The study of South Asian colonial amateur films and oral history archives provides a particular insight into imperial identities that is not necessarily evident from other sources. The Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, has recently made available online 280 films and 300 interviews documenting lesser-known aspects of the British rule in South Asia (see www.admin.cam.ac.uk/news/dp/2010030401). The Centre’s online archives represent a timely and singular contribution to the current scholarship concerned with renewed negotiations of Britain’s imperial past and its relevance to today’s multicultural society.

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There are also examples of interrelated visual and oral sources that supply the researcher with multilayered, complementing background information. One such case is offered by the Davy film collection and by Mr. C. H. Barry’s interview from 1933 (no. 008), both documenting in great detail the inter-war life and activities of Indian students enrolled at the Aitchison College, Lahore. The two films from the Davy collection, made by an unidentified filmmaker in the 1930s, show the College at a time when the Principal was C. H. Barry. While the films show general views of the College’s grounds and buildings, scenes of sports, horse shows, swimming, gymnastics and field hockey, Mr. Barry’s recollections reveal the critical situation he faced when appointed as the Principal of the College in May 1933. At that time, he was offered the job with the caveat that the College ’is bankrupt both in terms of numbers and finance. It is virtually bankrupt educationally. This is a last, desperate attempt to see whether it can be salvaged. We shan’t blame you if it collapses because it’s more than likely that it will.’ The interwar film scenes and Mr Barry’s interview illustrate an important, and ultimately successful, decade in the history of an educational institution launched by an unidentified filmmaker in the 1930s, show the College, Lahore. The two films from the Davy collection and by Mr. C. H. Barry’s interview from 1933 (no. 008) about touring with Mahatma Gandhi across East Bengal following the outbreak of communal riots.

Overall, the Centre’s online collections represent records of public and private colonial memory and offer outstanding insights into imperial ways of life. Their relevance to the imperial studies curriculum illuminates the entwined British and Indian collective memory and challenges stereotypical representations of the two colonial identities and cultures. The comparative analysis of these films and interviews reveals novel imperial gender and racial dynamics, while the identification of particular instances of colonial visual rhetoric and postcolonial memorialization proposes new methods of interpretation and acknowledgement of colonial societies. Thus, as first person narratives of specific times and events, the Centre’s colonial amateur films and postcolonial interviews advocate for the renegotiation of Britain’s imperial memory and past.

Lastly, the Centre’s online collections offer a palimpsest of documentary resources that presents illuminating imperial as well as post-colonial ideological and cultural frameworks. The examples discussed here show how the Centre’s cross-referential online archival resources invite renewed research of means of production and re-imaging of imperial memory, and how these visual and aural digital collections advance interconnected methodologies of critical literacy in the field of digital humanities.

Annamaria Motrescu
University of Cambridge, UK
amm230@cam.ac.uk

Notes
1. See the Berridge and Stokes film collections, the W.S. Benton and E.P. Mainprice photographic collections, and Brig. R.E. Gardner’s interview (no 270).
2. See the Krantz film collection and the F.G. Alderson-Smith’s interview (no 007).
3. See the Barclay film collection and C. Sweeney papers.
4. See, for instance, Miss Anu Bandhopadhya’s interview (no 105) about touring with Mahatma Gandhi across East Bengal following the outbreak of communal riots.
5. See, in particular, the Kendall film collection.
7. See interview no. 148, 1970. Also, for records about the Indian National Army (INA) see S.A. Ayer’s interview (no. 172) about touring with Subhas Chandra Bose, and Mr Cyril Stracey’s interview (no. 836) in which he comments on the formation of the INA.