Locating the frontier in St Vincent and the Grenadines

Kingstown panorama

A pirogue slices the morning sea, bouncing from wave to wave. A fisherman sits in the stern, one hand on the tiller. The pirogue is powered by an outboard engine. The man leans forward, crouching against wind and sea-spray, gauging each oncoming swell. A thin ‘V’-shaped wake spreads from the bow across the deep-blue, choppy water. His partner sits facing him. They wear rough, well-used trousers, old shirts under bright yellow plastic jackets. Hats are jammed low on their heads. They do not speak. The man nearest the bow stares inland. He sees the curve of the bay. It snuggles below towering headlands to east and west. Behind the bay lie a range of folded hills.

If he had binoculars trained inland, the fisherman would see to the west a fort looming above the bay, black cannon rusting in their embrasures trained seaward. He knows that just as many cannon face inwards, away from the sea. Below, under their protection, red-roofed houses and shops made from wood or concrete with blue, yellow and pink walls, and a few churches, are packed together. They spread inland and along the bay’s coastline joined by narrow winding lanes. Open gutters carry a thin stream of grey waste-water through the narrow lanes. Where the gutters are blocked the waste forms a stagnant trail of off-white scum. More houses dot the deeper green hills behind the town. Cooking smoke curls from a few chimneys. Some of the streets and pavements of the town are made from cobblestones and some from concrete or asphalt. They are all roughly constructed. There are gaps
between each cobblestone from years of use and poor maintenance. The asphalt has thick patches that form low mounds, and in places it undulates unevenly. Many houses over-hang the pavements, supported by stone arches. The arches are a practical load-bearing solution to upper storeys. They provide shade from a fierce sun that will soon be overhead. They have become a small city’s claim to a unique feature.

A drunk lies in a disused shop doorway surrounded by the acrid smell of piss and alcohol. (There is probably a law against this sleeping-it-off in public. There are no shortages of laws. Their implementation is always capricious.) He wears a loose, torn shirt that has seen better days. His trousers are encrusted with dirt. The thick white soles of his feet are without shoes. His head is wrapped in an old jute sack sandwiched between two thin pieces of cardboard. A few people pass him on their way to serve in a master or mistress’s house, or to clean shops and offices. Cars begin to fill the streets and by mid-morning parking in the capital will be impossible. In the covered market, traders set up their tables to display their produce. Emaciated mongrel dogs play-fight near the vegetable market while they wait for scraps of food. Kingstown is awake.

The Caribbean frontier: a framework

Conventional frontier analysis takes the frontier as an aspect of the past, associated traditionally with disputed boundary lines and zones of conflict. It is either specifically identified or, if understood as a zone, of limited duration. Thus, for example, Howard Lemar and Leonard Thompson, in their introduction to The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared, define the frontier as ‘a territory or zone of interpenetration between two previously distinct societies’. The frontier ‘opens’, they suggest, ‘when representatives of the intrusive group arrive, and “closes” when a single political authority has established hegemony over the zone’ (Lemar and Thompson, 1981: 7). The frontier is either open or it is closed – though closure may
take a while. The implication for St Vincent then is that once British hegemony was established the frontier was closed. Caribbean historians appear to agree with this perspective and have mostly consigned frontier analysis to the past. For example, Gordon Lewis, bemoaning the lack of scholarship in the region based on the concept of the frontier, identifies as his first diagnostic characteristic of Caribbean societies that ‘they were in brief (and among other things) frontier societies’ (Lewis, 1968: 4). Woodville Marshall, in his 1999 historiography of the Windward Islands, notes that after 1815, while they shared the common British colonial fate of many islands in the region, ‘[S]ome of them were briefly perceived as a frontier for plantation expansion’ (Marshall and Brereton, 1999: 565).

Frontiers are, for historians it seems, either open or closed. One reason for this is that their essential understanding of frontiers appears to be driven by an ideological commitment that is region- or nation-state-focused. The essays in Lemar and Thomson’s collection offer regional comparisons – North America and Southern Africa – or comparisons that involve fully formed nation states with fixed boundaries: United States of America, Canada or South Africa. In the Caribbean context, Gordon Lewis, much of whose work focuses on Puerto Rico, outlines this nationalist leaning regionally in ‘Main Currents in Caribbean Thought’, where he traces the progress of Caribbean thought, from pre-slavery through anti-slavery ideology towards nation state formation, concluding with the growth of nationalist thought (Lewis, 1983).

More specifically, the brevity of the frontier period in the Caribbean, according to Lewis, is a result of the imposition of slavery in these societies. Thus he rejects Fredrick Jackson Turner’s frontier claim that: ‘Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity’ (Lewis, 1983: 82). Lewis recognises frontier traits of rough democratic forms of government, hard drinking and rudimentary political structures as applicable to such locations as Yucatan logwood settlements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, these forms, he argues, had disappeared by the late eighteenth century, overwhelmed
by repressive and authoritarian slave society. For Lewis, then, Turner’s attention to the opening up of opportunity, American distinctiveness and the scope of self management that the frontier offered could not apply to the Caribbean, which experienced, for centuries, a functioning industrialised slave society, albeit based on agricultural production. This perspective also implies that the social arrangements around the frontier in the Caribbean context have received little attention.

