

Shifting rural and urban frontiers in St Vincent

Territorially small though St Vincent may be, the frontier between ('wild') hinterland country and ('civilised') urbanity is reinforced by the island's complex and difficult topography. The natural wild persists in twenty-first century St Vincent in its hills and central mountainous terrain. Numerous divisions, spurs and folds slice through either side of the island's central spine of mountains separating leeward and windward coasts. A giant could hop along this spine from one central volcanic peak to the next and so work his way along the length of the island from south to north. His last step would end at La Soufriere, the island's active northern volcano, which rises to 1,234 m (4,048 ft). The extinct volcanic peaks to the south of La Soufriere are named Richmond at 993 m (3,528 ft); Petit Bon Homme, 756 m (2,481 ft); and Mt St Andrew, 735.5 m (2,413 ft). The southern coastline, not without its hills, is however flatter and more gently sloping. The population of St Vincent has been increasingly concentrated in the south of the island, particularly Kingstown and its environs. The concentration suggests that the same hopping giant has stood the island on its southern tip and shaken it vigorously so that most of the island's population has gathered around the southern coastal rim. The island's most southerly census district of Calliaqua contains the single largest population by far of the whole island. In 2007 the total was 20,844 (22.6 per cent of St Vincent's population): almost twice the next largest census district, the suburbs of Kingstown, where for 2007 the total was 11,800.¹

On the flanks of the hillsides, spurs – steep, sharply crested and serrated, with deeply folded ravines locally known as ‘gutters’ – fan out towards coastal bays or drop precipitously to the sea. These ravines were gouged by pyroclastic lava flows from intermittent volcanic eruptions through the centuries. The eruptions poured out *nuée ardente* – the ‘glowing clouds’ that asphyxiate humans and animals and burn the bush cover – while hot lava gouged deep furrows down the flanks of the volcano to either coastline. As a result, to reach the capital in the south from the (leeward) western shores, people travelled by large, many-oared canoes well into the twentieth century. This could be a hazardous journey. Depending on sea swells and boat loads the boats occasionally capsized, drowning produce and passengers alike. The intermittent volcanic activity also created black sand beaches around much of the island’s coastline. Completing a road network circling the entire island remains a challenge, with the road at present petering out near Richmond in the north-east – another reminder of continuing hinterland. The windward (east) side of the island is flatter and more gently sloping, though as it faces the Atlantic it is exposed to the north-east trade winds and heavy swells.

The urban landscape, meanwhile, constitutes the island’s paradoxical encounter with modernity. At the western end of the town, before the climb towards the leeward coast, are the island’s historical Botanical Gardens, among the oldest in the western hemisphere. Their 21 acres (8.5 ha) remain a colonial legacy of scientific transplantation of plant species from locations as far away as Tahiti, including Captain Bligh’s famous breadfruit. Now under-funded and neglected, the gardens remain, nonetheless, an enduring urban statement that wild nature can be organised, tamed and conquered. At the eastern end of Kingstown lies the deep-water harbour (reclaimed from the sea) with its spotless entrance and tourist-beckoning boutiques, though even in the tourist season only the occasional liner calls. The street leading to and from the port is lined by a mixture of dilapidated shops, an ageing supermarket, a recently built

glass-and-concrete modern public building and derelict homes. Lorries, vans and wooden hand-made push-carts compete for road space. In one side-street in mid-town you can find a wine shop with a few bottles of *Chateau Haut-Brion Penac* red from the year 2000 on sale for EC\$4,792.31 per bottle. Across the street stands the Salvation Army Building with day nursery, clothes bank and infant feeding programme.

Artist and activist Vonni Roudette claims that nature has been defeated in the capital. She writes:

Moving into the city itself and all signs of nature have gone; the last piece of greenery in the town centre was destroyed by the construction of the Central Market several years ago. Every mature tree in town has been ruthlessly cut down. From here in the city, the mountain background seems like another world, nature is excluded totally from town culture.

(Roudette, 2009: 27)

This, however, overlooks the social dimension of the relationship between countryside and town. Instead of retreating from the town, at least two ('wild') social influences from the hinterland have taken up residence in the island's centre of urbanity and 'civilisation'.

My first example of this process is the increasing acceptability of the 'Wilderness People', as they were known in the nineteenth century, as an urban presence. The Spiritual or Shaker Baptists, as they became known, were officially banned altogether for some sixty years for religious practices that alarmed mainstream colonial society (though the ban was enforced for less than half of that time). My second example is the changing attitudes towards marijuana use and supply in early-twenty-first-century St Vincent. The two are linked by establishment attempts at banning, followed by a coming-to-terms with these social aspects of the Vincentian hinterland. While the incorporation of Shaker Baptists into mainstream society has long been complete, the acceptability of marijuana growing and use remains a work in progress.

