

# *Historical Notes on the Carib Territory*

by

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## **THE CARIB QUESTION**

The spark which lit the 1930 Salybia riot may have been the improper and excessive use of armed force by Corporal Sweeney and his men in conducting their search for contraband goods. But its root cause was a widespread perception among the Carib community that the action by the police was merely the most callous of a growing number of attempts by the colonial administration to infringe upon their “sovereign right” to live as a privileged ethnic community within the island’s geopolitical space. This perception may be identified in representations made to the authorities in London and locally in the pre-riot years.

A petition to the British Monarch penned on 28th June 1928 was typical. The signatories lamented the demotion of their Chief, Thomas Jolly John, to the status of Headman and further regretted the indignity of his having been placed on probation for some time. Their dissatisfaction with Administrator Elliot was most pointed. Of him the petition stated: “His Honour the Administrator is not in our favour and he is by all means trying his very best to reclaim our sovereign right. He wish to put us just like civilian... In fact, he wish to put new rules over us, which is altogether different from those which we did recover from Administrator Bell in the year 1902.” The petitioners went on to complain of Administration Elliot’s rejection of the many appeals made by Headman Jolly John to be paid a decent stipend. They concluded thus: “...we humbly pray His Most Gracious Majesty with our utmost fidelity, veneration and respect to grant us our Reserve ever more and to allow us to follow our ancient rules as in the time of Ti Francoise, our Ancient Chief. We profoundly and humbly beg His Most Gracious Majesty to appoint Thomas John for our Chief and to increase his fee and authority.”

Further representations were made in 1929 to Acting Administrator Major Peables. Secretary of State Amery had sent out a despatch in response to the 1928 Petition. And Administrator Elliot had taken leave of absence. Peables had paid a visit to the Carib Territory accompanied by Father Barreau, a Roman Catholic priest whose diocese included the Territory; Father Barreau served to translate Patois into English. The Administrator met with a crowd of between 300 and 400 residents under the Headman, Jolly John. Foremost among their concerns was information conveyed by a Mr. Riviere, a Government officer attached to the district, that plans were afoot to open up the Territory to the island’s residents. Having expressed strong objections to this, residents made a renewed plea to have the title of “Chief” restored, to provide the incumbent with a salary and increased authority, to erect a “small hall” for use by the Chief “as an office” and supply him with tools for road repairs. Another complaint was that Administrator Elliot had on his last visit taken away the plan of the Territory left in their safekeeping by former Administrator Mahaffy. Offence was also taken to the settlement of three “strangers” from Pointe Michel in the Territory and their refusal to obey the Headman’s order to leave.

The Caribs would again raise the issue of their “sovereign rights” during verbal exchanges in the early moments of the September 1930 riot. They believed such rights to include exemption from all types of government taxation, including customs duties. By this, what was treated as smuggling on the part of others was regarded as a legitimate activity on their part. And Administrator Bowring on a visit to the Territory in 1932 found the Caribs to have “possessed a degree of independence of the government”. He noticed “a decided attempt” to inculcate in them that “they should look up to their Chief and that the government came second”. This attitude, he thought, was “probably instigated from outside the Reserve”.

One school of thought held that these rights had been conferred on the Carib people in some Agreement or other entered into between the Carib people and their English conquerors on the occasion of the establishment of the “Reserve” about the middle of the 18th century. It was stated further that Ti Francoise, then Chief, was not provided with a copy of the Agreement. As a result of this their “rights, duties and prerogatives were therefore largely a matter left to the whims of local officials”. A second school of thought traced the “privileges” accorded to them to Queen Victoria; she reigned from 1837 to 1901. In fact, the source of the Agreement alluded to has not been confirmed. Nor has the document been located.

It is a historical fact that the warring nations of England and France, because of the enormous difficulty they experienced subduing the Caribs, had agreed by the Treaty of Aix La Chapelle in 1748 to treat the island as “neutral” territory as between them, and leave the Caribs in sole occupation. But there is no evidence whatsoever that the Caribs were signatories to that treaty. It is also true that by the Treaty of Paris 15 years later which ended full-scale war between the English and the French, it was agreed that the island would remain in full right to England. But once more there was no specific reference to the island’s native inhabitants. And neither by the Treaty of Versailles in 1783 when, following a temporary change of hands the island would be returned once more to England, nor by the Parish Treaty of 1814 by which the island was restored to Britain for the last time, was any precise mention made of the Carib question. Indeed, a report on the Caribs compiled by Administrator Heskeith Bell in 1902 referred to their exemption from direct taxation such as house and road tax. Further, Secretary of State Lord Passfield would suggest by confidential telegram to Governor Johnstone dated 27 October 1930 that “an ancient ruling” might have exempted them from payment of customs duties. But there is no record of official documents purporting to make these exemptions.