The approach to analysing the frontier adopted here is closer to Alistair Hennessy’s more open and diverse understanding of the frontier (Hennessy, 1978). In his The Frontier in Latin American History Hennessy recognises in frontier studies scope for, among other things, understanding a rich diversity of material (when available), an explanation of peripheral capitalism as well as insularity. Frontier study also offers a useful foil to the nationalist representation of history. This notion of frontier can encompass an American sense of open-endedness as well as the more European idea of (fortified) boundary lines. This definition is useful to my exploration of the specificity of the frontier in a relatively under-explored Caribbean context, the eastern Caribbean island state of SVG.

On the face of it, a society like SVG, one that develops from a traditional plantation base, has little reason to develop or extend a frontier analysis. It was part of a region where, in John Stewart Mill’s words, ‘England [found] it convenient to carry on the production of sugar, coffee and a few tropical commodities’ (Mill, 1968: 320). It was a late-colonised, enclave economy comprising a hilly tropical island with a main port, dependent on foreign capital and in many ways pursuing economic activities unrelated to its locality. However, as Hennessy points out, to establish plantation institutions required traditional frontier expansion that was characterised by physical displacement and cultural deprivation, including physical uprooting. The plantation was also associated with maroon opposition as well as later labour resistance and rebellion. As St Vincent, like many British Caribbean societies, became a combination of welfare-dependent and service-industry enclaves, did the frontier simply disappear?
Far from disappearing, I am suggesting that the frontier remains very much present, if an under-recognised element of Caribbean island culture. Its traits are located in the restless and adventurous coastal wanderings of the Caribbean fisherman, sailor or sea-port smuggler. They can be found inland in the island-wandering woodcutter; those who squat on Government land; the urban dame school-teacher; or more recently, the innovative doctor, the mountainside ganja grower and in the financial services sector. I suggest also that the relevance of frontier study to the region has been resuscitated by international tourism’s search for the exotic and the remnant ‘wild’ in the Caribbean. In this search for ‘paradise’ and expensive exclusivity St Vincent’s even tinier Grenadine appendages – Bequia, Mustique, Canouan, Petit St Vincent, Palm Island and the Tobago Cays – are important new elements in the Caribbean frontier. Biographies and autobiographies about Vincentians are in thrall to the metaphor of the pioneer or trailblazer.

The purpose of this book, then, is to challenge the suggestion that the Caribbean frontier had a brief life and then was over. The concept of the frontier that is generally associated with the era of colonial conquest has continuing, and under-explored, analytical purchase in the context of the Caribbean region. Important traces continue to be found and new aspects to be identified. To demonstrate this survival and renewal I extend the conventional notion of frontier as physical boundary to suggest that, beyond physical boundary, the frontier holds also moral and ideational tension as the site of balance between what are imagined as ‘civilisation’ and ‘wilderness’. I will suggest also that social movements challenge attempts to establish firm boundaries between notions of wilderness and civilisation. These last are slippery concepts, not least because while ‘civilisation’ is continually being revised as a conceptual tool, there is a tendency for ‘wilderness’ to disappear altogether. I argue, on the contrary, that the two are symbiotic: ‘wilderness’ is necessarily implicated in any discussion of ‘civilisation’.

It is therefore important to attempt a definition of the terms. I understand ‘civilisation’ to refer to societal order and organisation
that has some element of ideological imposition and artifice. The anglophone Caribbean is a region located in the Americas, but for the most part manifesting Western European ways of thinking. The region has experienced a long history of globalised enslavement, indentured and free labour, and raw-material exploitation since the fifteenth century European arrival. As a result, the Caribbean was probably the first (agriculturally) industrialised region of the globalised, capitalist western world, and through this incorporation combined colonialism with modernity. Over the long term it has undergone a gradual evolution in political systems, from various degrees of colonial dependency to territorial sovereignty. The result for the past sixty years has been the bequeathing of state management to a predominantly black and (particularly in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana) East Indian political class controlling a host of individual islands and smaller island groupings of various sizes: among the latter is SVG, a politically independent multi-island state. The process of modernity arising initially out of colonisation is the beginning of what some may identify as ‘civilising’ practices that prioritise ‘development’. From the perspective of those who hold power, who mobilise the label of civilisation or who are sufficiently dazzled by that power, the notion represents the best model of the present and the future. Ideologically it is a model that any ‘sane’ or ‘reasonable’ human being would embrace and applaud.4

‘Wilderness’ from the perspective of the ‘civilised’ is associated with raw nature, the absence of imposed order, and as a threat to that order. Thus, as Robert Frazer Nash observes, wilderness is not only a physical location, but also a state of mind. A wilderness is ‘not so much what a place is but what men and women think it is. The New World was also a wilderness at the time of discovery because Europeans considered it so’ (Nash, 2001: 7). Wilderness represents the untameable that always encroaches and may take a variety of forms. At the collective level I explore some of these forms of wilderness in SVG through the processes of social dislocation, the religious grouping formerly called the ‘Wilderness People’ and illegal marijuana farming in the northern St Vincent hills. At the micro level I use certain details of individual
biography and monologue to draw attention to the ways in which the relationship between wilderness and civilisation is far from static but ever present and continually shifting. I am suggesting, then, that frontier may be read both as a process at the collective level and as a site of individual self-determination.