Spiritual Baptists and the shifting frontier of religious acceptability

[A]fter hymns and prayers come the part which is called Rejoicing. This consists of songs set to dance music, which cause them to shake and jump about in the most awful manner possible, in their frenzied state they make use of words which they call the 'unknown tongue', said to be known and understood by them alone.²

This description of Shaker ritual captures some of the fear and anxiety that the religious sect excited in St Vincent, resulting in the Shaker Prohibition Ordinance in 1912. The ban was actively prosecuted till around 1935, after which regulation lapsed until it was officially revoked in 1965. Vincentian historian Adrian Fraser suggests that Spiritual Baptists may have been active before emancipation among the slave population of the island (Fraser, 2011: 18). British historian Sheena Boa claims more specifically that around 1846 a new religious group was formed near the Calder estate in the central windward district calling itself the Wilderness People, for a time also known as 'Penitents' and the 'New Light' movement. The name 'Shakers' was given to them by their early critics and has stuck, although they are now officially 'Spiritual Baptists'. Patricia Stephens, a practising Spiritual Baptist, emphasises the sect members' sense of a link to the spiritual world. Rites include dancing to placate dead ancestors as well as food offerings. The 'Shaker' or shaking aspect that concerned outsiders have focused on is represented by Stephens as the use of the body like a musical instrument, as opposed to drums, which were forbidden. Both historians accept that many who joined the Shakers were probably at one time members of St Vincent's (Wesleyan) Methodist congregations. Methodist ministers were the most active missionaries ministering to the enslaved population on plantations, and they exercised strict control over their flock. They opposed dancing and drumming and operated a strictly conservative morality with regard to sexual relations (Boa, 1998).

The Wilderness People found the services of the Methodists staid and unacceptable as a form of worship.³ Methodist missionary ministers, meanwhile, were disgusted by the practices of these dissenters, whose behaviour they considered to be out of control. Among the uncontrollable elements cited were indulgence in trance and 'speaking in tongues', induced by long periods of abstinence and of dancing. In addition, by holding services in the open air Shakers combined these unacceptable rituals with the physicality of nature and the wild, thus putting themselves beyond the easy reach of those in authority. One result of this combination, it was vaguely suggested, was sexual orgies. For example, the Methodist Revd Hurd observed that Shakers were 'in the habit of going into the woods to hold prayer meetings, which were generally continued all night and provided the fruitful source of great irregularities and crime' (Boa, 1998: 265). The new sect soon became a direct threat because it poached members from Methodist congregations and, by the early 1900s, had established thirty-eight separate meeting houses. By 1905, Fraser suggests, some 90 per cent of Shaker congregations were composed of renegade Methodists. Another unsettling challenge was that Shakers implemented gender equality in leadership roles. Both men and women could preach at meetings and interpret 'speaking in tongues', and many women held ceremonial roles, including operating as 'Shepherdesses' of prayer houses. These independent innovations contrasted with an exclusively masculine Methodist missionary body answerable to General Secretaries in England, and the relegation of women to minimal roles concerned with the upkeep of churches. Another feature of the sect that did not endear it to the establishment was that it long remained a rural, black, peasant-led organisation⁴ with links to African cultural and behavioural retentions.⁵ It was perceived as a rural threat because it was independent of European influence and beyond establishment control. The identification of Shaker practice with African cultural retentions added to the generalised moral panic of the respectable authorities. Thus the 1905 report of the Acting Chief of Police on the

Shakers claimed that they exhibited 'one of the few distinct hereditary traits of African barbarism which still remains to the Black race of St Vincent' (quoted in Fraser, 2011: 19).

After a number of police and Church-based reports on their activities, the Shakers were banned under the colony's Shakerism Prohibition Ordinance in 1912. In introducing the legislation, the island's Administrator described the threat that practitioners posed as 'a blot on our civilisation and a stain on the history of the Colony'. The Ordinance made it an offence 'to hold or take part in or attend any Shaker meeting to be held in any part of the colony, indoors or in the open air at any time of day or night'.⁶ Prosecutions may be assumed to have taken place regularly from the early years of the ban, though only the numbers prosecuted from 1920 until 1934 are available. In 1934 some ninety-four sect members, the largest number in any one year, were convicted.

To avoid prosecutions most of the Shaker prayer houses were located in the countryside, and for a while participants avoided Kingstown. However, by 1935, as official interest in prosecuting sect members declined, meetings began to be held in the capital. This easing of prosecution coincided with an active campaign led by George McIntosh to remove the official ban. McIntosh owned and operated a pharmacy in one of the poorer areas of the capital. He was widely recognised as a spokesman for the poor and was elected as leader of the Workingmen's Association in the colony's Legislative Council. He championed the right of Shakers to practice religious observance in their own way and put forward two formal proposals to the island's Council for the repeal of the Ordinance. Both efforts were vetoed by the authority of the (appointed) Executive Council but it may well be that the political pressure he applied was enough to ease the formal persecution of the Shakers. In 1950, the burial ceremony of one of their Shepherdesses was preceded by a march through Kingstown. The occasion was celebrated by the poet Shake Keane, in his poem 'Mistress Mucket's Funeral', later called 'Shaker Funeral':

Shaker Funeral

Sorrow sin-
bound, pelting din
big chorusclash
o' the mourners;
[...]

Sweet Mother gone
to the by and by,
follow her to the brink o' Zion ...

Wave wave
as they roared to grave
a drench song –
soulthunder –
was *aymens* through
the wind, shrieks flew,
and the eyes were strong;
for 'twas madness gave
them dirge, that grew
made thunder.

Drums, flags,
pious rags o'
robes stanching
sweat;
mitre o' tattered
straw, bamboo crozier
wagged by wind's clenching –
deathwind that bragged
sorrow, smattered
o' sweat.

