

Highlight the positive

A newly-discovered photographic study of life in the Caribbean destroys old stereotypes. **Matthew Brace** reports.

A SET of fragile glass plate negatives of the Caribbean taken during the first few years of this century, which lay undiscovered for decades, is being hailed as one of the most accurate and revealing photographic records of the region ever produced.

When the Royal Geographical Society's picture library manager, Joanna Scadden, opened a dusty drawer in the vaults and began examining a set of previously uncatalogued slides she did not realise immediately that she had unearthed a collection of significant cultural and historical importance.

It was the work of Sir Harry Johnston, a British government official based mainly in colonial East Africa, who was sent to Haiti, Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad in 1908 by his friend, the US President Theodore Roosevelt, to document on film the life of the region's blacks.

Until Ms Scadden's discovery, the bulk of the negatives had remained largely unknown, languishing in the society's basement.

While the collection (which goes on display at the society this week) painted a picture of poverty and hardship it also, more importantly, broke a mould by discarding the stereotypical image of blacks as mischievous children or savages.

According to the Jamaican art historian Dr Petrine Archer-Straw, who has curated the photographs, Johnston's scenes of markets, farmers and workers in rural settings were ahead of their time.

"They depict a vivid and accurate record of a lifestyle that has changed considerably in this century. These

photographs defy post-independence political ideas that present the region as polyglot, multi-racial and hybrid.

"Instead we find a Caribbean community that is predominantly black," Dr Archer-Straw said.

She added that to some Caribbean historians most British historical writers of the period were unrepentant imperialists who believed West Indians were, on racial grounds, unfit for self-government.

"Johnston, on the other hand, believed that blacks had experienced an accelerated development and proved themselves capable of governing their own affairs," she said.

"His views may not pass now, but at the time they would have been considered progressive."

The Jamaican High Commission, the British Council and the Royal Geographical Society have jointly organised a repatriation programme through which each of the four island nations will receive a full set of prints to add to their archives.

Another aspect of the project is the implementation of an educational programme in the Caribbean designed to raise debate and promote a wider understanding of the context in which Johnston operated.

The programme will include history evenings for university students and teacher trainers to discover ways in which visual evidence such as these photographs can be used in education.

Sir Harry Johnston's Caribbean collection is on display at the Royal Geographical Society in London for two weeks before touring the Caribbean



Making their way: A Haitian peasant (above) at market and a Haitian mother with her children

Photographs: Harry Johnston/The Royal Geographical Society



Johnston's title for the
colonial rule stymied black
Royal Geographical Society