But the frontier has historically been and remains very much a part of global production. For example modern globalisation has shaped the development of various types of island tourism, from yachting to the discovery and development of discrete private island enclaves – the development of the Caribbean’s financial sector as well as patterns of Caribbean migration. All of these developments I connect to notions of the civilised and the wild. The frontier, then, can be read as a form of moral landscape, an important element of which implies some form of boundary, where notions of civilisation and wilderness meet and regularly clash. In this sense, the frontier is a liminal space holding the other two structures in balance. In the Caribbean context, the continuation of frontier-influenced ideas can be perceived in the now commonplace notion of ‘Caribbean civilization’, variously and loosely defined (see Chapter 3 below). For ideological and aspirational reasons – driven variously by the Afro-centric reaction to centuries of racial denigration and the desire of post-independence leaders to demonstrate their own modernity – critical or analytical interest in Caribbean civilisation’s dialectical counterpart, the ‘wild’ or ‘wilderness’, has been muted. The following section examines how, historically, this lacuna has come about and I will go on to illustrate collective and individual frontier retentions as well as new directions for the concept of the frontier in the region.

In bringing together the notions of civilisation and wilderness a fundamental question is how to apprehend the flexible and fluid nature of the ‘frontier’ in the Caribbean, and, in particular SVG. A region of such complexity offers a variety of ways to apprehend the notion of ‘the frontier’ and its sometimes overlapping and sometimes synonymous terms, ‘border’ and ‘boundary’. An immediate if sometimes overlooked complication is that the region is located in
the Americas and so subject to Fredrick Jackson Turner’s special-case plea for the specificity of the ‘American’ frontier: that is, a line that moved east to west to create a cultural zone. Yet, simultaneously, the term is inflected by a regional tradition of European-influenced thinking. The European burden of meaning has traditionally rested on the notion of fixed borders between states. The North American tradition suggests broad regions of interaction involving more than one culture. Thus, the American and European traditions pull the meaning of ‘frontier’ in different directions.

Along with this tension the frontier, as common-sense ‘category of practice’ boundary-line delimiting one mini-state from another, has severe limitations in the Caribbean. Chapter 1 has demonstrated the appeal of redrawing these mini-state lines. At the other extreme, beyond the demarcation of state sovereignty, the multi-island mini-state of SVG affords a heady mixture of land and sea that further complicates (and even confuses) notions of boundary (line) and terrain (zone). For example, in the Grenadine ward islands that are part of the State of SVG the diligent ‘collect and classify’ analyst is confronted by a plethora of geographically locatable though mind-boggling sea/land frontiers between one island and another. In 1950, confronted with this array of ‘islets’ as he chooses to call them, Patrick Leigh-Fermor abandons the prosaic. He captures the other-worldness of the Grenadines archipelago in exalted, empathetic prose when he takes an aeroplane ride over the area, observing:

innumerable islets scattered across the sea from horizon to horizon, and seeming, as they slid slowly southwards, to writhe and change shape and turn over: violoncellos, scissors, earwigs, pairs of braces, old boots, cogwheels, armadillos, palettes, wishbones, oak leaves, boomerangs and bowler hats, all of them hanging mysteriously in a blue dimensionless dream.

Alongside these, he notes: ‘Solitary cones rose portentously through the penumbra, but no little wreathes of foam surrounded their crests; only a few yards of water separated them from the water-level. Pathetically,
after so much uphill work, they had just missed being islands – “Well tried”, one felt like murmuring’ (Leigh-Fermor, 2005: 197).

However, without the luxury of the travel writer’s metaphors, how might the analyst capture the array of frontiers encountered in the geographic confines of this nation state? Various stretches of sea water divide the so-called mainland island, St Vincent, from the Grenadines – the latter comprising inhabited and uninhabited islands and, as Leigh-Fermor suggests, mere rocks that lie just below or jut out of the sea. A collective sea/land territorial boundary can legitimately be identified between the grouping of Grenadine islands and the St Vincent ‘mainland’ – this demarcation is given some legitimacy in the way that the nation state is officially named – St Vincent and the Grenadines. Some, but not all of the Grenadine islands are legitimate ports of entry to the State of SVG. Yet another frontier between St Vincent and the Grenadines is geological – the Grenadine islands are geologically older than the volcanically formed St Vincent mainland. In contrast, while the island state of Grenada to the south of SVG includes two island dependencies – Petit Martinique and Carriacou – their existence is not acknowledged in the naming of that state. In the SVG context yet another line of sea/land territorial demarcation exists between each island in the national chain and its immediate surrounding seaboard – that of language. Thus Bequia, with some 5,000 year-round residents, 14 km (8 mi) south of St Vincent and the single largest island in the Grenadines chain, exhibits sufficient linguistic distinctiveness for linguists to conclude from a recent study of Creole English spoken there that ‘there is a great deal that is unique to Bequia. The uniqueness is most evident in the discussion on the words and ways of speaking which, even if they are shared with other varieties of Caribbean English, often show unique meanings and usage on Bequia’ (Meyerhoff and Walker, 2013: 119).

Beyond these administrative, territorial and cultural island-to-island distinctions, the concept of frontier as zone is further complicated when combined with the ambiguous concept of islandness. Chris Bonjie captures this ambiguity well in his observation that: ‘The island is a figure that can and must be read in more than one way: on the one hand as
the absolute particular, a space complete unto itself ... on the other
as a fragment, a part of some greater whole from which it is in exile
and to which it must be related ... it is a site of double identity –
closed and open’ (Bongie, 1998: 18). Furthermore, every island with
a beach – and most have several – harbours a liminal space. Adam
Nicholson, in his study *The Mighty Dead: Why Homer Matters*, calls
the beach ‘the great zone of liminality between land and sea, the
sphere of chance-in-play’. He points out how symbolically potent is
the departure of a vessel from a beach in Homer, and how often it
occurs. Why? Because ‘Leaving a beach is moving off from indecision’
(Nicholson, 2014: 30).

In frontier terms islands may be small; simple they are not.

The more flexible concept of frontier as zone can to some extent
respond to Bonjie’s complication. Here the notion of frontier is also
an intellectual and collective space that, as Nash suggests, exists in the
imagination. The frontier here describes more a cultural and spatial
zone that need not necessarily be fixed geographically. Of course, the
temptation for island-discoverers, colonists and island nation-state
managers (politicians and bureaucrats) to close the frontier is strong.
This form of frontier closure is represented in the processes of map-
ning, naming, building and changing island landscapes, all of which
are acts of possession – often presented for hegemonic purposes by
colonialists as ‘natural’ and ‘innocuous’. These actions are, as Rebecca
Weaver points out, the characteristic behaviour of anyone who finds
themselves stranded on an island. As she observes about imperial
islands: ‘Castaway colonists spend much of their time trying to turn
(their location) into a more “civilized” Western space like that they
left’ – the great literary exemplar, of course, being Robinson Crusoe
(Weaver, 2007: 24). This involves building huts, pens, bridges, gardens,
as well as performing various other rituals of possession to make the
place feel familiar. The antithesis of such behaviour, of course, is the
process of ‘going native’. Even when this does not occur, if the island
is already populated at the time of ‘discovery’ a Man Friday is invari-
ably involved as a mediator, and it would be misleading to think that
all castaways and settlers necessarily invest to the same extent in the modernising and ‘civilising’ process.

Indeed, a challenge to the hegemonic process of possession is represented by Walter Mignolo as ‘critical border thinking’. That is, a process whereby a cultural zone not only reflects modernity but is also critical of modernity. In this process of criticism the centre – more than likely ‘colonial-managed’, may be challenged at both the individual and collective levels. For Walter Mignolo this involves a process of ‘epistemic rupture’ and moments in which ‘the imaginary of the modern world system cracks’ (Mignolo, 2000: 73). From my local analysis of SVG it is unlikely that the grander rupture to the world system will be traced to Vincentian subaltern practices, though cracks at the St Vincent level are not to be excluded. As I will demonstrate in the SVG case, the cracks or threats to the system that appear at the local level have, in these modern, populist times, invariably led to State strategies of incorporation, or a leaning in that direction. However, I borrow Mignolo’s perspective, which I read as expressing an exploration of local thinking from the (wild side of the) border as well as thinking about the border from the ‘civilised’ side, to explore frontier behaviour at a local level in SVG. The study addresses those who, in Mignolo’s phrase, see themselves as having no option but to challenge the power-centre and take an alternative direction. This challenge is issued through direct or indirect criticism of those, whether local or international, who presume to navigate the society and define the frontier. In this context, the hegemonic centre (characterised by ‘civilised’ thinking about the border) upholds ‘common sense’ and ultimately what those at the centre of power, on or off the island, identify as ‘civilised’ behavior. How these zonal frontier-challenge processes happen and how they work themselves out in the SVG context are the meat and drink of the chapters that follow. The attractiveness of the frontier concept in an island situation like SVG is precisely this double-edged potential for ambiguity. It can be envisaged as liminal, closed and open at the same time.

Central to this open/closed status of the frontier in the Caribbean is the additional notion of ‘incompleteness’. This sense of incompleteness applies to both sides of the Caribbean frontier – the ‘wild’ and
the ‘civilised’. The frontier process that I am conjuring can be likened to the parodic and creolised ‘New World Vision’ threshold on which Wilson Harris locates Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*. Harris describes this vision as ‘a complex wholeness inhabited by other conferring parts that may have once masqueraded as monolithic absolutes or monolithic codes of behavior in the Old Worlds from which they emigrated by choice or by force’ (Harris, 1981: 87). He suggests that in the modern, globalised world the masquerade of cultural integrity needs to be abandoned and recognition given instead to the ‘incompleteness’ of each of the cultural elements that go towards making up the creolised whole (cited in Bongie, 1995, 246). This complexity is what I see as constituting a *frontier process*, in which each element is constantly being made while challenging the other, but each remains always incomplete. Civilisation and wilderness, then, function alongside a notion of *islandness* as both a sense of completeness, and, conversely, of openness to whatever might wash up on its shores – and thus incompleteness.