Saints in blue
bathrobes flew
about the ranks o' the sinners,
and froth-lipped virgins
with powdered skins
and frocks that stank
with the slime and the stew
from the purged away sins
o' the sinners;

And heads were white
in starch cloth ... Bright
was the blood from the eyes
o' the candles;

and the 'horn of the Ram
of the great I Am'
spoke hoarse in cries ...
and crowned with the light
o' the Judah Lamb
were the candles.

Lord delivered Daniel
from shame's mouth,
(o strong, o strong roll Jordan),
Lord deliver our Mother
gone to the Glory Home,
gone to the Glory Home, gone to Zion.

All God's brothers
were loud, and the ten
holy lampers were
reeking in smoke;
and the 'valley of sod-and-shadow',
Staff-Rod,
was blenched as the cankering
sweat o' men
and the reeking o' God
in the smoke.

His willing be,
Mother gone,
Jordan deep,
but her soul is strong.
Follow her to the brink o' Zion.

And now the grave
was washed in a wave
o' wails and a
city o' stars

that dribbled and burned
in the tears that turned
hot sins, on the smoke-white pillars ...
But their sorrow was yells,
And their faith was brave
as the blood-blemished lambs
piled big on the grave
their city o' wax and stars.

Sweet Mother gone,
King o' Mansions-over-Jordan.

O strong ...
Leave her safe on the brink o' Zion.
(Brown and McWatt,
2005: 97–99)

In 1951 St Vincent achieved full adult suffrage and by 1967 achieved Associated Statehood with Great Britain. This intermediate status, between colony and full political independence, gave the State the right of full control over its internal affairs. The Ordinance banning Shaker practices was finally repealed in 1965, tabled by the island's first Chief Minister, Ebenezer Joshua, with no dissenters. A further indication of the acceptance of the sect lies in its inclusion as one of twelve religious denominations regularly recorded in the national census counts since 1960. Its membership increased between 1960 and 1991, and then showed little change during the following census years. With a substantial decline in Methodist Church membership, by 2012 Shaker and Methodist numbers were at a similar level.⁷

The shifting frontier of marijuana tolerance

As a result of the natural wildness imposed by geography on the St Vincent countryside, attempts to expunge the wild through the management of social and economic countryside practices constituted a nightmare for both colonial and postcolonial governments. The slow death of the St Vincent sugar industry during the nineteenth century created conditions so desperate for the mass of the rural workforce that by the end of the century, State acquisition of land for small farmers was officially recommended. This process was begun in 1899. However, the beginnings of land settlement brought to light a conundrum. As David Eltis points out, if civilisation was to be located anywhere in the countryside it was assumed to lie in large-scale agriculture and not small peasant-held plots. In 1882, for example, an estimated two-thirds of the island – twenty-two estates – were owned by a single owner, one D. K. Porter, while a further sixteen estates were owned by three other planters.

At the end of the nineteenth century the overriding colonial anxiety alongside the apparent need for the development of small farms was the fear of a regression to what the authorities called 'African livelihood patterns'. This notion was open to a variety of negative interpretations, including low moral standards in unsupervised areas of settlement.⁸ The historian Bonham Richardson noted that in 1890, when St Vincent's Governor, Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson, was assessing locations in the north-west of the island with a view to providing grants for small settlements near to Richmond Valley, he was anxious to ensure that such settlements would remain under Government supervision. The reason for this anxiety, as Richardson notes, was that 'he had observed near-naked women, a sure sign of immorality and decadence' (Richardson, 1997: 220).⁹

As St Vincent's large private landowners lost interest in their ailing plantations, the Government increasingly bought them, becoming, by the 1960s, the island's largest landowner. Over the years a variety of smallholder land settlement schemes have been implemented with mixed results. Crown lands on forested slopes in the centre of the island – that is, above 107 m (350 ft) – have long been officially protected for water conservation and to stop soil erosion. At the same time, the trees on the upper reaches of these hillsides have long been felled and burnt for charcoal, or the land squatted for banana growing. Deforestation then has been a problem for many years, recently exacerbated by clandestine marijuana growing and use.¹⁰

In the latter part of the twentieth century a legitimate, if protected, trade in banana growing, which was equally popular with small as well as large farmers, became increasingly uneconomic as British and European Union subsidies to the eastern Caribbean were dismantled as a result of World Trade Organization regulations. From around 9,000 registered banana farmers in St Vincent in the early 1990s, who employed 10,000 people on a weekly basis, there were by 1998 no more than 4,500 registered. By the 1990s the alternative cash-crop economy of marijuana growing began to thrive in the protected 'wildness' or upper reaches of the island's hinterland. By 1999 St Vincent was the major

trafficker in the southern part of the region. Estimates by the UNDP suggest that for this year the island supplied 7,180 kg. The next highest supplier was Barbados with 333 kg (Klein, 2004: 225). One estimate suggests that at the turn of the century close to one-fifth of the island's GDP was raised through illegal marijuana sales and exports (Fineman, 2000). By 2002 there were an estimated 1,500 marijuana farmers cultivating in excess of 1,200 ha (c. 3,000 acres (1,214 ha)) in the northern St Vincent hills (John, 2006: 13). The growers supplied a regional and local market. The social anthropologist Axel Klein has spent time with some of these farmers in the St Vincent hills observing their patterns of cultivation and crop sales. He describes them as rugged individuals for whom 'Insecurity is the hallmark of ganja cultivation at every step of the cycle' (Klein, 2004: 230). They are confronted with the prospect of thieves, eradication from coordinated military and police raids, ambush from rivals, and being cheated by buyers. They are in many ways, then, identifiable as modern frontiersmen in all but name.

