius. Ah see dem lawyer properly leh go langridge to wish he fare-well an' of course he gie dem he reply in characteristic langridge too.

TOLL OF THE RAINS.

Gibraltar-Courtland Situation.

Proprietors' Sad Plight.
 Plea for Relief from Pump Obligations.

Interview with the Hon. E. A. Luckhoo.

A deputation from the Corentyne, Berbice, consisting of Messrs Hooper (Chairman, the Gibraltar-Courtland block), A. E. Carlow, Abdulla, Giddings, Caesar, and Carrington (proprietors), led by the Rev. T. A. Giles, met the Hon. E. A. Luckhoo, representative of Division No. 1, the Corentyne Coast, in his office at New Amsterdam and discussed with him the deplorable condition of the block with a view to his making necessary representations to Government on their behalf.

The deputation pointed out that the present abnormal rainfall had reduced the district to absolute penury; they had lost their provisions, rice and stock, and but for the fact that Pin. Albion was next to them, from which they got a few days work every week, they would have been reduced to the point of starvation.

The question which affected them most was their indebtedness for the pump which had recently been dismantled, both for capital charges and interest and maintenance. The cost of the pump was \$72,000 of which they were to pay 40 per cent apart from the sum due for maintenance, \$11,000. The men pointed out that they could not meet the charges and if there lands were even forfeited, so grave was the situation that the position could not be helped.

In the course of the discussion, it came out that the pump cost a considerable sum more than they were made to understand it would cost, that charges for maintenance were excessive and out of all reasonable proportions, that the pump was badly designed and uneconomic, and that although the pump was of no use to them, since July 1932, charges were incurred.

The men further pointed out that in the first instance when the pump was ordered that British

SER

Rain

Sug

Rice

Atten

tion of

held in

Mr. I

siding,

to the

during

were

result

count

On

claim

other

tion

paid

of ol

Fur

sent

Sug

of pr

wa

de

the

“And the Rains Descended.” *Daily Argosy*, January 7, 1934, 7. Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown, Guyana. Photo by Anna Feign, June 2025.

The illustration shows three men in the foreground next to an ark dubbed “drainage.” A caricature of a dark-skinned and shoeless “disconsolate villager” looks on to a flooded village and crops in the background, and says “Boss look whah come pon we now. Ah did read in de Bible say no mo’ flood” (1934:7). The colonist savior, “Eddie, the optimist” condescendingly asserts, “Cheer up sonny. We will have the Ark finished before the next Deluge” (1934:7). The colonial illustrator constructs the racialized Guyanese subject as ignorant, uncivilized, and powerless in the face of the flood. He must wait for salvation from his white colonial “boss.” The colonizer, Eddie, claims the authority to build the Ark. As the builder and thus as the savior, colonial authority claims control of time and seeming salvation. The villager is told to “cheer up” and wait — the Ark “will” be finished “before the next deluge.” This places the villager in a permanent state of waiting, dependent on colonial benevolence.

The Ark, that is, the drainage was already built, but not for the benefit of the village. Throughout the 18th and 19th century enslaved African and indentured Indian laborers built systems by-hand to support the plantation. They built seawalls (which prevented flooding at high spring tide), backdams (which blocked rainwater from lands behind the estate), side dams (which blocked floodwaters from neighboring lands), and drainage canals with sluices (known as kokers, which released surplus water from the estate).¹ Yet this so-called Ark, the expensive drainage, irrigation and sea defenses, were not

¹ See Daly, Vere T. *The Making of Guyana*. London: Macmillan, 1974. And Gray, Summer. 2023. *In the Shadow of the Seawall: Coastal Injustice and the Dilemma of Placekeeping*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

maintained by estates.² Indeed, in 1934 the Flood Investigation Committee “noted that the lack of maintenance by derelict or partially derelict estates contributed significantly to the flooding of villages as dams were not cleared in an ‘efficient manner.’”³ The Ark was abandoned, and so too was canal maintenance and sea defense.

Yet the cycle of waiting for salvation endured. Four years earlier, oil was promised as the way out of economic ruin.