In these circumstances, the Caribs’ claim to sovereign “rights, duties and privileges” seemed to have rested on shaky ground. The island’s bureaucracy made this patently clear. In a letter written three weeks before the 1930 riot Acting Administrator Baynes had responded to a request by Headman Jolly John that his people be exempted from payment of taxes by intimating that he had no power under the law to grant such a request. Baynes explained his position in this way: “the Caribs are under the same law as everybody else in Dominica and must pay taxes like everyone else. They have been given the Reserve to live in, and have a Chief to look after their interests, and the way in which you should perform your duties as Chief is to encourage the Caribs to respect the law, and to be good and loyal subjects.”

On his part, Administrator Bowring’s view of the personality of the Caribs was this: “Carib men are a worthless and indolent lot, addicted to drink whenever they can procure it. Whenever they

earn money by the sale of canoes the proceeds rapidly disappear in rum; they are undoubtedly good fishermen, excellent canoe-builders, but their most lucrative pursuit is that of smuggling, a matter which it is practically impossible to deal with under present conditions." The Administrator was more charitable to womenfolk. "The women, I am told," he wrote, "are different. They are generally of good morality and faithful to their husbands, anxious to acquire money and keep it." Bowring would certainly not recommend the conferment of "sovereign rights" on such a community.

Elliot was more brutal. He is reported to have expressed the opinion that "if it were not for reasons of sentiment I think the Reserve might be thrown open in a few years time, and sufficient land allotted to each family." He concluded: "They are bound to become absorbed in the native population before long." Heskeith Bell, a former Administrator of the island, described Elliot as "not being sympathetically inclined to these people and seems to have absorbed some of the Creole prejudice against them". His reaction to the petition to the King dated 28th June 1928, earlier mentioned, in which the Caribs expressed disapproval of his Administration is instructive. Acting Administrator Peables had in response to the petition visited the Territory and made favourable recommendations to Secretary of State, Avery. Elliot on his return from leave sought to block the recommendations by suggesting to Avery that Peables had "insufficient knowledge" of the "somewhat delicate" Carib state of affairs and had thus acted hastily. If he had his way the Territory would have been "thrown open" within twenty years, that is to say, by 1948, "for the reason that it appears that few, if any, pure-blooded Caribs would then be left". He wished the community's leader to hold the title "Headman" instead of "Chief" on the ground that "the small remnant of pure Caribs does not justify the appointment of a 'Chief'". Far from supporting a greater degree of autonomy, he recommended "somewhat closer supervision" of the community because he believed its residents to be "confirmed smugglers".

The Carib cause found support among local persons who gave evidence before the Commissioners. J.B. Charles, the elected representative for the island's Eastern District in which the Carib Territory was located, proposed that Headman Jolly John who had been suspended after the riot should be re-instated as "Chief". His reasoning was pragmatic: "The people are not accustomed to go before the Magistrate. (Jolly John) is the only person now to settle disputes and he cannot do so now." Ralph Nichols, son of H. A. A. Nichols, the island's Chief Medical Officer also supported the cause of the Caribs. He had been a signatory to a petition to the island's Governor based in Antigua and a telegram to the London-based Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society condemning the combined police/marine offensive against the rioters. Now before the Commission, he suggested that the privileges enjoyed by the Caribs should be maintained and safeguarded by statute. And proprietor of neighbouring Hatten Garden Estate, H. D. Shillingford, expressed the view that the Caribs should receive protection from government.

But the Commissioners were not moved. They found, first of all, that "(there has) never been any acknowledgement or recognition of an independent Carib state". It was stated, to emphasize the point, that no grant of lands had ever been made to the native peoples but that the "Reserve" had "merely been set apart for their occupation". The Report stated further that there had never been an official definition of who a Carib was, nor had any rules been laid down "as to the persons or classes of persons entitled to the usufruct (produce) of the Reserve". It denied that the Carib

community had at any time been granted immunity from taxation, except in terms of boat tax. In respect of that tax it was pointed out that the exemption was made “not by Ordinance or Regulation” but, instead, “simply by administrative action.” That is to say, “government officers were instructed not to levy it”. And as to the jurisdiction of the island’s courts over the native peoples the Commissioners observed the following: “No special status exists save that in questions of dispute as to land occupation, the Chief or Headman has a certain shadowy jurisdiction, but he has no authority to enforce his decrees.” They went on to discuss as “unfounded and untenable” a suggestion that the Caribs ever occupied a position comparable to that of “a small Indian native state, subject only to the suzerainty of the Crown and not amenable to the ordinary jurisdiction of any local Court.”