These developments produced the knock-on effects of soil erosion, rapid run-off of water and lack of soil absorption. Government attempts to eradicate what has become a small-scale industry by arrests of users and growers as well as crop eradication (burning) were failing and causing a loss of popular political support. By 2002 more incorporative strategies, less concerned with eradication and more concerned with forest protection, were devised. Both language and strategies began to change. An 'integrated forest management and rural livelihoods project' was developed for farmers who were no longer referred to as 'squatters' or 'illegal growers' but 'forest users'. Incentives for replanting of trees for forest cover were initiated. It is a moot point how committed national authorities, especially politicians, were to forest protection and ganja eradication.¹¹ With increasing availability of ganja on the capital's doorstep, supplied through the island's mini-van network,¹² the use of the herb in Kingstown has become not unusual. This process operates to the extent that suppliers and users in various parts of the capital can exploit a 'blind eye' space between official illegality and a degree of public use.

Official negotiation between ‘civilised’ Government authority and illegal growers and other squatters – the latter increasingly recognised in the bland terms such as ‘forest users’ – increasingly emphasise strategies to enhance forest protection. Elsewhere in the region, Jamaica has started the process of decriminalising possession of small amounts of ganja. Ralph Gonsalves, the SVG Prime Minister, initiated discussion at the 2014 CARICOM Heads of Government meeting of its legalisation for medical use. An investigative report for the agency was commissioned.

Junior Spirit Cottle: St Vincent’s marijuana pioneer

I not shy to open my mouth to talk.

Junior Cottle

A tall wisp of a man in his mid-sixties dressed in jeans and sandals, with Rasta locks and a straggly beard, the one-time chairman of St Vincent Marijuana Growers’ Association now describes himself as ‘retired’. Mostly self-educated, he became politically active in the 1970s during the St Vincent Black Power movement. In 1973 he was accused with two others (Lorraine ‘Blackie’ Laidlaw and Marcus ‘Raycan’ James) of shooting and killing Cecil Rawle, the acting Attorney General of SVG. Rawle was shot in his home and died three days later in hospital. Before being captured, Cottle was shot in the neck while being pursued by the police. The bullet, he tells me, remains lodged in him, to no apparent distress. In October 1973 Cottle was convicted for Rawle’s murder and sentenced to be hanged. After a number of appeals his case reached the British Privy Council in 1976. The conviction for murder was revoked on account of irregularities in the 1973 trial. He was then rearrested for another offence: firing a gun at a police corporal, for which he served eleven years. He used this period in jail (1973 to 1984) to educate himself, mainly by reading Karl Marx. After the Government and international agencies’ ganja crop elimination drive in 1998, called ‘Weedeater’, Cottle

led a march of ganja growers in Kingstown to protest Government action. As well as being a political activist and campaigner for legalising marijuana growing and use, he has at various times in his life been a farmer, Government Agricultural Department employee, and liaison officer between marijuana growers and forest rangers. He thus became eventually a literal frontier, liminal character, who has swung between the wild and officialdom.

Cottle now owns a 'flowers shop' at the corner of Western Bridge and Bay Street on the edge of Bottom Town. His shop sells plants, while doubling, more actively on my visit, as a down-town bar. A wooden seat curves around the inside of the small bar-room with a few stools at the bar itself: Rasta colours painted inside, green paint on the outside wall. The west side of the bar is surrounded by plants on the outer perimeter. The bar is well stocked with a range of alcohol. On the afternoon that we meet there, around ten young people sit around the room. Bottled Guinness and (the local) Hairon beer are the most popular drinks. The atmosphere is thick with ganja smoke and loud, heavy reggae. Everyone has to shout to be heard. Home-made spliffs are openly smoked. Cottle sits close to me cradling one, a polystyrene cup of soup and two beers between us (his soup, he says, to counter a skin condition). He speaks in a thick Vincentian working-class accent with a raspy, smoke-filled voice that at times slurs his words.

Now, in another manifestation, he has become an articulate, working-class intellectual. He has written a number of articles arguing for acceptance of ganja use and legalisation of the growing of the plant. He has jointly authored official investigations that examine causes of deforestation. He claims to have moved on from the local liaison job between growers and (Government-employed) forest rangers. Professing retirement, he liaises as an official civil society representative for a number of international agencies. In 2009 he attended the First Global Forum on Cannabis, Opium and Poppy Cultivation in Barcelona. This was part of the UN Special Session on Drugs. He shows me the document stating his election to the Second Global Forum Steering Committee and his invitation to attend the Informal Drug Policy Dialogue, 23–25

April 2015. This group will in turn report to the April 2016 UN Special Session on Drugs.

He identified three areas where he is active: encouraging the recognition of the general benefits of marijuana for medical purposes, decriminalisation of its use and possession, and recognition that the herb provides a legitimate alternative livelihood.

He argued that the acceptance of the legitimate growing of the herb will help to preserve the forest through a replanting programme. He is convinced that in the country's forthcoming general election in 2016, 'No politician will speak out openly against it [marijuana use] in St Vincent.' Junior Spirit Cottle is a forceful intermediary between hinterland growers and urban local (and international) officialdom. His activities exemplify the role of a pioneer negotiating the shift between 'wild' hinterland production and urban 'civilised' acceptance of what remains an illegal, but increasingly uncontrollable, form of economic and social development in the St Vincent hinterland and capital.¹³

Struggles to maintain 'civilisation' and contain Kingstown's urban 'wilderness'

As a visitor once noticed, Kingstown has few buildings taller than a coconut tree. It is a noisy, bright market town with too many cars and countless higglers (street vendors) each planted on their patch of pavement tending their heaps of fruit or vegetables. The Little Tokyo bus stand is one of two in the capital full of vans idling and spewing petrol fumes as they wait for passengers, or revving already hot engines for the next trip to the countryside.

Urban living quickly took over from the plantation estates as the nearest thing to civilisation afforded by the island. But, if keeping order is a test of civilisation, then for the town wilderness encroachment is a ceaseless challenge. On a recent visit to Kingstown I spoke with Maurice Baisden, a local archaeologist. His family has lived in the capital for generations. We spoke about how the town had changed over the

years, especially the suburbs growing out of the legitimising of squatting by the Government's offer of land rights in the New Montrose or 'Monkey Hill' area, and more recent suburbanisation in the environs above and to the east of the town, through the sale of lots to private buyers in the Cane Garden area. We sat on the steps of the town's Central Library one afternoon while he told me about his grandfather, once a town warden in the capital. At the turn of the twentieth century, town wardens were employed by the local-government Town Board to keep order in Kingstown. They were responsible for ejecting people who were not from the town before its gates were closed in the evening – the town was small enough for them to know who 'belonged' and who didn't. During the day a part of the warden's job was to regulate higglering, limiting where it could take place and enforcing the collection of dues and licences from vendors. If vendors strayed from the market area in the centre of town, the warden was authorised to confiscate their wooden stalls and keep their produce long enough for the goods to rot and thus become useless for sale. This would happen frequently till the unregulated vending stopped.

Today, an Italian-designed, concrete-covered market has replaced the last patch of green in the town centre. Hot and under-used, the market is an unpopular location for fruit- and vegetable-sellers. Meanwhile, street vending continues for the most part unchecked across town. There are also cheap, bootlegged CDs and DVDs on sale, and card sharps plying their trades. Street vendors may also sell a store owner's stock outside the owner's premises. The Government and Town Board prefer to collect taxes and licence fees from itinerant vendors (street vending is charged a cheaper rate than in the covered market) rather than move them on. On the more popular and central public pedestrian pavements pitches on both sides of the pavement compel pedestrians to walk in its centre. There are occasional attempts to move vendors – for example near to election time – but unless licence fees are being collected the vendors stay put. For many years Heritage Square, in the town centre, had only one regular vendor of alcohol on the street. The area is a popular location at carnival and other festive

times, and so temporary stalls would also be set up along this stretch, ranged along the town centre's riverbank beside the Central Library. These temporary vendors have now become numerous and permanent. On Friday evenings, public 'blocko' fetes catering to all comers take over the central square, the scent of illegal marijuana hovering over the square while police patrol its outer limits. In this way, boundaries and borders become confused, as, for a time each week, ganja moves to the centre, while law and order patrol the periphery.

Figures on the front line 1: the 'queen of Bottom Town'

Shirley Lynch is over seventy years old. She has lived for over forty years in an area of Kingstown known colloquially as 'Bottom Town'. There is no official area so described. It is a beach side area of west Kingstown that is notorious as one of the rougher corners of the capital. To an outsider, the area appears to be a somewhat down-at-heel urban fishing village on the town's western outskirts before one takes the climb to the more salubrious Edinboro district along the coast or moves inland to Montrose and the leeward stretch of the island. In the 1970s, the Government reclaimed some 18 acres (7.3 ha) of land from the Kingstown harbour and along the bay front, incorporating this area of Kingstown. Before the reclamation the front of Shirley's house looked onto the black-sand beach and out to sea. When the weather was rough the sea came up to her door and occasionally flooded the ground floor. Some houses in the neighbourhood have turned their frontages into small grocery and rum shops. On the reclaimed land there are also a bar, and communal shower and toilet facilities. Bottom Town and its environs are where newcomers from the countryside often begin their urban life. Though over the years the area has gained a reputation as a violent and dangerous part of Kingstown, residents are protective of it. As Shirley Lynch says of outsiders: 'We don't look for trouble, but if someone comes looking for trouble they will find it.'

I have known Shirley for some fifty years. It was in the role of employer that my father took on a young Shirley Lynch as his administrative assistant. Growing up in a household where adults were authoritarian and could be volatile, I found her a warm and reassuring presence. She, in turn, treated me with respect and kindness, and out of that grew the friendship that has endured to this day. In the late 1960s, while I was a schoolboy in Kingstown, for about ten years she worked as a young administrative assistant in my parents' businesses – the insurance agency my father ran and the sale of Avon cosmetics coordinated by my mother. Both required someone who could be trusted, and she fitted the bill. Prior to that job she had been a primary school teacher in a small private school run by her aunt, located on the same spot that she now occupies with her family. After leaving my family's employment, she got a job in the smocking industry. This was an early attempt to create an economic zone of household rural employment by using seamstresses around the island to finish partly completed garments before re-exporting them to the USA. As a fieldwork manager she controlled the outsourcing of garments to be sewn in individual homes across the island, collecting the completed work which was then re-exported. Although I left the island when I was thirteen, such was the bond between us that I would visit her at home when I returned. Strained by lack of contact, sometimes lasting for years, that bond was never finally broken. As I have renewed my links with more frequent visits to St Vincent in the past twelve years, the contact has been re-established. A recent visit was along the following lines:

Side veranda, concrete-wall house located in Bottom Town, the notoriously rough end of Kingstown, capital of SVG. Supplicant in khaki shirt, with grey balding head, has his back to me. He stands just below the level of the veranda, his eyes level with the desk-top that stands on the veranda floor. He is speaking with an elderly lady known to all around as Mother Lynch. She is a sprightly, seventy-something black woman with short, greying plaits. She wears a nightgown, slippers and spectacles,

through which she stares at him without expression. Mother Lynch sits upright at her battered school-desk, on which rest two sturdy elbows, her Bible and a well-thumbed school exercise book. She holds the stub of a pencil in one hand. She is stoic, silent and expressionless. Khaki-shirt has come for an 'ease', a loan. Business concluded, he turns to go. I step over one of the knee-high metal wicket gates as Khaki-shirt exits over the other gate nearest to him. I call her name. She looks up, beams, stands and gives me a hug. We pick up where we left off and gossip about family. Who's doing what? Where are they? No dialect or nation language here – strictly Standard English, she with her certainties and her school mistress adages:

'Stay and shelter from the rain, it will soon stop. Two wrongs don't make a right. Always study your work. Don't wear jeans and T-shirt again when you visit me, they keep you too hot.' Then a new story confirms her respectability.

'The last funeral that I attended I told the pastor that I did not like the kind of dresses that the women were wearing in church. The amount of flesh showing is disrespectful in the Lord's House. I also told him "You are the shepherd, they are the flock. You should tell them your requirements." I surprised him when I said that, so he asked me: "Who are you?" I told him, "I am a woman and that is all you need to know."'

I bring the talk round to her earlier life and she tells me a story that I had not heard before.

'When I was a girl I used to go to mountain [*sic*] on my donkey to plant ground provisions. One day a man followed me and he tried to interfere with me. I had a cutlass and pushed it in his nose and turned it. He won't do that again. When I came to Kingstown I taught in my aunt's primary school. Some bright children passed through that school. They come to look for me now and then.' She mentions an eminent Caribbean banker. Proudly tells me how, by chance, they met outside a government office and his excited shout of her name and his eager embrace. She reminds me of how she did clerical work in my father's office. 'When it closed I managed the home-based sewing across the island. All of that put this roof over my head.'

‘This roof’ – a sturdy, unpainted concrete bungalow covered in galvanise and partly enclosed by an ‘L’-shaped veranda – is one of the better-maintained houses on the bay front. There is a yard at the back with room for a flourishing mango tree. The town centre got a deep-water harbour, government buildings and a bus station. Shirley got a paved road in front of her house, and beyond that, rows of fishermen’s shacks where they keep nets, boats, engines, boat parts. She no longer notices the obstructed view, but she warns the occupants: ‘If the weather is rough you have to move. In the past the sea has reached my door.’ Unlike many a Caribbean home, now usually enclosed in burglar-proof bars, her veranda is open and unfettered. Despite the area’s tough reputation, security is not a problem for her. The district has its hierarchy and she is near the top, a sort of queen of Bottom Town.

She has long been a local Justice of the Peace. A passionate political party activist, she was appointed when the ‘Son’ Mitchell-led New Democratic Party (now in opposition and led by Arnhem Eustace) was in power. The incoming Government, her political opponents, tried to take the post from her, but failed. She used to be fetched at all hours in the night to witness statements given to the police, or if someone local was to be charged, but today she no longer goes to the police station after six in the evening. She tells me that the boys from the neighbourhood always ask for her if they are picked up. She says that her presence reassures them that they will not be unfairly treated or beaten up.

In many ways this scene is far from that of a conventional frontier situation, which is predominantly masculine and patriarchal. Instead, I have described a woman who has risen to a position of power in an area informally demarcated as a violent Kingstown location. Shirley’s authority has partly grown out of party political activism, but her concern with decorum, standards and especially respectful dress also suggests her commitment to respectability. These represent very un-frontier-like traits, yet important frontier elements remain, not least the area’s association with violence. In this context, Shirley is respected for

her public service and her accomplishments, but her prestige depends on the useful skills she deploys, both as a Justice of the Peace to defend wayward youth, and working with what law exists in the neighbourhood to establish people's rights. Still, it's plain that the frontier is the site of a battle between urban order and its opposite, disorder. I see Shirley as one who has challenged the social boundaries in her earlier role of teacher, helping some of her past pupils across class barriers to become big-shots. But not so big that they ignore her influence.

To reassure me that I am safe under her roof while capturing, unconsciously, the common frontier nature of the area, she recounts the following story.

One morning recently I notice a man not from here walk in front of my house. He passed a number of times and it made me curious, then suspicious. I thought it was odd. Khaki-shirt, who just cursed me off before you arrived, was nearby and also saw the man. He asked what the man wanted. Khaki-shirt did not trust what he heard. He told the man if he dared to touch me he would be dead.

She remains, then, important enough to be offered protection in her neighbourhood, a protection that she has in turn offered and continues to offer to unattached youth and those in need. The visit ends; we embrace. I step back over her little gate.