“Oil-Minded”

In the November 18, 1930 edition of the colonial British Guiana newspaper *The Daily Chronicle*, J.P. Croal from the Engineering Department of the Venezuelan Gulf Oil Company in Maracaibo, wrote his first in a series of articles advocating for the development of the oil industry in Guyana. The headline exclaimed “Every Man, Woman and Child in British Guiana Must Become Oil-Minded!” For Croal, oil-minded meant educating the population about the promise of black gold as the solution to Guyana’s economic problems.

Introductory to a series of articles specially written for the British Guiana "Daily Chronicle."

Every Man, Woman and Child in British Guiana Must Become Oil-Minded!

By J. P. CROAL
Engineering Department,
Venezuelan Gulf Oil Company,
Maracaibo.

The solution of British Guiana's economic problems lies in (1) the construction of hinterland communications (2) the removal of "the oil embargo"—the ban imposed by the Imperial Government against the development of an oil industry, (3) the production of an agricultural crop exportable in bulk. The one which promises most rapid results is the removal of the oil embargo.

On Sunday, November 23, the "Daily Chronicle" begins publication of a series of articles on the development of an oil industry in British Guiana. The coupons headed VOTE FOR OIL will be published daily, and whether or not the series is continued will depend on the number of coupons returned to the "Daily Chronicle" Office. The author of the articles must be personally satisfied that the people of British Guiana are alive to their own interests.

ON Monday night October 13, the anniversary of the great Latin-American nations, I had the pleasure of listening to an election speech broadcast by Mr. Roosevelt, Governor of the State of New York, who is seeking reelection. He introduced his address by recounting how more than four centuries ago Christopher Columbus set sail to discover the New World and on not reaching his goal after months of sailing, his men began to get impatient and almost mutinied. But Columbus was firm in his belief and encouraged them by the words "Sail on, sail on" which slogan American can very well adopt for the progress they have made and are making for the benefit of the world to-day.

Just as gold from Mexico and

South American Republics brought fame and riches to Spain, so oil has brought fame and riches to the United States of America. When Drake sank his first well in 1859 he never dreamt that he was opening the way to the development of what is considered the second largest industry in the world today. The investments in the industry total the mammoth sum of \$12,000,000,000 of which nearly \$500,000,000 (five hundred millions) is invested in Venezuela and Columbia alone.

British Guiana's Lost Opportunities.

Thus it should be realized that oil is a commodity in which every man, woman and child should be interested.

(Continued on page 7)

VENEZUELAN OIL CONCESSIONS.
ANNUAL PROFIT MAINTAINED.

("Daily Chronicle" Special Correspondent).

LONDON, Nov 11.

The directors of Venezuelan Oil Concessions Limited (says the "Times") have declared an interim dividend of 6 per cent in respect of the financial year which ends on December 31.

This will be payable on both the Preferred and Ordinary shares. The announcement is in accordance with the promise made by the chairman at the general meeting held in June that the board would consider the question of making an interim distribution.

In respect of 1929 the company paid 20 per cent which was paid in one sum. The present dividend will be payable on a capital of over £7,000,000, this including the 1,800,000 Ordinary shares in March, last.

Shareholders are informed that so far as can be ascertained at present the aggregate profit for the year 1930 will be approximately the same as that earned during the previous year.

Let Your Slogan Be—
VOTE FOR OIL
COUPON

I hereby signify my desire to learn more of the Oil Industry which I realise is the only industry, if developed in British Guiana, to save my country.

NAME

ADDRESS

OCCUPATION

Let Your Slogan Be—
VOTE FOR OIL
COUPON

I hereby signify my desire to learn more of the Oil Industry which I realise is the only industry, if developed in British Guiana, to save my country.

NAME

ADDRESS

OCCUPATION

² See p. 9 in Rodney, Walter. 1981. *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*. Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

³ See Kandasamy, Lloyd F. "A Brief History of Floods in Guyana." *Stabroek News* (Guyana), February 6, 2006. as quoted on p. 55 in Gray, Summer. 2023. *In the Shadow of the Sea wall: Coastal Injustice and the Dilemma of Placekeeping*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

Croal, J.P. “Every Man, Woman and Child in British Guiana Must Become Oil-Minded!,” *Daily Chronicle*, Magazine Section, November 18, 1930, 5. Walter Rodney National Archives, Georgetown, Guyana. Photo by Anna Feign, June 2025.