But to return to the particular. My study employs three modes of enquiry – historical, sociological and literary. The last of these three comprises monologues, poetic voice and literary criticism. In ranging across these genres I read the frontier from the perspective of the Caribbean island colony with its various geographical and cultural specificities, its hierarchies based on intimidation and imposed by a dominant capitalist world system. I argue that the concept of the frontier is essential both to Caribbean colonial history and to the Caribbean present. More recent developments – long-term colonial consolidation, political independence and globalisation processes – should not be allowed to obscure the frontier process in the Caribbean, which has never completely disappeared, and of which individual and collective traces remain. In the rest of this chapter and in Chapter 3 which follows I discuss the historical elements of ‘civilisation’ and ‘wilderness’ and the way that they have developed in SVG. In Chapter 4 I will examine at the micro and individual level three sketches of modern individual frontier lives in SVG. And at the collective level, I will demonstrate how
competition over what I describe as ‘the remnant wild’ has become central to development in St Vincent’s Grenadine dependencies. In Chapters 5 and 6 respectively I will discuss how this frontier collection of islands has been written about and how some of its (internal) cultural and social boundaries have shifted. The final chapter will examine the utility of frontier analysis for the study of islands in general, and implications for the study of the Caribbean and SVG in particular.

St Vincent and Kingstown’s role in the frontier

There are many historical indicators of SVG’s conventional frontier features – conflict over territory, colonial acquisition, outpost status and distance from any centre. Kingstown, the imperially named capital, lies on the south-west coast between two towns with Kalina (Carib) names: Barrouallie to leeward and Calliaqua further to the south. Sandwiched between them, the Kingstown embodies its frontier status, backed by hills, looking out to sea and facing down these Carib settlements. Every feature of Kingstown speaks to its strategic and defensive role, starting with its location on a wide bay stretching 2.4 km (1.5 mi) across from east to west, and able to be defended against attack from sea or land, since the surrounding hillsides provided good sites for lookout areas and gun emplacements. In 1784, durable fortifications for Kingstown began to be built. By the last year of the Brigands’ War the town’s outer environs bristled with troops and gun emplacements facing both seawards and inland. To the east was Cane Garden, where Three Gun Battery was located. To the west of the town separating Kingstown from New Edinboro stood One Gun Battery. Above this at about 600 feet (183 m) above sea level stood the garrison, Fort Charlotte, named after George III’s consort. Fort Charlotte contained barracks for 600 men and 34 pieces of artillery of different descriptions. The fort was garrisoned till 1873 when troops were finally withdrawn from the island. On Dorsetshire Hill, to the north above the town, there stood a further garrison. The town also operated a militia of all freemen.
aged between 18 and 55, comprising 909 men ranging in rank from 2 Colonels to 785 rank-and-file members (Martin, 1843: 56). In the centre of the town the House of Assembly contained two lookout or guard huts close to the road to afford a view of any mass movements converging on the seat of government. As the town slowly expanded from east to west around the bay the intention to provide security was clear. Meanwhile, the port offered a link by sea to the outside world.

Time for a song . . .

Song of Chatoyee

This is the land where I was nurtured
once beyond the British claim
green are our valleys
blue our mountains
places that I return again.

Every leaf, every bush
every branch on every tree
calls to Carib Chief. Cha-to-yee

This is the land that I fought for
here the place where I was slain
green are our valleys
blue our mountains
places that I return again.

This is the land my spirit wanders
cost to cost ‘cross each terrain
green are our valleys
blue our mountains
places that I return again.

Every leaf, every bush
every branch on every tree
calls to me.

(Nanton, 2014b: 59)

Thus, in the late eighteenth century, the port of Kingstown was a colonial out-station where settler wagons could be circled, metaphorically, for protection. They were opposed by the Garifuna (Black-Carib) population, an ethno-genesis grouping that combined over many years island Kalina (Carib) and ex-enslaved African-origin populations exercising pre-existing claims on the land and resisting colonial expansion.
The capture or sacking of the town was an important goal of their guerrilla struggle. Though occasionally approached during the warfare this goal was never achieved.¹³

Along with the need for fortification, because of its remoteness and fear of Garifuna attack from land and French naval attack from the sea, other characteristics of Kingstown associated with the frontier include a rough and ready style of urban living – a kind of urban dereliction – as well as regular bouts of violent social unrest. In his 1837 History of the West Indies Robert Montgomery Martin estimates that Kingstown comprised only 300 ‘larger sized houses the lower stories of which are in general built with stone or brick, and the upper of wood, with shingled roofs’ (Martin, 1837: 223). There were three main streets parallel to the sea. They were given the descriptively simple but practical names of Bay, Middle and Back Street. The rough and ready names of Middle and Bay Streets have persisted. Officially Back Street was later renamed Glenville Street in its eastern section and Halifax Street to the west, however its more informal name of Back Street persists. The main streets were intersected by six others. The early town pattern, laid out by the French during their occupation, has remained the basis of its street system, though where the French designated cobble-stoned Middle Street as the main street, the British preferred Back Street.¹⁴

On Back Street there was a stone Court House used for Council and Assembly meetings on the first floor and below it the Court of Justice (Martin, 1843, 51). Three streams flowed through the town, with its red-roofed houses painted blue, yellow and pink.

Arrival at Kingstown port in 1826 involved few formalities. Frederick Bayley, a British travel writer who spent part of that year on the island, observed: ‘There is no careenage at St Vincent … instead of rowing gently alongside a flight of very convenient steps, and getting quietly out of the boat … people are obliged to run their boats aground and … leap onshore as soon as the sea may withdraw a respectful distance’ (Bayley, 1833: 171). Once ashore things hardly improved, since human pedestrians had to contend with untended pigs roaming freely in the heart of the town. The authority attempted to control them by
urban slave gangs of ‘old runaways [recaptured slaves] and generally hardened sinners’ working in chains. It was one of their jobs to destroy every pig that they met: ‘They cut off its head and threw the body in the roadside to be carried away by the owner’ (Bayley, 1833: 196). Ten years later, the magistrate and journal keeper John Anderson painted a more general word picture of the town’s dereliction, detailing

The crazy wooden houses … The badly paved, or metaled dirty streets, where broken bottles, – hoops of iron, & other rubbish lie huddled before the doors; the mean appearance of the low roofed stores and huckster shops; – the defaced & mouldering houses; the naked appearance of the planked, uncovered floors & walls of even the best and inhabited tenements.

(McDonald, 2001: 63, 66)

An immediate reason for this lack of interest in urban public affairs was the limited commitment felt by white planter settlers to Kingstown beyond its function as a place of business and for protection. Throughout the nineteenth century colonial administrators continuously complained in their dispatches to the regional governor and to London about the maladministration of the governing planter elite in the House of Assembly. For example, by 1853 there was no regular system of taxation on the island and so taxes had to be voted annually in the island’s House of Assembly. Assembly meetings were often poorly attended or simply not held. In January 1853 the recently arrived lieutenant-governor observed ‘the Treasury was bankrupt, society disorganized and in fact I cannot better describe the situation of affairs than by saying that in all departments there existed a state of anarchy unexampled I believe in the history of this island’.15

It was on their plantation houses that planters chose to focus their attention, rather than public affairs or the town. In her Domestic Manners, Mrs Carmichael observed on her visit to St Vincent that ‘The planters seldom come to the colonial town upon pleasure, and are always much occupied with their agricultural concerns, and anxious to return to their properties’ (Carmichael, 1834: 19). Along with
the centrality of the estate, Mrs Carmichael also observed the lavish entertaining that was on offer at one plantation house. She described in detail part of one spread for a dinner party for between thirty and forty guests: ‘Turtle and vegetable soups, with fish, roast mutton and turtle dressed in the shell, with boiled turkey, boiled fowls, a ham, mutton and pigeon pies, and skewed ducks, concluded the first course’ (Carmichael, 1834: 34).

For the white settlers who came from England, Scotland or Ireland, St Vincent was a place of exile. They were sojourners aiming to make a fortune before returning ‘home’. In 1826, for example, when investment in sugar was paying high dividends, Bayley noted the particular meaning that the phrase ‘at home’ had for white Vincentian settlers.

Unlike the inhabitants of the French colonies, they look upon the island in which they reside as a place to which they are, as it were, exiled for a certain period … very few of them expect to die on those properties. Those who can afford it are in the habit of making trips every three or four years to the United Kingdom; and nearly all look forward to spending their last days in the land of their birth.

(Bayley, 1833: 292)

This is borne out by remembrance plaques, dedicated to the society’s nineteenth-century elite, covering the walls of Kingstown’s St George’s Anglican Cathedral. Commemorating men of wealth or status who held office in the island, as well as their loyalty to Britain, they name their far-flung final resting places as Kensal Green, London (for example Council Members James William Brown (d. 1847) and John Audain (d. 1864)); Berkshire (the Civil Service Commissioner George Herbert Dasent (d. 1876)); and south Wales (e.g. the planter John Whittall (d. 1858)).

The frontier is also traditionally associated with violence. In this respect, Kingstown was no exception. Once it was established as the island’s foremost town, Kingstown became a place of security for members of white settler society and an important location where they sought protection against Garifuna fighters. Charles Shepherd
describes one planter group embroiled in the Brigands’ War as being ‘obliged to take circuitous routes to avoid the high roads which were commanded by the enemy, to reach Kingstown’ (Shepherd, 1831: 65). Long after British settlement, when planters and ‘respectable folk’ were sufficiently alarmed by protest of one form or another, they continued to seek refuge in Kingstown. The fear that drove them to the town changed from marauding Garifuna to their own dissatisfied estate labourers. For example, in 1862, in the wake of many grievances, labour unrest and rioting broke out on the island’s Windward Coast estates. The historian Woodville Marshall, who has studied the causes and consequences of these riots, observes that: ‘Planters clearly understood that they were targets; most of them “literally fled” when they heard of the assaults … and did not return to their homes until the riots had been completely suppressed’ (Marshall, 1981: 41–42). The Barbados Globe of the period reported: ‘The greatest terror and consternation was felt in the countryside as well as in the towns, and most planters, whites and “respectable persons” immediately sought refuge in Kingstown from the rioters’ demoniacal villainies.’