Figures on the front line 2: sketch of a frontiersman

Same island, different scene, yet linked to the previous one in significant ways. It is the 1950s, and in a large, secluded house on a cliff overlooking the turbulent meeting point and boundary clash of the Atlantic and the Caribbean, whose combined waves incessantly rush inshore to shatter on the rocks below, a small boy lives with his family.

When thunder-claps wake him at night and the sheet-lightning lights up his bedroom, without hesitation he races from his bed and crawls to safety between father and mother. Like many middle-class

West Indian children, he is indulged. He loves comic books – the large, brightly coloured American ones, and later the smaller, grittier black-and-white ones with British Second World War stories. This passion is one of the few he and his father share, and so the man funds and shares his son's insatiable appetite for them.

I cannot say that I knew my father well. Perhaps he did not want to be known. What I remember of his characteristics could fit on a postage stamp, but there were identifiable tendencies that were almost archetypal. One style was *el hombre*, a hard-drinking rogue who loved to gamble – roulette, dog racing, cards – and could hold his liquor. He was a minor colony's Papa Hemingway with experience in Santo Domingo, where he had travelled in his early twenties, along with three or four friends, to work for Shell Oil. The details of what transpired there are little known, except that he learned to speak Spanish and prospered, returning as 'a person of means', eligible for marriage and a retail partnership. Accordingly, he married my mother. White in appearance and educated in England, she met all the requirements of a 'good catch'. Their social life consisted of a few close friends and family, who would meet two or three times a week in each other's houses where the whisky flowed. At the height of these close gatherings Spanish would sometimes spatter his conversation, a reminder of that other life. Like his father before him, he entered the retail business, though unlike him he succeeded in making his family financially secure.

My father attended school only up to the age of fifteen, but he valued education highly. By the time I was eight or nine years old, schooling was already competitive. A vague kind of character formation was aspired to on my behalf. The benchmark here was my cousin, my closest companion, almost a brother. We were of similar age and attended the same government school, but he was 'bright' and invariably attained better marks than I did. Too wide a gap in our marks usually resulted in a discussion about returning to the dame school that I have described earlier. That school aimed to instil the three 'R's in its pupils, which, apparently, the larger government school was incapable of doing to the satisfaction of my parents. And so a steady eye was kept on some fifteen of us as we

parsed sentences, sweated through long division and compound interest calculations, practised our cursive style in large blue copy-books, and acquired a detailed knowledge of the King James Bible. The teacher, Miss John, was no slouch when it came to corporal punishment.

From his days in Santo Domingo, my father kept an ugly, snub-nosed .38 revolver locked in a polished wooden case in a tall bedroom wardrobe. On Sunday mornings the gun would occasionally be brought out for pistol practice. My mother would attend her high Anglican church devotions and he would blast away at rocks or old tin cans on the stony beach below our house. This noise was intended also to be a warning to anyone straying onto his land. Government misdeeds brought rough talk about 'people deserving to be shot'.

Sunday afternoons, when my homework – simple or compound interest calculations – was presented for my father's examination, were tinged with a vague fear of corporal punishment. A tortoise-shell-rimmed gaze made his enlarged eyes slightly forbidding. He had his own acute sense of right and wrong and did not entertain shades of grey. 'Churchill should have kept on fighting to roll back the Ruskies.' All politicians were 'scamps and thieves'. The uncertainty of change was anathema as political independence loomed. The island and the entire region were 'going to the dogs'. The curtain was descending on civilisation as he knew it. All of this *hombre*-ness made the household wary in his presence. My mother used this to advantage, as she was the person through whom requests for outings and other events were invariably directed. If she did not approve of the request we were told to 'ask your father' and it ended there.

For a while he enjoyed playing golf. By the 1950s he was wealthy enough to buy a disused estate on the southernmost peninsula of the island that had been a course of nine holes in the late 1930s. He decided to revive it, making the club house on the cliff into the family home where I grew up. In a few years this dream of the sporting life collapsed. In the last twenty-five years or so of his life he showed little interest in physical exercise, preferring the routine of a few close friends and Scotch whisky.

The old-fashioned word ‘merchant’ suited him. His business partnership thrived for some years while various other ventures came and went. When he and his siblings inherited parcels of land he became the informal family estate agent. His interest in landownership and sales increased as my mother independently inherited land from her family. Thus he managed the sale of real estate on her behalf as well as having an interest in a nearby arrowroot factory. In his latter years, he managed an insurance agency from a small office in the centre of Kingstown. So by the end of his life, this frontier product of a minor West Indian colony had been an overseas adventurer; local businessman; factory-owner; informal real estate agent and insurance manager; and, in island terms, had prospered in all capacities.

These two, Shirley Lynch and my father, each in their own way epitomise frontier spirit, battling to uphold different kinds of respectability – he emphasising the individual, business-based ideas of legitimacy and civilisation while keeping the wild at bay by practising with his .38 revolver, she with her communally based ideas of respectability and civilisation. Perhaps it was inevitable their paths would cross, the wealthy businessman and the aspiring working-class woman. Each had something the other needed to prosper, and in its mutual dependency, it offered a not uncommon frontier relationship.

Epilogue

It's just nature, we say
this tsunami of empire that washed us up here.