With low returns on sugar and other industries due to the global Great Depression, he argued that oil was the way forward to economic prosperity. Pointing to neighboring Venezuela as the model, Croal emphasized speed: what oil did in five years for Venezuela is what sugar, coffee, and cocoa *failed* to do in 80 (November 23, 1930 *Daily Chronicle* Magazine Section p.1). The promise of speed and accelerated development is central to the imaginary of becoming “oil-minded” for Croal. It is with this speed, that Croal urges the Guyanese population to “Vote for Oil,” given that the oil industry “is the only industry...to save [the] country” (1930:7). This vote for oil played out in the 1930s. In 1938, the Trinidad Leaseholds Company Ltd received the first oil prospection license, and, together with Investments Corporation and Central Mining, undertook the country’s first oil exploration program.⁴ The play was unsuccessful. Yet, the colonial-era *Daily Chronicle* foreshadows the conversations today: that the oil industry will bring accelerated and unprecedented development, “galloping into modernity” as President Ali [remarked](#) in his 2023 republic anniversary address.

And the Oil Ascended...and the floods continue

In 2019, oil finally ascended. The floods continued, too. When I set up an interview with Leroy he mentioned that he wasn’t sure we’d be able to talk in his house because his home which sits below the road-level trenches recently flooded after unrelenting heavy-rain. His floor dried enough and I joined him one afternoon. As I listen back to the audio recording, it’s hard to hear Leroy in between the omnipresent sound of the fans keeping us cool (a lesson learned about the location of the audio recorder!) and the rumble of heavy-duty trucks almost constantly passing by. After we settled in to the interview, Leroy explained that with the emergence of the oil industry and associated industries there was a significant increase in traffic of heavy-duty trucks with building materials like sand. It’s not possible to know where these heavy sand-filled trucks were going on this day, but previous trucks carried sand to build the road to the Gas-to-Energy project, a key downstream feature of the oil and gas fueled value-chain for the country.⁵ The roads were not built to handle the weight of these trucks, and the vibrations combined with increasingly heavy rainfall created cracks in the foundation of Leroy’s and most of his neighbors’ homes. The foundation of Leroy’s home is a seemingly peripheral detail that, when you put it at the center of analysis, illuminates a key reality: that while the oil industry races to accelerate down the road, there is no plan for where the water will go, for repairing the shaken foundations everyday people are still left off the Ark. Coloniality persists.

[If I’m allowed to have this poem, I would like it at the end]

⁴ For an interesting abbreviated and illustrated history on Guyana’s history of oil exploration see *Guyana's Oil Odyssey, 1750-2019: A Concise Illustrated History of Oil Exploration in Guyana* (2019) published by the University of Guyana Energy Think Tank a book recommended to me by author Dr. Paloma Martin

⁵ I learned this in conversation with an individual who helped build the road to the GTE project.

~

Not I with This Torn Shirt

They call here,
– Magnificent Province!
Province of mud!
Province of flood!
Plantation – feudal coast!

Who are the magnificent here?
Not I with this torn shirt
but they, in their white mansions
by the trench of blood!

I tell you
this is no magnificent province
no El Dorado for me
no streets paved with gold
but a bruising and battering for self preservation
in the white dust and grey mud.

I tell you and I tell no secret –
now is long past time for worship
long past time for kneeling
with clasped hands at altars of poverty.

How are the mighty slain?
by this hammer of my hand!
by this anger in my life!
by this new science of men alive
everywhere in this province!
Thus – are the mighty slain!

Martin Wylde Carter (Guyanese poet and political activist, 1927-1997) (1950s)

Anna Feign (Palmer) is a Ph.D. student in Sociology at UC Berkeley. Her research examines the convergence of extractivism, (post)colonial development, and the climate crisis through a qualitative and spatial lens. She is a 2025-2026 Mentored Research Award Fellow and a [Global Democracy Commons](#)

Fellow. She is a co-founder of the [Caribbean Coalition at Berkeley](#) and a member of the Anti-Colonial Democracy Lab. Anna holds a BA in sociology from Occidental College and earned her MA in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley.