

## Intimate Enemies: French and English Settlers and Commentators in Colonial St. Kitts<sup>1</sup>

by

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*This article examines a variety of texts produced by the French and English colonists of the island of St Kitts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During this time, the island was jointly settled by these two groups, a situation which created considerable tension and frequent hostilities between them. By placing these texts in dialogue with one another, we gain a clearer and more nuanced understanding of the extent to which these competing imperial projects resembled and differed from one another, allowing us a new perspective on European settlement in the Caribbean in the era of slavery.*

KEY WORDS: *France; England; Caribbean; St Kitts; empire; slavery.*

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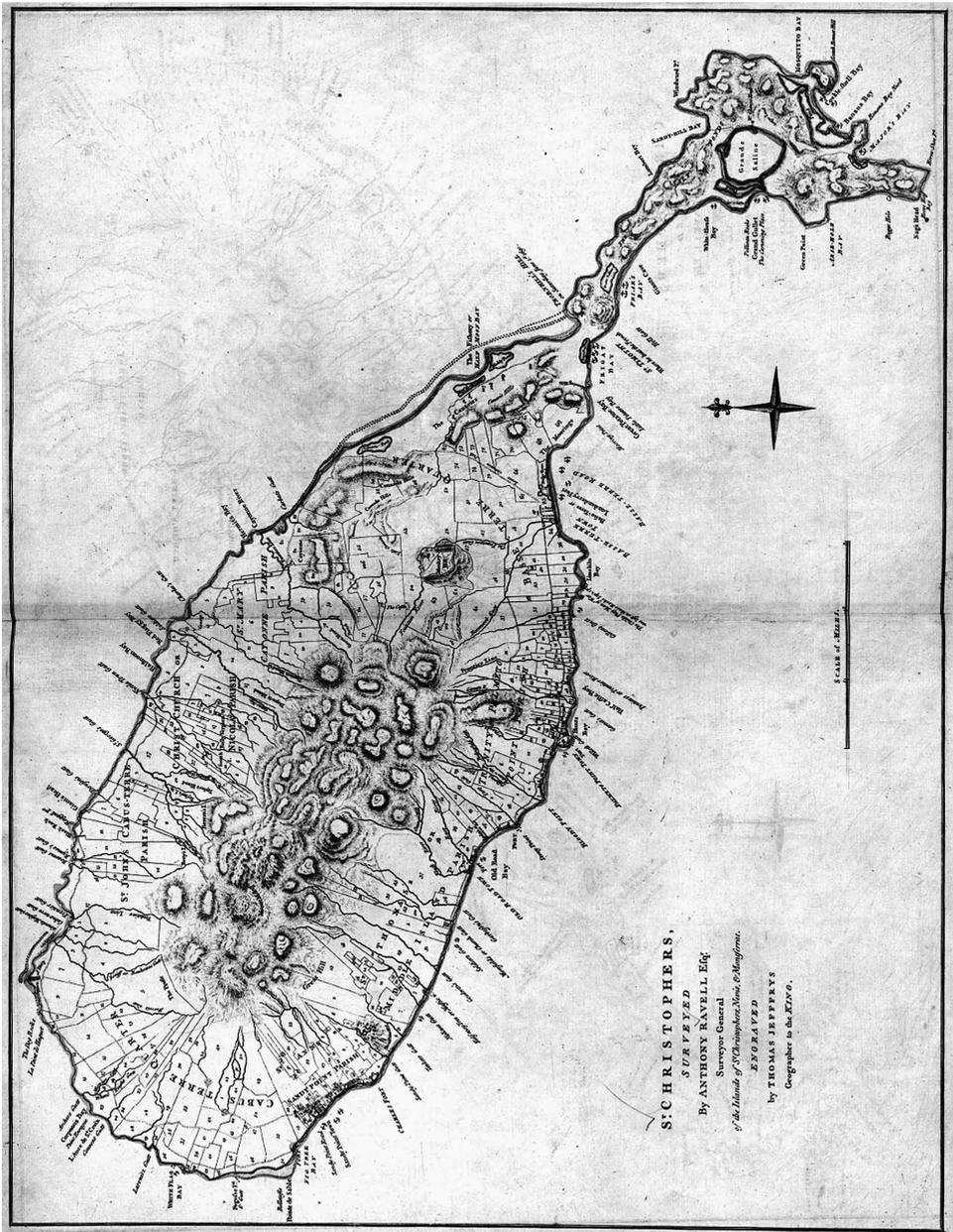
### INTRODUCTION: FRENCH ECHOES IN AN ENGLISH COLONY

The island of St. Kitts, formerly known variously by the names St. Christopher, St. Christopher's, or St. Christophers, comprises one half of the federated nation of St. Kitts and Nevis, which gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1983. Although St. Kitts was initially settled by English venturers in 1624, as the first permanent English colony in the West Indies, even the most casual perusal of any map of this island, whether historical or contemporary, shows a plethora of French-derived place-names, such as

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ST. CHRISTOPHER. ANTIQUE MAP



that of the capital city, Basseterre, as well as of localities such as Dieppe Bay Town, Capisterre, and Cayon. For, despite St. Kitts's nearly four continuous centuries as an Anglophone community, between 1624 and 1713 the island was officially divided between English and French settlers. The origin myth of European settlement therein, originated by the French Dominican missionary and historian Jean-Baptiste du Tertre in the 1660s and repeated over the centuries by many subsequent scholars, asserts that the first representatives of both nations landed on the island on the same day in 1624, although the eighteenth-century Jamaican planter-historian Bryan Edwards insisted that the English, the majority of whom were Suffolk farmers under the command of Sir Thomas Warner, formerly the captain of James I's Body Guard, had arrived two years prior to the French, largely Normans and Bretons led by the naval lieutenant Pierre Belain d'Esnambuc. This possibility notwithstanding, Edwards considered St. Kitts to be "the common mother of both the English and the French settlements in the Charaibbean islands," a claim which is echoed by today's government and tourism officials, who frequently promote the island's historical significance as the "Mother Colony of the Caribbean".<sup>2</sup>

Whenever it may have been that they made their respective arrivals on St. Kitts, the French and the English soon came to agree that, at least for the time being, their principal adversaries were not one another, but rather the Spanish, who had already established substantial permanent settlements on the other Caribbean islands of Cuba, Jamaica, and Hispaniola, and the indigenous Carib Indians, also known as the Kalinagos. In 1627, Warner and d'Esnambuc drew up a treaty which pledged their respective forces, which at that time numbered probably only around a hundred men between the two groups, to mutual assistance in the face of any hostilities from either of these opponents, an understanding which was renewed five times over the subsequent four decades. This agreement also laid out the parameters of settlement on the island, as they were later described by John Hilton, whose grandfather Anthony Hilton had been present at this event: "in what manner did they divide the land" was that "the English took eight miles to the windward and the leeward of a centre line drawn across the island, while the French took eight miles to the windward and leeward of the English territory".<sup>3</sup> By the terms of this agreement, the English colonists would occupy the central section of St. Kitts, plentifully watered by the Wingfield River, and the French the two ends

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<sup>2</sup> St.-Johnston, 1936: 116. Edwards, 1794, vol. I: 422. Merrill, 1958: 17, 48.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Leech, 2007: 192.

(known as Capesterre and Basseterre), with hunting, fishing, forests, mines, harbours, and the large salt ponds at the southern tip to be held in common.<sup>4</sup>

The strength of this Anglo-French accord was almost immediately put to the test, when in 1629 a Spanish naval squadron under the command of Dom Federico de Toledo made landfall on St. Kitts and destroyed a number of the houses therein before the invaders were driven out by the combined efforts of the French and the English colonists.<sup>5</sup> This display of transnational unity had been prefigured several years earlier, when French and English forces had joined together against the local Carib Indians, who were becoming progressively less content with the situation on the island, as their mobility and access to land were progressively limited by the endeavours of the new arrivals. In Bryan Edwards's description, the Europeans, acting upon rumours that the Caribs were planning an attack on them, "fell on the Charaibes by night, and, having murdered in cold blood from one hundred to one hundred and twenty of the stoutest, drove all the rest from the island, except such of the women as were young and handsome, of whom...they made concubines and slaves".<sup>6</sup> So brutally were the Caribs exterminated that the place at which the massacre occurred is still known locally as Bloody Point. Although the Caribs, afterwards based mostly on the island of Dominica, continued to launch periodic attacks against St. Kitts and the neighbouring French and English colonies for more than half a century, they never managed to regain their foothold on St. Kitts.

While the English and the French colonists appear to have been entirely in agreement with one another that the most effective way to deal with the Caribs, whom they saw as a threat to the security of their fledgling settlements and as an impediment to the intended development of their plantation-based economies, was to exterminate the entire indigenous community on St. Kitts, subsequent French and English commentators, writing many decades after the Bloody Point massacre, offered strikingly different evaluations of both the practicality and the morality of this incident. According to the Dominican missionary Jean-Baptiste Labat, the Caribs were "careless and lazy creatures" who were unwilling or unable to engage in the hard agricultural work increasingly valorised by Europeans. Labat, who had extensive contact with members of the Carib community on Dominica towards the end of the seventeenth century, praised what he considered to be their "proud and indomitable" spirit, but he asserted that this quality had a dark side which rendered them "extremely vindictive" towards anyone whom they considered to have in any way of-

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<sup>4</sup> Pestana, 2004: 96. Boucher, 2008: 69. Merrill, 1958: 21, 51.

<sup>5</sup> Schreiber, 1984: 175-176.

<sup>6</sup> Edwards, 1794, vol. I: 424.

fended them.” As a result, “no European nation has been able to live in the same island with them without being compelled to destroy them, and drive them out”.<sup>7</sup> By casting the Caribs as savages who were inherently unsuited to peaceful coexistence with Europeans in a new order centred upon empire and slavery, and thus as natural enemies of the progress of Christianity, commerce, and civilisation, Labat, a Catholic priest, an ardent missionary, and a self-professed friend to African slaves, apparently felt no qualms whatsoever about the Indians’ bloody demise.

In dramatic contrast, Bryan Edwards, writing nearly a century after Labat, described the extermination of the Kittitian Caribs as both inhumane and unnecessary. In his opinion, the Caribs were “poor savages” who were understandably angered by the Europeans’ seizure of what the former considered indubitably to be their lands, and had they planned an attack on the latter it would have been no more than a just response in the face of these depredations. But Edwards was convinced that, “having seized on the lands of these poor savages,” it was in reality the Europeans whose “consciousness of deserving retaliation made the planters apprehensive of attack where probably none was intended”.<sup>8</sup> This dramatic difference in interpretation can be attributed at least in part to temporal factors. At the time at which Labat penned his memoirs, the Caribs continued to pose at least some degree of threat to the European settlements in the eastern Caribbean, while by the late eighteenth century, when Edwards composed his history, they represented no danger to his native Jamaica or to any of the other long-established English West Indian colonies, and their aggressions against English settlers in Britain’s newly acquired colony on the island of St Vincent could be attributed to the active encouragement of French revolutionary advisors and to the fact that these Indians were in fact “Black Caribs” of mixed indigenous and African heritage, rather than the “pure” indigenes who had lived on St. Kitts a century and a half earlier. Edwards’s romanticised view of the Caribs appears to have been heavily influenced by the trope of the “noble savage” which had emerged in the latter half of the eighteenth century as a cultural ideal which depicted indigenous Americans as innocent children of nature who had been deprived by European interlopers of their ancestral lands and their natural rights, while Labat’s harsher words were written at a moment at which the triumph of the European over the “savage” throughout the Americas was not yet a *fait accompli*. But these notably divergent responses to a foundational event in the history of French and English St. Kitts can also be seen as indicative of the

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Beckles, 2008: 81.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, 1794, vol. I: 424.

numerous ways in which the two colonising factions on St. Kitts came to disagree virulently with one another on questions concerning the social, political, economic, and religious development of this divided settlement.

“A DISGUSTFUL SCENE OF INTERNAL CONTENTION, VIOLENCE AND BLOODSHED”

One might assume that, having in quick succession rid St. Kitts of the threat apparently posed by its indigenous population and seen off an attack by a rival European imperial power, the English and the French would have enjoyed a sustained period of peaceful cohabitation and, perhaps, even mutual assistance. But in reality, as Edwards observed, “national rivalry and hereditary animosity were allowed their full influence [in St. Kitts], insomuch that, for half a century afterwards, this little island exhibited a disgusting scene of internal contention, violence and bloodshed”.<sup>9</sup> Without a doubt, many of these problems emerged as a result of the increasingly hostile relationship which developed between metropolitan France and England over the latter half of the seventeenth century, particularly in the years following the Stuart restoration of 1660, which saw Charles II attempt to undermine the commercial dominance of the Netherlands. In the course of this conflict Louis XIV allied himself with the latter, a turn of events which would see the English, French, and Dutch colonies in the Caribbean become a secondary theatre of warfare in the so-called Anglo-Dutch Wars of the later seventeenth century.

But even had Anglo-French relations in the metropole followed a more amicable path, the situation on St. Kitts would likely have flared into at least occasional hostility. The island’s physical size, in and of itself, evokes William Butler Yeats’s observation, in the context of colonial Ireland, that “little room” could breed “great hatred” among the inhabitants. St. Kitts occupies approximately 65 square miles, or around 168 square kilometres, of land, with much of the southern part consisting of dry savannah, and the interior being characterised by steep volcanic hills, both of which regions were topographically unsuited either to habitation or to the cultivation of sugar or other local crops.<sup>10</sup> With the English occupying the middle section of the island and the French surrounding them on both sides, “the French and English bee soe intermixed together that with much difficulty could either hinder a Secret designe though there is constant guards upon each other’s borders”.<sup>11</sup> Although

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*: 426.

<sup>10</sup> Yeats, 2010: 254. Boucher, 2008: 17.

<sup>11</sup> Gardyner, 1651: 73.

necessity, in the form of Carib or Spanish adversaries, unfamiliar territory, and limited manpower, had initially encouraged the English and the French to act in concord with one another, the toxic combination of global geopolitics and local realities prompted the two groups of settlers to engage one another in decades-long rounds of hostilities, instead of doing their utmost to accommodate one another within a very small and, over the course of the seventeenth century, increasingly over-crowded island. In the words of the French historian and political philosopher Guillaume-Thomas Raynal (better known as the Abbe Raynal), “this arrangement mixed too many persons together, who could not be agreeable to one another, and jealousy soon divided those whom a temporary interest had united. This fatal passion created daily quarrels, skirmishes and devastations... [which were] fought with a degree of obstinacy that was not to be found elsewhere” in the European settlements of the Americas and Asia discussed in the numerous volumes of Raynal’s history.<sup>12</sup> But considering the initially cooperative relationship which had characterised Anglo-French efforts in the early years of settlement, and the two communities’ willingness to join together against external opponents, why were both groups so keen to create so many difficulties in relation to their own security and prosperity by striving again and again to undermine and even terrorise one another, rather than focussing on the improvement of their own settlements?

#### TAKING ADVANTAGE AND MAKING ADVANTAGE

At the most basic level, both the English and the French, over the first few decades of their shared settlement of St. Kitts, had managed to convince themselves that they were one another’s hapless victims, each side believing that it had gotten by far the less advantageous end of the bargain in the course of Warner and d’Esnambuc’s division of the island. The English pamphleteer George Gardyner tried to convince his readers that “there is a kind of equality” in the respective strengths of the two groups, because, while the French were more numerous than the English in terms of population, the latter “make good by their English spirits, which doe not degenerate with the Climate,” whereas the French, he implied, soon fell into physical and spiritual decline in a distant and exotic tropical environment.<sup>13</sup> But other commentators were significantly less sanguine about the respective advantages of the two groups: the Scots cartographer John Ogilby complained in 1671 that,

<sup>12</sup> Raynal, 1788, vol. VI: 305-306.

<sup>13</sup> Gardyner, 1651: 73

while “the English have more Rivers and People” in St. Kitts, the French benefitted because they possessed “more plain Land, fitter for Cultivation, and [more] Forts furnish’d with Guns and Soldiers”.<sup>14</sup> A generation later, the English historian John Oldmixon opined that “the French have more of the plain Country, and lands fitter for Cultivation,” whereas the English “inhabit that Part of the Country where the high Mountains rise,” which was filled with “high and craggy Rocks and Precipices” which made transportation challenging and agriculture impossible.<sup>15</sup> But nearly a century later, decades after the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) had dispossessed the French colonists and given Britain complete control over the island, the Abbe Raynal claimed that the French settlers had failed to turn these apparent advantages to their benefit, as they “had never seriously attended to the care of cultivating productions upon their domain... they cultivated nothing but a little cotton and indigo, and had but one single sugar plantation” at the time of the Treaty’s signing.<sup>16</sup> While Raynal’s evaluation greatly exaggerates the French settlers’ lack of commitment to sugar cultivation, it is nonetheless accurate to state that, as of 1713, the English had been notably more successful than their neighbours in moving St. Kitts towards the highly profitable monocultural sugar regime which had already emerged in and enriched Barbados and the other English West Indian colonies.<sup>17</sup>

These contrasting commercial and agricultural priorities were emblematic of some of the sources of mistrust which developed between French and English Kittitians over the course of the island’s first century of European settlement. While the English almost from their moment of arrival focussed their attentions on the creation of a profitable export-centred agricultural sector, the French appear to have been primarily concerned with the establishment of a variety of physical and social amenities, attempting to replicate metropolitan ways of life to the greatest extent possible, despite the challenging physical and social circumstances presented by St. Kitts’s location, climate, and topography.

Although, according to John Oldmixon, in the first years of settlement it was the English who were quick to “build themselves good Houses...whereas the French contented themselves with Huts,” within a couple of decades it was the latter who had opted “to live more together, and [who] have built a fine Town” at Basseterre, the development of which was a particular project

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<sup>14</sup> Ogilby, 1670: 384.

<sup>15</sup> Oldmixon, 1708, vol. II: 221, 225.

<sup>16</sup> Raynal, 1804, vol. V: 26.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, a colonial governor’s report of 1674 stated that the French colonists had by this time established more than a hundred sugar mills (Merrill, 1958: 54).

of the Chevalier Louis de Poincy (his name is given by some historians as Philippe de Longvilliers de Poincy), a member of the order of the Knights of Malta, who served as the lieutenant-general, or royal governor, of the French sector of St. Kitts between 1639 and 1660.<sup>18</sup> While English commentators insisted that they and their countrymen were quite content to follow a more dispersed pattern of habitation, one in which their “fine Houses” and “very handsome Churches” were spread out across the English sector of St. Kitts, primarily along the coast, they were simultaneously awed by and envious of what the French had managed to accomplish, in having created a recognizable facsimile of a French provincial town on a small, remote tropical island. Even the highly Anglo-chauvinistic John Oldmixon forced himself to admit that “the Castle in this Town [the chateau constructed at Basseterre by de Poincy around 1640], where the Governor resides, is the most noble Edifice in the Island,” while the English cartographer Richard Blome described de Poincy’s mansion as a “stately Castle...having spacious Courts, delightful Walks, and Gardens,” as well as an extensive walled compound, known as the “Ville d’Angole” (Angola City) in which his several hundred slaves lived. Additional amenities which aroused the envy of English commentators were Basseterre’s other “stately edifices,” including a slate-roofed church originally constructed in the 1630s for the Capuchin friars, but soon thereafter taken over by the Jesuits (commonly referred to as the Jesuit College, for which College Street in Basseterre remains named, although the building was destroyed in an earthquake in 1690), a substantial hospital, or *Hotel-Dieu*, at which “such people that cannot get cure at their Homes...are well maintained and attended by Doctors, and Physitians,” a school, a “publique-Hall, for the administration of Justice,” and a number of “fair houses built of Brick and Free-stone.” By contrast, reported the French lawyer Georges Butel-Dumont with a nearly audible sniff, “in place of cities, the English have built many forts,” including, by 1690, the fortress of Brimstone Hill, which later earned the sobriquet of “the Gibraltar of the West Indies” for its strategic location and its formidable defences against any threat of invasion.<sup>19</sup>

One might wonder why these English observers would be moved to envy the imposing French buildings while choosing to construct far more modest domestic and public structures, a pattern which the English followed in their settlements throughout colonial British America. Visitors to Virginia in the

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<sup>18</sup> Oldmixon, 1708, vol. II: 224, 226. Wilkie, Jr., 1990: 172-173.

<sup>19</sup> Oldmixon, 1708, vol. II: 226. Blome, 1672: 49. Butel-Dumont, 1758: 64. “Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park,” UNESCO World Heritage List, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/910> (Consulted 17 March 2015).

late seventeenth century, when that colony was newly flush with wealth from the burgeoning trade in tobacco, were astonished to find that the homes of men who owned dozens of slaves and hundreds of acres of land were so small and crude that they resembled the residences of the poorer sort of English labourers, rather than those of metropolitan aristocrats or great merchants.<sup>20</sup> Christopher Jeaffreson, one of St. Kitts's richest English planters in the later seventeenth century, commented of his fellow English settlers that "the most part here lye in hammakers [hammocks], sit upon benches...and never cover the table but at meals," in an attempt to dissuade his business factor in London from attempting to export to the island more luxurious, but un-desired, household items such as bedticks, hangings, cushions, carpets, curtains, and "chaires that do not fold".<sup>21</sup> English colonists, particularly those in tropical environments in which elaborate buildings were perpetually under threat from "accidents of fire or water or wind," such as hurricanes, earthquakes –indeed, Basseterre suffered substantial damage as a result of a major earthquake which struck the Leeward Islands in 1690, and destroyed not only the Jesuit College, as noted above, but also de Poincy's chateau– and floods, as well as from foreign attack or slave rebellion, tended to build quickly and cheaply, at least until their communities' economies had fully developed, and a native-born elite had emerged.<sup>22</sup> But although this practice was a matter of choice, and of practicality, close proximity to locales in which their rivals had developed more imposing cultural landscapes could generate bitter resentment.

Similar sentiments were expressed at the end of the nineteenth century by the English historian and novelist James Anthony Froude as he travelled throughout the Caribbean. He contrasted the splendours of Havana, which he rhapsodically described as "a city of palaces, a city of streets and plazas, of colonnades, and towers, and churches and monasteries," with the far less imposing cityscape he encountered at Kingston, Jamaica, which "is the best of our [English] West Indian towns, and Kingston has not one fine building in it." "We English," Froude complained, "have built in these islands as if we were but passing visitors, wanting only tenements to be occupied for a time," an observation reflective of the fact that, even after the English gained permanent control over the French sections of St. Kitts, including the town of Basseterre, in 1713, they showed little interest in impressing themselves onto the landscape through the planned development of town streetscapes or the erection of

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<sup>20</sup> Crowley, 2003: 83.

<sup>21</sup> Jeaffreson, 1878, vol. II: 190.

<sup>22</sup> Mulcahy, 2006: 73. Robertson, 2001: 93.

majestic public buildings.<sup>23</sup> It seems, then, that the French and the English of St. Kitts each created the type of settlement which best reflected their cultural values and their goals for their respective communities' development, yet at the same time they were moved to stinging envy of one another's accomplishments, whether those might be a thriving sugar industry, an impregnable fortress, or an imposing capital city. But the sources of their mutual mistrust ran more deeply than simply holding sharply contrasting visions of the ideal colonial settlement.

#### MASTERS AND SLAVES

Within a generation of the establishment of permanent settlements in St. Kitts, both the French and the English inhabitants began to cultivate sugar, and to look to the African slave trade, as well as to white indentured servants, as a labour force for their plantations. By 1680, nearly half of St. Kitts's approximately 3000 residents were enslaved Africans, and throughout the remainder of the period under study whites were always a numerical minority within the island. But despite this shared acceptance of and commitment to chattel slavery as an institution, its practice became still another source of mutual mistrust and contempt between the two settler communities. From the beginning of their engagement with enslaved labour, English Protestants and French Catholics alike expressed their concerns regarding the relationship between the large-scale deployment of Africans as slaves and the religious and cultural goals which they claimed lay at the heart of their respective colonial endeavours.