Most importantly, the Commissioners were not convinced that there was much in the Carib way of life to distinguish the community from the rest of the island’s population. They wrote as follows: “The Caribs have no traces of primitive customs or traditions, no folk-lore, dances, songs or music, no costume or ornament to distinguish them from the other inhabitants of Dominica, no carvings or relics, and no Carib language. In a word, the Carib race had disappeared. The substantial desire to conserve the racial individuality of this people can therefore command little sympathy: Their blood is no longer pure, and it would be better for them to mingle with the rest of the population.”

In the circumstances, four principal recommendations were made. The first was that Government appoint an officer to superintend the affairs of the community. His specific charge were to guard the territory against “invasion” by “unauthorized persons”; to “safeguard the application of tribal rule” in respect of intermarriage of “Caribs” with other islanders; and “generally to develop prosperity and improve the standard of life in the Reserve”. It was recommended also that the Officer so appointed should “listen” to advice given by the Chief or Headman, as the case may be. But any advice to be listened to required government approval. Notably the functions of the Chief/Headman in that regard would be “purely advisory”. A further recommendation was based on the philosophy that “isolation” was not in the “true interests” of the Carib community and by extension that “the more they take part in the common life of Dominica the better for them”. Hence, it was proposed that no fiscal immunities other than boat tax and no special privileges be granted.

The Commissioners considered it imperative to “bring (the Caribs) into closer contact with their neighbours and to give them as circumstances permit advantages to be offered by government and financed by government resources”. The stated advantages included the introduction of vocational training at the Salybia School during school hours; the training of “selected pupils,” preferable girls, at the Agricultural Department in Roseau in “agricultural knowledge suitable for the Reserve;” the dissemination of information by the Agricultural Department on how Carib farmers might be better able to increase their yields.

So the Carib question was resolved. The descendants of the first settlers had confronted the state in defence of what they perceived to be their ancient right to sovereignty within the island’s geopolitical space. Brought before the court, they had won. But the State, clothed in Commissioners’ garbs, would have the last hurrah. The message was clear: Caribs were first and foremost residents of the island and would be treated accordingly. ([BACK UP](#))

### **THE SALYBIA RIOT OF 1930**

On 19th September 1930 a major confrontation occurred at the Carib Territory between residents and a detachment of five police officers sent out from Roseau under the command of Corporal Richard Sweeney. Two residents were killed and others wounded by police bullets, while all the officers suffered bodily injuries. There are differing versions of precisely what triggered a resort to force by contending parties: one lays blame upon the police; the other exculpates them. But there is common ground on that the disturbance was sufficiently disturbing to the Colonial Office in London as to require the commissioning of an enquiry into the question of the existence of an ethnic Carib “nation”, so to speak, within the framework of an overall state of Dominica.

The course of events as told by the police identified the Caribs as the culprits. It may be summarized like this. The police detachment comprised Corporal Richard Sweeney in command, Lance Corporal Greenaway and Privates George Richard Lake, Darius Jacob and Eithel Joseph. They set out in the very early hours of 19th September 1930 with instructions from Chief Inspector John R. A. Branch oblivious as to whether or not they would be joined by the Inspector. Branch’s instructions were three-fold: to search for smuggled goods at specified places; to seize goods suspected of being smuggled; and to arrest persons suspected of having smuggled or harbouring the goods. They arrive at Salybia before dawn. On arrival the party having earlier obtained an “authority” from the island’s Treasurer commences a search of the house of James Licente. Items including 2 lbs. leaf tobacco, 4 tins of cigarettes, articles of shop goods, butter, sweet oil, soap and matches and some measures for selling liquids are found therein, as a result of which Corporal Sweeney proceeds to arrest Licente. Licente offers no protest.

