

Text: Blue Curry

Repairwork

A thrill raced through the town of Nassau when HMS St. George signaled its arrival on 2 December 1861. It was to be an extraordinary moment in the otherwise blighted existence of this island outpost, as Queen Victoria's second son, HRH Prince Alfred, was aboard—the first royal visitor to the Bahamas. Only a week's advance notice had been given of his arrival; nonetheless, the adolescent midshipman came ashore at eleven o'clock the following morning amid gun salutes, the cheers of an adoring crowd, and all the fanfare required for such an auspicious occasion. Over the next four days he attended numerous lavish engagements, dinners and balls in his honor. The locals lined the streets at every opportunity to catch a glimpse of their "Sailor Prince," consumed by the need to know the details of all of his movements among them. When the St. George sailed on to Jamaica, with it went all the excitement that the visit had brought, and the town was forced to return to its humdrum existence. Only the memory remained of an event that would, as the local press suggested, "be long commented upon not only by our children but by our children's children, even when many of us who have witnessed the event, shall be forgotten and laid low in the dust." ¹

Every attempt was made to make this statement so and to permanently mark this visit into the collective memory of the people. The site of his embarkation became Prince Alfred's Landing, his name was inscribed into the limestone face of one of the only caves on the island, and an annual public holiday was thereafter celebrated in his honor. A final reminder of the prince's visit was proposed in 1866 by members of the House of Assembly for a memorial bust to be placed in the public library. Charles Bacon, a London-based sculptor with an established reputation among dignitaries and royalty, was commissioned that same year to create a suitable likeness of the prince, recently created Duke of Edinburgh and Earl of Ulster and Kent. The duke himself agreed to sit for Bacon to render his image in marble, and the finished bust was shown at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of 1867 as the premier work displayed in the sculpture section. It would arrive in Nassau later that year to be unveiled at a grand inauguration ceremony and celebrated with a regatta and a ball. Governor Rawson presented the bust to the Bahamian people, assuring them that it was an "excellent likeness" and confidently stating: "We may therefore be proud to possess it, both as an admirable work, and as a gratifying recollection of one who is endeared to us."

¹ The Bahama Herald, Wednesday, 11 December 1861.

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In spite of all of these efforts to fix memory into position, a moment arrived when the first royal visit of 1861 lost all importance, as did its memorial markers. Prince Alfred's Landing was removed when extensions were made to the port, the inscription on the caves has been mostly obliterated by the elements, and Prince Alfred Day was struck from the list of public holidays at the start of the last century to be replaced by Discovery Day. The marble bust, the most intent memory marker of this event, also suffered a similar fate, and has sat broken and graffitied among derelict furniture in the Nassau Public Library and Museum. Although not on display as part of the collection on the main floors, it anonymously resides on the octagonal top floor veranda frequented mostly by tourists, who have not let it go unnoticed. As one visitor to the library commented: "When my husband asked who this was, I had only one answer. It was a statue of A Man Beside Himself! (True subject unknown!)" 2 "Beside himself" both physically and figuratively, the bust no longer serves its role as a memory marker; its provenance unknown and the events for which it was created to commemorate likewise forgotten.

1 "Anniversary of the Landing of Prince Alfred," The Nassau Guardian, Wednesday, 4 December 1867.

2 Comment posted on the igougo.com travel Web site with a photograph of the bust sitting on the veranda floor of the Nassau Public Library and Museum, 2 February 2005 ; http://photos.igougo.com/pictures-photos-12095-s1-pl34267-Nassau_Public_Library.html.

I could make no connection with the decapitated bust when I stood over it for the first time six years ago. All connections to memory and history were missing and an unsettling feeling of meaninglessness presided. I reflected on how objects have no innate capacity for memory; they depend on us to imbue them with ours. Out of this sense of obligation to the object I made several consolatory visits during the intervening years, observing how it was carelessly moved around, dripped on with paint, drawn on with pencil crayons and, ironically, used as a site for new memories to be marked, the earliest reading ELLI AND REDS IN 84. My decision to act was driven by a sense of immediacy in light of this continued decline. I made a swift temporary repair to return the bust to some semblance of its former wholeness while still acknowledging its current state. Using the sculptor's mark as a departure point for research, I was able to identify the artist, his subject, and how the product of their collaboration came to be brought there. In this way I have attempted to accurately reconnect the bust to the system of connections that give it meaning. Repairwork is my effort to halt one object's slip into oblivion and, perhaps, our own slip with it.