As early as the 1640s, at a time at which slavery had yet to become central to the economy of any of the Anglo-American colonies, Richard Ligon, an English visitor to Barbados, came up against this disjuncture between the love of God and the love of gold. Ligon had been greatly impressed by the intellect and curiosity of a slave named Sambo, who asked Ligon to help him become a Christian, as "he thought to be a Christian was to be endued with all those knowledges he wanted." Ligon was happy to oblige, and informed Sambo's owner of his bondsman's wish, but he was disappointed when the man informed him that Barbados was ruled by English laws, "and by those Laws we could not make a Christian a slave." Ligon responded that his desire was in fact "to make a Slave a Christian," but his request was again turned down, on the grounds that "being once a Christian, he [the owner] could no more account him [Sambo] a Slave." Ligon was dismayed that "poor Sambo [was] kept out of the Church: as ingenious, as honest, and as good-natur'd

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<sup>23</sup> Froude, 1888: 256. Hobson, 2007: 192.

poor soul, as ever wore black, or eat green,” and he would probably have been still more disappointed had he been able to foresee that the majority of the slaves in the English colonies of the West Indies would continue to be “kept out of the Church” for the next hundred years.<sup>24</sup>

By the latter half of the eighteenth century, newly emerged evangelical Christian denominations such as the Moravians, the Methodists, and the Baptists were engaged in a re-evaluation of English Protestantism’s ideas regarding the relationship between Christianity and slavery, and some of their adherents in the plantation colonies proselytised to the enslaved with a message of God’s love for all persons of faith, regardless of their colour or legal status, in a way which was attractive to some bondspeople but which did not threaten slaveholders with any hint that the adoption of the Christian faith conferred any new rights or privileges upon their workforce. But throughout the period under study, the English of St. Kitts made few serious or sustained attempts to Christianise their fast-growing enslaved population, considering such activities at best as a waste of time and at worst as a wrong-headed practice which could encourage a dangerous degree of presumed spiritual, and, potentially, legal and social equality between the races.

The attitude of the French colonists of St. Kitts towards the religious conversion of their slaves presented a sharp contrast to that of their English neighbours. The former were not entirely immune to anxieties regarding the social and legal position of Christian slaves; although Louis XIII is said to have approved the introduction of slavery in France’s overseas colonies only with the proviso that these Africans would be Christianised, planters frequently doubted the wisdom of such a policy.<sup>25</sup> In 1646 the monks of the Capuchin order were expelled from St. Kitts, for reasons which are reported to have included their preaching that Africans, once baptised, could not be held as slaves, as they argued that “it is an unworthy thing to use one’s Christian brother as a slave.” But the Capuchins’ missionary successors in St. Kitts, the Jesuits and the Dominicans, not only financed their endeavours through the profits of the slave plantations which they established there and in the other French colonies in the West Indies, but they strongly encouraged planters to permit them to baptise their slaves and to instruct them in the Catholic faith, with the understanding that such proselytization would not in any way alter the slaves’ legal status. According to the Jesuit missionary Jean Mongin, who served as the *cure des negres* (minister to the blacks) of St. Kitts in the late seventeenth century, the local planters were not merely willing but eager for

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<sup>24</sup> Ligon, 2011: 101.

<sup>25</sup> Jesse, 1961: 153.

him to catechise their slaves. Mongin's writings do not explain the source of this attitude, but Sue Peabody has suggested that the slaveholders may have believed that Christian slaves would be more docile and easier to control than those who retained their "heathen" African spiritual beliefs, as "Christian doctrine could be used to encourage slaves' obedience and acceptance of the status quo," an opinion which would by the Second Great Awakening of evangelical Christianity in the early nineteenth century become prevalent amongst slaveholders throughout the American South.<sup>26</sup>

This desire to make enslaved men and women into Christians was granted the force of imperial law in 1685, in the *Code Noir* issued by Louis XIV. The second of the code's fifty-nine articles decreed that "all the slaves who will be in our Islands will be baptized and instructed in the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman religion." Within a week of a planter's purchase of a newly arrived "saltwater" slave from Africa, he or she was expected to inform the governor of the colony of this transaction, or to face a punitive fine for failing to do so; the governor was then supposed to contact the Jesuits or the Dominicans to "give the necessary orders to have them [the new slaves] instructed and baptized within an appropriate time." According to the Dominican missionary Jean-Baptiste Labat, who resided in the French Antilles between 1694 and 1706, as soon as an African arrived on a plantation, he or she should be lodged in a hut in the slave quarters with a particularly devout slave, who would not only prepare him or her for the rite of baptism, but would emphasize the centrality of the Catholic faith to the daily life of the plantation, refusing to eat or sleep in the same room with the new arrival until she or he had received baptism at the hands of a missionary. Another article of the *Code Noir* upheld this overt relationship between Catholicism and the affective life of the slave community by commanding all slaveholders to ensure that their baptised slaves were buried in consecrated cemeteries, while those who died without having been baptised "will be buried at night in some field near the place where they died," a practice which encouraged slaves' at least outward conformity to the Church of Rome by ensuring that after death they were not placed outside the bounds of the community in which they had passed much or all of their lives.<sup>27</sup>

This significant disjuncture between English and French attitudes towards and practices regarding the religious instruction of the enslaved generated a war of words between the two communities on St. Kitts, one in which the French were dominant, as it was they who had significant numbers of well-

<sup>26</sup> Peabody, 2002: 62, 68.

<sup>27</sup> *Le Code Noir ou recueil des reglements rendus jusqu'a present*, 1767: 1, 3. Quoted in Jesse, 1961: 154.

trained and enthusiastic religious personnel on the ground, both to minister to the enslaved and to defend themselves and attack their opponents in print, while there were too few Anglican clergy on the island to meet the needs of the English settlers, let alone to proselytize to the slaves<sup>28</sup>. Among the most effective of these French propagandists was the Dominican Jean-Baptiste du Tertre, who served as the superior of the order's mission in the French Antilles throughout the 1640s, and who composed a voluminous general history of the French settlements in the West Indies upon his return to the metropole towards the end of that decade.<sup>29</sup> According to du Tertre, Africans, rather than being the soulless and animalistic creatures that some advocates of slavery claimed that they were, "are certainly touched by God's grace, for they remain faithful until death to the Religion they have embraced; they practise its virtues and perform its good works; and I can say in truth that they live the Christian life more perfectly in their condition than many French people." The fact that the English colonists of St. Kitts rarely gave their slaves religious instruction, and that those who did so were indoctrinating their bondpeople in what, in the eyes of French Catholics, were the heretical tenets of the Church of England, positioned the English settlers as failing to take seriously their divinely ordained responsibilities for the care of the souls of the enslaved. In the words of Guillaume Moreau, the superior general of the Jesuits in the French West Indies in the early eighteenth century, "all the [English] heretics do not baptize their slaves, claiming that slavery is a condition in opposition to the children of God, and consequently they never speak to them of religion".<sup>30</sup> By contrast, according to du Tertre, "there is scarcely a Negro in all the French Antilles that is not a Christian, scarcely one that they [the missionaries] have not regenerated in the waters of Baptism." Du Tertre asserted that by the 1660s more than 15,000 slaves in the French West Indian colonies had been baptised, and that the slaves who had been born in the colonies were as well instructed in the faith as the islands' white children were. He went on to offer what would over the following two centuries become a familiar justification of slavery: that had these bondpeople remained in Africa, they would have been denied the blessings of the Christian religion and prevented from leading a godly life and ascending to heaven, an advantage which, he believed, entirely outweighed any sufferings they might have endured as slaves.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> On the scarcity of Church of England ministers in St. Kitts during the seventeenth century, see Zacek, 2010: 128-129.