Attention then shifts to the premises of Ti Roy Frederick. The Treasurer’s “authority” is read and Frederick’s house and shop as well as the nearby bushes are searched. Three demi-johns of rum are found under the occupants’ bed and additional rum and 40 pounds weight of leaf tobacco are discovered in the bushes. As a result Frederick’s wife is arrested. A crowd of residents begins to gather. The search continues but nothing more is found. About an hour into the search Carib Chief Thomas Jolly John arrives at the scene and is immediately told by a female onlooker that “the police have no warrant”. Thereupon the “authority” is shown to Chief John. Momentarily Ti-Roy Frederick appears. He is arrested and his wife released. The crowd grows and is seen to be armed with sticks and stones. Corporal Sweeney implores the Chief to calm the crowd, to which the Chief warns as follows: “The Administrator could break me but goods and prisoners not going from here this morning”. This reference to the Administrator is in respect of Administrator Elliott’s attitude to the Carib people which had earlier resulted in a change in status of their leader from “Chief” to “Headman”. Elliott had in June 1928 expressed the view to Secretary of State Amery that “the small remnant of pure Caribs does not justify the appointment of a ‘Chief’”.

The warning given, Chief Jolly John asks Corporal Sweeney to remove the cuffs from the hands of the two apprehended. The officer willingly complies and instructs his colleagues further to seize the goods but at the Chief’s request release the prisoners. Buoyed by their success the crowd edges closer to the policeman, pushing them with sticks and stones. A man is spotted in the distance aiming a firearm at the policemen. At this Corporal Sweeney gives an order to “fire into the air”, in response to which private Jacob is struck in the head with a stone and Greenaway

receives a bullet in the left arm from a shotgun. In retaliation Lance Corporal Sweeney gives an order to “fire to protect our lives”, which is carried out so as to “give us a chance to get away down to the river”. In the melee, the policeman are disarmed, shot and otherwise severely beaten.

Troline Stanford was said to have cut sticks and handed them to fellow-rioters. Further, Frederick Viville, Merrifield Valmont, Francis Stephen, Sammy Burton, Bonus Thomas and Donald Nelson were clearly identified as participants in the disturbance. And Chief John was targeted as the mastermind and ringleader although he “did not take part in the fracas, only gave instructions”.

The rioters, while not denying their battery of the police officers, considered themselves to have acted in self-defense against the excessive use of force by police acting without a warrant. The Carib Chief gave testimony that upon arrival at the premises of Ti Roy Frederick he inquired of Corporal Sweeney: “Who give you permission to come in the Carib Reserve to do this? Produce me a warrant for your doing such things.” To this the Corporal responded: “Chief, I haven’t a warrant but I go on authority and here it is.” The paper was signed by Baynes, the island’s Treasurer. This authority was disputed because the Caribs interpreted their immunity from payment of direct taxes such as house, road and boat tax to mean their exemption from all forms of fiscal levies whatsoever, especially customs duties. So interpreted, the practice of smuggling, though unlawful outside of the Carib Territory, was thought to be perfectly legal in their own context. Chief John alluded to this in his statement that “the Caribs say that they will not allow the goods to be taken away as they were told by Major Peebles (a former Acting Administrator of the island) that they were exempted from all taxes and licences”. The account of the residents further was that on the police refusing to leave the goods behind a struggle ensued between the police who attempted to take the smuggled goods and the crowd which was trying to prevent this. The crowd then began to get heated and threaten the policeman. They then seized a demi-john of rum from police hands. This act by the Caribs was met by the discharge of police weaponry.

The disturbance was quelled by a combined police/marine operation involving the use of police assistance from neighbouring West Indian islands and military support from H.M.S. Delhi. The need for outside assistance was justified on the ground that local forces were preoccupied with “hurricane duties”. The operation began on 20th September and ended 5 days later. A day-to-day account was provided by telegrams transmitted from the battleship in the island’s waters to the Colonial office in London. A telegram sent on the day the riot occurred read in part: “Caribs attempt to smuggle liquor on a large scale from French islands. On-the-spot police attempt raid on place of concealment. Overcome by riotous mobs of Caribs armed with sticks, stones and shot guns. Serious injuries inflicted on police. Caribs very restless. Administrator thinks demonstration of force in the Carib Reservation would be exceedingly helpful. Marines from H.M.S Delhi commanded by Captain R. M. Burgess under the guidance of Chief Inspector of Police in the Leeward islands, Colonel Bell, landed at Reservation at 1:30 p.m. today and will support local police forces who will remain in the Reservation for next 24 hours, and their future movements will be guided by events.” A second telegram from the same source informed that after dark on the following day the H.M.S Delhi cruised along the coast of the Carib territory “illuminating villages with searchlights and star shells.” This action was said to have had a “very salutary effect.” On the 23rd the marines gave support to local police in making arrests as a result

of which, according to a further telegram, “all wanted Caribs have disappeared into the bush” pursued by police and marines. Those in pursuit were gladdened by the apprehension of five rioters but disappointed that the Carib Chief “who is wanted most of all” was still at large; he would voluntarily surrender to Administrator Elliot two days later. The H.M.S Delhi concluded its series of daily telegrams on the state of hostilities with news that on September 25th the situation had been brought under control. All was “quiet”. All marines had re-embarked. Extra police had come in from neighbouring sister islands. And “all” injured police were “expected to recover”.