However, this picture of Kingstown as the place of white planter refuge is not as simple as it appears. Before emancipation the social organisation of towns like Kingstown was characterised by contradiction and ambiguity. There was greater mixing than on plantations between enslaved and free, as well as across the whole range of class and colour. The social mixing arose, as Barry Higman notes, because most of the slave population lived on the premises of their owners, though in separate rooms or out-buildings, while others lived in huts scattered among their masters’ residences (Higman, 1995: 95). After emancipation the town increasingly became the space in which competing political interests of various sorts were worked out. Kingstown’s streets became the battleground where protests were voiced, marches were held, and daily competition for space to live and trade remained at its sharpest. One indicator of this development, the historian Roderick McDonald notes, was that emancipation legislation reflected ‘the high priority given to controlling apprentices’. He points
out that this was reflected in new definitions of crime and criminality, and the introduction of new mechanisms of control such as the treadmill. The geographical area of Kingstown was part of John Anderson’s responsibility as a stipendiary magistrate during the period of apprenticeship prior to the abolition of slavery. With more mobility among the general population, he records in his diary frequent brawls, drunkenness in taverns, illicit shebeens and debauchery in abodes of violence, as well as parties where stolen goods were consumed at town premises (McDonald, 2001: 101, 147). He refers specifically to the plundering of houses and provision grounds. Also commonplace was theft from ships landing cargoes like brandy, estate stores, butter and salt-fish.

Rioting in the town was recorded in the following years: 1838, 1841, 1855, 1856, 1858, 1862, 1879 and 1935. McDonald has analysed the repressive post-emancipation measures, including heavily punitive legislation to control Kingstown, and over-zealous magistrates, introduced by a fearful white political minority supported by the colonial administrative representative. He notes that by 1836 the number of prisoners on the island – 1,265 – was four times the annual pre-emancipation average. Kingstown had its own jail and house of correction. The measures, he argues, were introduced as an attempt to maintain white elite power by eradicating differences in the town between the free coloured community and black ex-slave apprentices (McDonald, 1996: 322). When the opportunity arose their introduction faced a backlash. At times the outcome of court cases was challenged by vocal groups who freed prisoners on their way to and from jail (Boa, 2002: 134), opposed the enforcement of judicial punishment by cat-o-nine tales (Marshall, 1981: 47) and challenged efforts to implement anti masquerading policies. Often these actions in turn led to noisy, and sometimes violent, protests resulting in the calling out of the constabulary, the local (white) militia, and occasional colonial troop reinforcements sent from abroad. Sheena Boa, who has also studied the causes of some of these nineteenth-century Vincentian protests and their main participants, has shown that working-class women from Kingstown were often prominent in leading this unrest (Boa, 2002).
The idea of the frontier, long neglected in Caribbean studies with its frontier features of remoteness, defensiveness, violence, and a rough and ready society, can thus be seen as central to Kingstown's history.

Notes

1 SVG comprises a collection of thirty-two islands of varying sizes located between Grenada to the south and St Lucia to the north.

2 In his essay on the changing cultural geography of the frontier, an element of which is the contemporary wilderness experience, C. Michael Hall indicates that 'authentic, spiritual and escapist values are related to the cultural geography of the frontier and to strong elements of the “experience” that is commodified for the benefit of wilderness tourists' (Hall, 2002: 295).

3 See for example John (2009); King and King (2011). And see Chapter 4 below for discussion of two recent autobiographies of political pioneers.

4 Chapter 5 explores how this hegemonic model of civilisation, sometimes called 'Caribbean civilisation', is exploited by the political leadership in SVG, and Chapter 6 explores how it has been challenged.

5 Young's Island, Bequia, Mustique, Canouan and Union Island are all inhabited, and are different distances from the St Vincent mainland and from each other. The larger of the uninhabited rocks include Isle a Quatre, Balliceaux and Battowea. Some parts of the latter are privately owned while all of Mustique is leased to a private company that sets its own rules – for example only 140 houses may be built on that island at any time.

6 Bequia, Union Island and Canouan are legitimate ports of entry to the State of SVG but the inhabited island of Mayreau is not a port of entry.

7 However, the beginnings of a more robust regional ‘epistemic rupture’ may be detected in the collective confrontation between Caribbean states and ex-colonial powers, articulated in the growing demands for reparations for slavery.

8 In 1979 SVG became a politically independent, multi-island state comprising thirty-two islands, 389 km² (150 mi²) in area. The islands for many years formed a minor part of British New World colonial island society.

9 Kingstown was not always the main town. First Barrouallie along the leeward coast and then Calliaqua were the centre of shipping. The latter served as a place for landing British military expeditions and reinforcements during the Brigands’ Wars. In 1763, the island was acquired by the British at the Treaty of Paris. It was declared ‘Crown property’ and sold by auction to British subjects. Some 20,000 acres were ‘given’ to one Swinburne, while another 20,538 acres were auctioned to bidders. Some 4,000 acres were bought by General Monckton, who had earlier captured the island. The northern half of the island remained under Garifuna (‘Black-Carib’) control but soon became a site of a fierce contest among Garifuna, French and British interests.
island was nominally governed from Grenada, first under Brigadier General Melville in 1763 and then under Leybourne in 1771. In 1776 it became sufficiently valued as exploitable plantation land for Valentine Morris to be appointed the island’s first resident governor, presiding over a restless territory. Though Morris put much time, effort and his own money into island fortifications, his governorship ended in debacle when in 1779 the island fell to French invasion for a four-year period, for which he bore the brunt of the blame (Waters, 1964).