<sup>29</sup> Peabody, 2004: 115.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Jesse, 1961: 156.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*: 153, 154.

From this alleged sin of failing to look after the spiritual welfare of the enslaved, it was easy, and tempting, for French clerics to project responsibility for any perceptions of brutality within the institution of slavery onto the English slaveholders, and thus to depict the French practice thereof as benevolent and beyond criticism. The Dominican missionary Labat wrote of his experiences in the West Indies at the end of the seventeenth century that “the English [planters] were wont, as a punishment, thus to grind their negroes to death” in their sugar mills, a “gruesomely precise metaphor” for the system of West Indian plantation slavery as a whole.<sup>32</sup> To Labat and his readers, this supposedly commonplace practice served as evidence not only of the cruelty of slavery in the English colonies, but of its allegedly benign nature as practiced within the French settlements.

Considering that few, if any, of the English colonists of seventeenth – or early eighteenth – century St. Kitts would have been familiar with the works of du Tertre, Labat, or any of the other French missionaries in the West Indies, these textual claims for the moral and spiritual superiority of the French system of slave-holding may have had little effect on day-to-day relations between the two communities. But in times of Anglo-French warfare, the treatment of slaves could become a major issue on the island. Du Tertre claimed that in 1635 French officers had led hundreds of armed slaves in a campaign against the English Kittitians, in an attempt to terrify them to the point that they would choose to abandon their section of the island.<sup>33</sup> According to du Tertre, “the slaves of the French colonists were not less brave than their masters in opposing the English”.<sup>34</sup> This anecdote is not supported anywhere else in the historical record, and it is almost certainly untrue: at this time, Anglo-French relations on St. Kitts were relatively amicable; the island was very much in the “frontier stage” of its social and economic development, as it would remain until the 1660s, so it is extremely unlikely that slaves numbered in the hundreds across it, let alone within the French sector on its own, and the French population was so small that it is quite inconceivable that they would have chosen to risk supplying with arms a group of enslaved men who would have considerably outnumbered them. But even if du Tertre’s story is a fiction, far more reliable sources attest to the fact that, during the attacks which the elder Christopher Codrington, Captain-General of the Leeward Islands, launched against the French Kittitians in 1690 and 1691, in the course of King William’s War, the English forces overran the

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Plasa, 2011: 20.

<sup>33</sup> Boucher, 2008: 70.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Jesse, 1961: 151.

French sector and made off with large numbers of slaves.<sup>35</sup> According to the Jesuit Moreau, many of these French slaves, all of whom “were baptized, well instructed, and several had piety” in the Church of Rome, were taken to the nearby English colony of Antigua. Although, according to Moreau, their new English owners treated them fairly well, they longed to return to servitude under Catholic masters, and several dozen ran away to the French colony at Guadeloupe, where Moreau, in his role as the local *cure des negres*, encountered them. According to his account, the slaves informed him that “in returning as they had among the French, they understood that they would not be nearly so comfortable in life and in work as they had been with their English masters, but that their displeasure in living among brutes, the fear of dying without rites had resolved them to return to a country where they could live as Christians”.<sup>36</sup> Through this anecdote, Moreau attempted simultaneously to demonise slavery as practiced by the English planters and to justify and even valorise it as it existed among the French colonists.

While Moreau’s narrative has greater credibility than that of du Tertre, as it was drawn from his personal experience rather than acquired at second hand, it must nonetheless be interpreted with a certain degree of scepticism. Like his brother Jesuits throughout the French empire, Moreau was keen to impress his superiors in the Order, and its potential financial supporters, back in France with tales of his success in bringing New World inhabitants, especially non-Europeans, into the Church. And even if Moreau had recounted his experience with complete accuracy, these fugitive slaves needed an influential European as their ally, so they may well have chosen to exaggerate their devotion to the Catholic faith in order to gain refuge in Guadeloupe, rather than being returned to certain punishment in Antigua. But even if this anecdote is hyperbolic, other observers, including those who had little affection for the Jesuits or for other Roman Catholic missionary orders, noted that many slaves seemed to have formed strong connections to Catholic priests in the French West Indies. As the white population of St. Kitts continued to shrink in relation to that of the enslaved, and the island’s planters became ever more anxious about the possibility of rebellion amongst their bondpeople, the English had every reason to fear that, if their slaves did not attempt to escape bondage entirely, they might try to cross the borders of settlement within St. Kitts in order to labour for French Catholic masters, whom they may have considered to be more godly and benevolent than those of the English sector. While slave-owners were, of course, determined to prevent

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<sup>35</sup> Boucher, 2008: 219, 230.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Peabody, 2002: 54.

their slaves from escaping, they did understand their desire for liberty, particularly amongst those numerous “saltwater Negroes” who had been born in freedom in Africa. But for slaves to cast off not unfree labour as a system, but its specific practice by their nation, was still more galling, particularly when they believed that their enemies were encouraging such activities, and gloating over them in texts which would reach the eyes of European readers, and which would represent them in what they were convinced was an undeservedly bad light in the metropole.