By contrast, the other side painted a picture of terror unleashed against the entire Carib community. Chief John would relate three months later that “while I was in prison all the Carib men and women and children all went to hide in bush or forest for about a week.” A month earlier the unofficial members of the island’s legislature had sent a telegram to the London-based Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society in which the police/marine operation was described as a “punitive expedition” during the course of which the “whole Carib community” was terrified to the extent that they “fled into the woods with their babies”. In the circumstances the legislators issued a call for an “independent” inquiry into the “necessity of use of force” by the police and the “subsequent treatment” by them of the Carib people. There was evidence that “in many instances” the police committed “unwarrantable acts of destruction” as well as humiliation. The door of a house was wrenched off; a pot of food was broken and destroyed; beds and personal effects were thrown out of houses and trampled upon; a box containing glassware was smashed; clothing was also trampled upon. The Schoolmaster’s house was searched without a warrant for “felons, arms and smuggled goods”. Chief Jolly John was subjected to gross humiliation. On his arrest the officer “undressed him and took away his collar and tie and also his shoes.” Inspector Branch would later confiscate the Chief’s staff of office, the “plan of the Reserve” and private papers and three bottles of medicine, and threaten his life with a revolver.

Needless to say, Administrator Elliott was fully supportive of the measures of pacification. In a confidential memo to Governor Johnstone on 27th September he stated: “...the prompt response of H.M.S. Delhi which resulted in the landing of the marines the day after the disturbance occurred and of a demonstration by the ship with searchlight and star shells off the Carib Reserve... constitutes a lesson which will be remembered.” While considering the police to have acted “with restraint” and to have resorted to arms “only when their lives were in danger,” he expressed nothing but disdain for the community’s Chief. His view was that John “has given considerable trouble since his appointment in 1928”. In fact, the Chief would be criminally charged for his role in the confrontation and suspended from his office.

The riot left Caribs, Dudley John and Royer Frederick, dead and many of their comrades injured. Both John and Frederick succumbed to bullet wounds. As to those Caribs injured, the precise number is difficult to tell in view of the fact that one only, a man named Alexandre, was examined by the medical officer for the District, Dr. Reginald Armour. There were no fatalities among the police. But all suffered injuries. Corporal Sweeney sustained four gunshot wounds to the legs, an injured thumb and concussions on the face and the back of the neck in the region of the spine. The others were comparatively fortunate. Lance Corporal Greenaway received a superficial gunshot wound to the arm and abrasions to the head and body. Private Jacob was

hospitalized for five days as a result of superficial gunshot wounds as well as other wounds to the face, head and arms. Private Lake suffered a scalp wound above the forehead and “two blows to the body”. Private Joseph may have been least affected; three teeth were knocked out.

Eleven residents including their Chief were arrested and brought before the High Court for “assaulting the police and in a violent manner rescuing smuggled goods seized, in contravention of Section 61 of the Trade and Reserve Act, 1894”. Cecile Rawle provided counsel for the defendants. It was beyond doubt that the police had been attacked and beaten and, further, that the smuggled goods had been violently rescued. Hence, the defence was constructed on two grounds: the first, that those accused had not been conclusively identified; the second, that the accuseds had acted either in self-defence or under strong provocation.

All the accuseds were acquitted. It is certain that discrepancies in the Crown’s case created reasonable doubt in the minds of the Court. While, for example, Lance Corporal Greenaway estimated the mob to have been 40 persons at peak, Corporal Sweeney put the figure at 200. Sweeney gave evidence that all the officers carried revolvers except Private Lake. But Greenaway identified Lake as the only officer who obeyed Sweeney’s order to “fire in the air”. On the vital question “who struck first”, Private Lake’s testimony was that the order to fire was given before residents shot at the police. The evidence of Private Jacob reversed the sequence. His testimony was that a boy with a gun stood by the Church and aimed and fired at Greenaway, Lake and himself. A bullet hit him. Then, the order to fire was given. Greenaway’s version was that the said order was given only because “above the crowd on a bank a man was standing with shot gun pointed at us”. On Corporal Sweeney’s part, the order was given as the crowd rushed the police with sticks and stones.