In two periods of fierce guerrilla warfare – 1772–1773, and then again in 1795–1796 – known as the Brigands’ Wars, the island was the centre of intense bouts of conflict between the local Garifuna (Black-Carib) population who were supported by the French, in opposition to British forces. For details of the first Brigands’ War see Fabel (2000). For the second Brigands’ War see Jacobs (2003). From the settler perspective, they were converting underused land to sugar plantations. From the Garifuna perspective, settlers were denying them access to their own land on their own terms. Despite fierce resistance, by 1796, Chatoyer, the Garifuna Paramount Chief, had been killed and his followers routed. They were banished that year first to Balliceaux, a neighbouring islet off St Vincent where the shortage of food and water caused the death of around half the exiles. Of some 4,338 captives who entered Balliceaux between July 1796 and February 1797, a mere 2,248 embarked when expelled to Roatan, off Honduras, in March 1797 (Fraser, 2002).

These were the more standard defence forces. During the first Brigands’ War they were supplemented by an additional British force of regular soldiers and marines who numbered close to 3,000, with around 2,000 slaves supporting these troops. Fabel claims these forces were opposed by only 500 Black-Carib guerrilla fighters. He describes the forces arranged against each other as ‘a blow-torch to incinerate a wasp’ (Fabel, 2000: 196).

In addition to these conventional features of a frontier, the composition of the island’s population in the latter part of the eighteenth century is also characteristic of a frontier region. Of a total population of 13,603 in 1787, black/Africans made up 87.2 per cent, white/Europeans 10.6 per cent and the coloured/mixed a mere 2.2 per cent. The population geographer Joseph Spinelli suggests that the 10.6 per cent represented the highest proportion of white/European settlers at any time in St Vincent’s history. The important frontier element to this statistic was its heavily skewed male-to-female ratio of 911 men to 126 women. Spinelli notes this feature ‘was not out of reason for a frontier area, St Vincent had recently passed into British possession a mere 13 years earlier’ (Spinelli, 1973: 323).

There were occasions in the skirmishes, between the Garifuna and their French backers on one hand and settlers and British military forces on the other, when this could easily have happened. This is because St Vincent was also a frontier society characterised by weak governance. Ivor Waters has described the island’s first governor, Valentine Morris, as ‘able’. But he notes that Morris was handicapped not only by Garifuna resistance. The exercise of State authority over settlers was resented. They objected to a 4.5 per cent tax
levy on exports as well as the requirement to contribute to the cost of naval protection. Waters claims that colonists were interested far more in looking to their own resources than in participating in the (white) militia (Waters, 1964: 37). Legislation required planters to keep one white person in the militia for every fifty slaves, under a penalty of £50 for each deficiency (Martin, 1843: 56).

14 Frederick Bayley describes Kingstown's layout in the early nineteenth century. Bay Street, the port landing area, was the centre of commerce. He notes: 'All the principal stores are in the bay, and the chief commerce of the island is there carried on.' Middle Street, he observes, 'contains but a few goods stores, and those chiefly for dry goods; there are, however, a number of little shops for the sale of caps, ribbons, and other articles of ladies' dress, which are generally kept by colored people. Also retail rum shops in abundance are therein contained; therefore there are always a number of sailors in the middle street.' Back Street he describes as unpaved, with 'a few stores in it, and the houses … chiefly the residences of those who are not engaged in commercial affairs … This street is moreover adorned with the residence of his Excellency, the Governor, the court house, the church, the methodist chapel, and the government house' (Bayley, 1833: 192–193).


16 Barbados Globe, 13 October 1862, Bridgetown.

17 In Kingstown in 1817 there were estimated to be 2,255 people in slavery, representing 9 per cent of the colony's total slave population. Women constituted a high proportion of the working population in the capital, with some 41 per cent of the urban slave population registered as domestics (Higman, 1995: 228). By 1834 official records indicate that there were between 1,000 and 1,500 town-based slaves. Their employment extended to the wharfs, shipping or related vocations (382), non-praedial tradesmen (212) and domestic slaves (2,199) attached to households of the urban white population, with the remainder classified as 'aged, diseased or otherwise non-effective' (British Sessional Papers: House of Commons, 1835, Vol. L, 685, cited in McDonald (1996), 320).

18 In 1821 was passed "An Act for Building a Cage, and for establishing a Police in the Town of Kingstown", followed six years later by 'An Act for the Establishment and Regulation of a Treadmill in Kingstown' (McDonald, 1996: 320).

19 In 1872 the wearing of a mask in any street was made a petty offence in St Vincent. This Act was a widely ignored piece of legislation around carnival time on the island. An attempt to enforce this legislation in February 1879 led to urban rioting in Kingstown. The confrontation resulted in a police retreat from a mob, the loss of control of Kingstown for many hours and the dispatch of the warship HMS Blanche from Barbados to help quell the riot. Eventually, nine masqueraders were identified by the police as rioters, two appeared in a police court, and four were arrested and sentenced for assault.