#### “THE POPISH FACTION”

Another major source of tension between the English and the French in seventeenth-century St. Kitts was the presence within the English sector of a significant number of Irish Catholic indentured labourers. Although the English planters were willing to engage these bonded men and women when African captives were unavailable or unaffordable as a labour force, they tended to view Irish servants in highly negative terms. By the middle decades of the seventeenth century, planters throughout the Anglo-American colonies had come to prefer black slaves to white servants, seeing the former as more cost-effective, as they provided a lifetime’s worth of service rather than only that of a few years, and their children were automatically subject to perpetual labour, but also because they considered the latter to be inherently lazy and disobedient. This prejudice was still stronger in relation to Catholic servants from Ireland, who were stereotyped not only as disorderly and drunken, but also as a constant threat to the peace and security of English plantations and communities, due to their nationality and religion, as they seemed to constitute a perpetual “fifth column” whose loyalty to their masters was always suspect. In the words of Christopher Jeaffreson, a prominent English Kittitian planter of the later seventeenth century, “Scotchmen and Welchmen we esteem the best servants, and the Irish the worst, many of them being ever good for nothing but mischief”.<sup>37</sup> This apparent potential for treachery was particularly threatening in a colony such as St. Kitts, in which the French, whom the Irish servants were believed by the English to see as their natural allies, due to their shared Catholic faith, were permanent neighbours rather than occasional invaders. According to John Oldmixon, whenever Anglo-French tensions were rumoured to be on the rise in the metropole, “the Irish Papists...instigated the French

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<sup>37</sup> Jeaffreson, 1878, vol. II: 207.

to break the Peace there [in St. Kitts], before 'twas broken in Europe".<sup>38</sup> As soon as war broke out, English settlers believed, their Irish servants would take any opportunity to betray them to their French enemies, and, like the slaves whom Guillaume Moreau encountered in Guadeloupe, they might even desert their lawful masters in order to join their Catholic allies.

Even in times of peaceful relations between the English and the French, the presence of any significant number of Irish servants generated considerable unease between the two groups. By local law, the Irish were forbidden to erect any Catholic church or chapel or to host any Catholic priest within the English territory, and in addition they were barred from crossing into the French sector to attend services there, even at the major Catholic holy days. But in 1650, in an act of clear provocation, the Jesuit Jean Destrèche, whom some scholars assert was actually an Irish priest originally named John Stritch, arranged for the erection of a chapel at Point du Sable (Sandy Point), a locale just over the border between the French and English territories. When the Irish servants learned of this development, their joy "caused them to forget the danger to which they exposed themselves, by coming in a crowd and without hiding themselves in order to greet the Father, whom they all regarded as a man sent by God".<sup>39</sup> As John Ogilby noted, the borders between the French and the English sectors were marked by "Watch-houses, where Sentinels, or Watch-men stand daily in their turns," so these Irish men and women risked being caught and harshly punished for their attendance at Destrèche's services.<sup>40</sup> In the eyes of the English, their French neighbours were deliberately and unlawfully luring their servants across the borders for Papist gatherings; from the French viewpoint, the English were treating their servants with the same lack of Christian compassion as they did their slaves, denying them spiritual knowledge and comfort and forcing them to labour among cruel heretics.

As with Moreau's narrative regarding the fugitive slaves, it is quite possible that Pelleprat's description of the piety of the Irish servants of St. Kitts conceals alternate motivations on both sides. While there is no reason to discount Destrèche's religious devotion or his desire to offer his fellow Catholics access to the sacraments, it is quite possible that, as a Frenchman (or an Irishman), he was happy to discomfit the English by luring their labourers into French territory and openly flouting the prohibition on Catholic observance; indeed, he also disguised himself as a merchant in

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<sup>38</sup> Oldmixon, 1708, vol. II: 193. See also Block and Shaw, 2011: 33-60.

<sup>39</sup> Pelleprat, 1655: 39-40.

<sup>40</sup> Ogilby, 1670: 385.

order to travel to the English colony at Montserrat, which had a far larger population of Irish Catholics than did St. Kitts, and held a number of clandestine masses in the woods there.<sup>41</sup> And, for their part, the indentured Irish men and women might have been drawn across the border as much to avoid particularly arduous tasks or to escape, at least temporarily, a hated master as to attend Catholic services. Both the French and the English inhabitants of seventeenth-century St. Kitts made frequent complaints about servants who absconded from their masters and fled across the border, an activity which threatened not only the rule of law and the legitimacy of imperial boundaries, but the economic productivity of communities which had yet to fully make the transition to a labour force of African slaves. The English and the French had a mutual agreement to return runaway servants to their owners, but it is not difficult to imagine that both sides would have taken pleasure in at least occasionally facilitating the temporary abscondment of some of their opponents' bondspeople, particularly if such behaviour could be legitimised as an act of piety and compassion.<sup>42</sup>

#### UTRECHT AND AFTER

As we have seen, in the near-century which separated the initial arrival of the English and French settlers on St. Kitts and the final expulsion of the French from the island following the English victory in the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714), via the provisions of the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, a number of factors—political; religious; cultural—generated and maintained a climate of often virulent hostility between the two groups of colonists on this small island. It would be logical to assume that this situation would have been resolved after the French were forced to give up their territory in 1713, but in reality these Anglo-French tensions persisted well into the eighteenth century. Many of the French settlers departed St. Kitts as soon as they were ordered to do so, whether to return to France or to settle elsewhere in its West Indian colonies, but others refused to vacate the lands and homes which they and their families had owned and occupied for several generations. In the course of these efforts on the part of these French colonists to remain on the island and on their lands, the meanings of “Englishness” and “Frenchness” were recast at the local level, as many of these settlers bolstered their claims for continued residence by arguing that, while living under French rule, they had actively supported

<sup>41</sup> Pelleprat, 1655: 19.