***Final offer gentlemen. Five pounds three shillings
for the seasoned buck.***

When that last wave rolled back it exposed a humble butter fish
twitching, flipping and flapping, worn down town

***Five dollars for that heap?
Ground provisions no longer cheap.***

its mouth opening and closing

***You'd be amazed what deals can
can be struck with care in our capital's
little market square.***

sucking its death of sea air wondering why its fins
fail to glide through water while its scales
slap the keel of some hard-hulled fishing boat.

***Only thirty dollar Mother Lynch. Ah beg yuh,
Mammy going send money for the wear and tear.***

When did we begin to ignore the hucksters
with their tight grip on the sidewalks

***DRIVER! Why you can't look
where you coming?***

their five shoe boxes, twenty-three pink plastic combs and
white trestle tables that groan with out-size brassieres?

***RASTA! Why YOU can't go where you
looking?***

We're cool with the pool of smart boys skulking in Middle Street
each with his three card stool waiting to fool the next passer-by

You and you family think they big-shot.
while Sam solicits donations for his phantom football teams.

It have a funeral at four o'clock sharp.

Who turns a hair when Bazodie marches through Market Square
wearing buttoned down wrists, short pants, head in a balaclava?

***I wonder why people always have to die 'pon a
week-day.***

With his termite ridden piece of treated pine he executes a perfect off
drive
and follows it through okras and eddoes in the firm belief that he is
Brian Lara.

He? He say he going to come back.

And we look away when the rain fills the drains

Who want to go to Hell can go to Hell.

and cockroaches thick as locusts swim out of the open gutters
like recently hatched leather-backs lost on their way to sea.

You are the shepherd, they are the flock

But all's not lost. The wharf sign welcomes everyone
to a capital city proclaiming itself a 'hive of industry'

***Boy, don't wear jeans and tee shirt again
when you come to see me
they keep you too hot.***

(Nanton, 2013–2014)

Notes

- 1 Total mainland population for 2007 was 92,110 (SVG, 2012: 12).
- 2 Thomas Webster Clarke, school inspector, in a police report of 1905 (quoted in Fraser, 2011: xx).
- 3 Boa cites one Methodist minister, the Revd Hudson, who, in 1849, described the tension created by these rebellious church members. From his statement it is apparent that the Shaker practices were viewed as distinct and unacceptable. Hudson reported to his General Secretaries: 'they insisted in holding meetings independent of and separate from our own, in which they indulged in the wildest enthusiasms and anathematising all who would not join in their excesses; indeed from the first we clearly saw that an "imperium in imperio" would never do and it is much to be regretted that our predecessors allowed such an organisation within our societies when at first by the expulsion of the ringleaders it might have been arrested, but being allowed to proceed with impunity they became more insolent and determined and led many astray' (Boa, 1998: 192).
- 4 Edward Cox identified among the leadership between the years 1900 and 1934 that some twenty-four were labourers, one a small proprietor, one a woodcutter; eleven other leaders had no identifiable occupation (Cox, 1993: 14).
- 5 Patricia Stephens describes the pattern of these links as 'a broken continuum, one which relied on ancestral memory, something disjointed ... a wound which could be healed by shaping the Faith around the struggle for dignity in the hostile environment of the slaves' new world' (Stephens, 1999: 20).
- 6 Fraser notes that it was the magistrates who were given the final say to determine what was Shakerism. Actions that were used to determine the practice included 'binding of the head with white cloth, holding of lighted candles in hands, ringing a bell at intervals in meetings, violent shaking of body and limbs, shouting and grunting, flowers held in the hands of persons present and white chalk marks on the floor' (2001: 81).
- 7 Recent census figures indicate that except for the Pentecostal sect all other membership of religious denominations in SVG either declined rapidly or stagnated. In 2012 Spiritual Baptists held 8.9 per cent of total church membership.
- 8 This concern, Bonham Richardson argues, dominated official questions about control and direction (Richardson, 1997: 220).
- 9 One of the arguments presented by St Vincent planters against abolition was that freedom would result in slaves falling into habits of idleness and vice. That this belief continued is reflected in Hely-Hutchinson's concern.
- 10 Lyndon John estimates that the island's State-owned forest cover declined from 56 per cent in 1945 to 37 per cent by 1993. By 1995 it had shrunk again to 28.2 per cent (11,000 ha) and by 2000 had further declined to 15.4 per cent (6,000 ha) (John, 2006: 12–13).
- 11 The 2002 CANARI Technical Report outlining the integrated forestry strategy states that 'Significant portions of the state-owned forests were also turned into banana fields, either through illegal squatting, or with

the informal blessing of politicians who encouraged or allowed people to use portions of state property' (Cottle *et al.*, 2002: 2). Informal warnings prior to the 1998 'Weedeater' and the 2009 Vincy Pack ganja eradication raids were provided. Although there was considerable crop destruction, and some deaths resulted from the raids, some of the force of the raids was mitigated. Cottle suggests that the 'Weedeater' raid contributed to the overthrow of the Mitchell Government in 2001. He suggests also that ganja growers contributed to the popular sanction against the constitutional changes proposed by the Gonsalves-led Government in its second term of office between 2005 and 2009 (Cottle, 2010).

12 See Mike Kirkwood's foreword to this book.

13 In December 2014, it was reported in the *Stabroek News* that another pioneer, Conley 'Chivango' Rose, the coordinator of the National Marijuana Industry Association of SVG, is working to get a medical marijuana institute built in St Vincent because of the island's role as the leading cultivator in the eastern Caribbean. See Edmonds (2015).