<sup>42</sup> Pestana, 2004: 200.

amicable relations with their English neighbours, thus casting themselves more as Kittitians than specifically as Frenchmen (or women). Others asserted that they were not Catholics, adherents of a religion which many English people considered to be inimical to their own nation, faith, and culture, but were in fact Huguenots, Protestants who had suffered persecution at the hands of their Catholic countrymen, and who thus had more in common, politically and culturally, with their English co-religionists on St. Kitts. For example, the widow Elizabeth Renoult made a “humble Peticon” to the English authorities that she be allowed to retain possession of her late husband’s “Considerable Estate,” on the grounds that “he was of the Protestant Religion...and did...Swear Allegiance to the [English] Crown,” and another widowed petitioner, Elizabeth Salenave, requested that she be allowed to hold onto the four hundred acres of land acquired by her late husband Jordain, as not only had he apparently been “a Protestant and a great friend to the English Nation,” but her niece was the wife of Robert Cunningham, an officer in the English sector’s militia, a man whose “great zeal to your Majesty and your Royal Family is notoriously known”.<sup>43</sup>

The process of evaluating these claims and coming to decisions regarding which of these applicants were indubitably “French,” and thus liable for immediate eviction from their lands and expulsion from the now entirely English territory, and which, if any, were sufficiently “English,” by confession or allegiance, if not by birth, to remain on the island was a highly complex and contentious one, which was still underway two generations later, when Anglo-French hostilities flared up once again on a global scale, in the Seven Years War (1756-1763).<sup>44</sup> But despite the fact that, as Linda Colley has argued, the eighteenth century saw Britons increasingly defining themselves and their nation in social, political, religious, and cultural terms, in metropole and empire alike, in opposition to “their prime enemy, France,” the Assembly of St. Kitts naturalised so many former French settlers in the years following Utrecht that, as the English commentator John Campbell described, “it is certain that some of the best [French] families remained” on the island, in full possession of their estates, and within a few years of the Treaty began to contract marriages between their children and those of the colony’s leading English planter families.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *The humble Peticon of Elizabeth Renoult Widdow*, C[olonial]. O[ffice]. 152/10: Board of Trade: Original Correspondence, Leeward Islands, 1713-1716; C.O. 239/1: Leeward Islands: Original Correspondence, Secretary of State, National Archives of Great Britain, Kew, London. Oliver, 1909, vol. I: xxxvii.

<sup>44</sup> Zacek, 2008: 62-75.

<sup>45</sup> Colley, 1992: 18. Campbell, 1763: 43.

These ongoing debates regarding the mutually constitutive nature of English and French identity, and the extent to which some, if any, of the inhabitants of the formerly French sector of St. Kitts were sufficiently trustworthy to be allowed to remain as inhabitants and landowners, were not the only problem of the pre-Utrecht era which remained to trouble the English authorities. Although by 1714 African and Afro-Caribbean slaves had entirely replaced indentured servants within the plantations' labour forces, the descendants of the Irish servants of the previous century in many instances remained on the island, with the majority residing in an impoverished and crime-ridden section of Basseterre which became known as "Irish Town," a name it retains today. With the cession of the whole of St. Kitts to the English, these Catholic Irishmen and women were no longer seen as a possible threat to local security, but their poverty and landlessness, compounded by their ethnic and confessional identity, placed them, as labourers and artisans, at the bottom of the hierarchy of white society, still largely stereotyped as a "riotous and unruly lot" and denied any real voice in local affairs or much stake in the social order.<sup>46</sup> And while the English colonists had observed with envy the amenities with which the French had provided Basseterre, in comparison with their own failure to develop a comparable degree of infrastructure in the English sectors, for decades after they gained control over the whole of St. Kitts arguments raged between those who felt that the dignity of a British colony required a dedicated meeting space for legislative sessions and those who begrudged the expense thereof. As late as 1758 no such space had yet been created, with the Assembly acting to remit Alexander McCabee's tavern-keeping license fee in Basseterre with the proviso that "he shall furnish the Council and Assembly with Two Convenient Rooms to Sitt in and provide proper entertainment for both houses," as well as "provid[ing] dinner for the Judges of the Courts of Law and the Officers and Gentlemen that attend them." Not until 1760 did the public vote in favour of financing the construction of a government building in Basseterre, despite the fact that, by the mid-eighteenth century, St. Kitts was, on a per capita basis, the richest colony in British America.<sup>47</sup> By contrast, Virginia had commissioned the building of a lavish Governor's Palace in Williamsburg by the beginning of the eighteenth century, at which time Barbados had also erected its imposing Government House.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Inniss, 1985: 14. Beckles, 1990: 503-522.

<sup>47</sup> C.O. 241/7: St. Christopher's, Minutes of Council and Assembly, 21 March 1758, National Archives of Great Britain, Kew, London. See also Zacek, 2009: 115-126.

<sup>48</sup> Wenger, 1997: 223.

## CONCLUSION

The French colonists, or at least the great majority thereof, departed St. Kitts after less than a century of settlement therein. At the time at which the Treaty of Utrecht, with the proverbial stroke of a pen, transformed the island into a wholly English polity, St. Kitts was still a fairly marginal colony in comparison with many of the other European possessions in the West Indies. It would be almost half a century before it would gain renown as an island whose soil produced sugar of exceptionally high quality, and, in turn, generated such wealth for the men who made up its plantocracy that many of them fulfilled their ambition to turn the management of their estates over to overseers and attorneys, and to relocate to England to join the community of absentees whom Richard Pares asserted were “the most conspicuous rich men of their time”.<sup>49</sup> The Payne family of St. Kitts, the first member of which, Abraham, had arrived on the island in the 1650s, relocated permanently to England by the 1750s, though they continued to own their Kittitian estates until the early twentieth century, and other leading planters began at this time to send their children to school in England, from which some chose never to return to the island<sup>50</sup>. But the century in which the English and the French were obligated to share the island between them merits further historical enquiry, especially of the sort which places the, perhaps surprisingly, large number of texts produced by members of both communities in dialogue with one another, with the aim of gaining a clearer and more nuanced understanding of the extent to which the imperial projects of the English and the French within the Antilles were simultaneously comparable and divergent.

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<sup>49</sup> Pares, 1960: 38.

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## Enemigos íntimos: colonizadores y comentaristas franceses e ingleses en la isla de San Cristóbal

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*Este artículo examina la variedad de textos producida por los colonos franceses e ingleses de la isla de St. Kitts (San Cristóbal) en los siglos XVII y XVIII, momento en que ambas comunidades se hallaban asentadas en este mismo territorio lo que generó mucha tensión y enfrentamientos frecuentes. La puesta en diálogo de estos textos permite entender las similitudes y diferencias entre los dos proyectos imperiales y ofrece una nueva perspectiva del asentamiento europeo en el Caribe en la época de la esclavitud.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Francia; Inglaterra; Caribe; San Cristóbal; imperio; esclavitud.*

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