Confronted by clear uncontested evidence of the use of force by the Caribs against the contingent of police officers, a tempting inference to be drawn from their acquittal by the Court must be that the accuseds were believed to have acted in self-defence. Sir Robert Hamilton would make the point before the House of Commons in the following terms: “These legal proceedings have now terminated and the result has been to show that the police... it was their action entirely which led to the fracas; that the Caribs drove them out of the reserve, although the police were firing at them... Their case was properly gone into and they were all acquitted by the judge, who was evidently under the impression that they had acted entirely in self-defence.” Of course, the acquittal would have grave implications for the preservation of law and order in the island. In a confidential note written by a Colonial Civil Servant, Mr. Bowyer, it was described as “unsatisfactory” from the Government’s standpoint. His opinion further was that “in view of the inferences which will be drawn... if for no other reason” a thorough inquiry was required.

Indeed, a Commission of Inquiry would be set up. It would be chaired by James Stanley Rae, Chief Justice of the Leeward Islands of which Dominica was a part and would sit for nine days examining 27 witnesses. Thus, the first inhabitants of the island had confronted the establishment and won. But their future lay in the hands of the Commissioners. [\(BACK UP\)](#)

## **JOURNEYS INTO OUR PAST - THE MYTH OF CARIB CANNIBALISM**

The creation of myths and stereotypes was a critical weapon in the arsenal of colonial expansion and domination in the Caribbean Region, whether by Spain, England, Holland or France. It served to justify colonial rule by degrading the personality of the native or subjected people and so rank them in a contrived scale of human civilisation at a level infinitely lower than that of the colonizer, the white-skinned European. Englishman David Hume, for example, would write of Africans in the middle of the 18th century that they were as a race naturally inferior to whites and, further, that Africa had produced “no civilized nations, no individual eminent in action or speculation, no indigenous manufacturers, no arts and no sciences”. Of enslaved Africans there was, as we have seen, the stereotype of the lazy Negro, and Edward Long, a Jamaican slaveowner and planter-historian would later claim that the ancestors of West Indian slaves were “devoid of genius and had intelligence equal only to that of the orangoutang,” a kin of the monkey. Gobineau would go much further and theorize in the middle of the 19th century that “all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help and that.... of the first seven civilizations..... six belong at least in part to the Aryan race, and the seventh (is) that of Assyria..... no Negro race is seen as the initiator of a civilization.” These myths would serve to legitimize the fallacy that it was the “white man’s burden” to “civilize” backward peoples of the world by conquest, subjugation and conversion to Christianity.

Among the earliest myths to have arisen from the European encounter with the Caribbean was that the island Caribs, the first settlers in Dominica so far as is known, was a man-eating cannibal. This notion probably had its origins in evidence said to have been found by the Spaniards in a Carib village in the island of Guadeloupe. The alleged episode would pass on from generation to generation and be recounted in the early 19th century in Thomas Gordon’s History of America. It is worth reproducing at length if only to illustrate, as in the case of the myth of the lazy Negro, the shaky ground on which European truths stood. It stated: “From the rafters hung human skulls which like Scandinavian heroes, they converted into drinking cups and household utensils; human limbs were suspended in the sun that they might be cured for food; and in one cabin, the head and other parts of a young man were being boiled, with the flesh of parrots and geese, while other parts were being roasted..... the inhabitants not only fed on the bodies of their enemies taken in war, but also they instituted the chase for the sake of the game. Males only were deemed worthy of this fate, the women were reserved for slaves and concubines. Captive boys were raised to man’s estate, and then fattened for the table, being deprived of their virility to render them more tender and palatable.” This “discovery”, without explanation or analysis on the part of the author, constituted “the horrible proofs of the cannibal propensities” of the Carib nations.

The context in which this view of the early Caribs unfolded was marked by two significant features. One was that the Caribs of the Lesser Antilles, in a manner somewhat different from the Arawaks who were settled in the Greater Antilles at the time of Columbus’ arrival, confronted European attempts at occupation from the very start with surprise guerilla attacks and in this way represented a major obstacle in the way of the colonial project. It was a commonplace of colonising activity then and subsequently that human obstacles were best confronted by the vehicle of extermination. The notion that the Caribs were flesh-eating cannibals would provide strong justification for military strategies aimed at extermination of a stubborn and wily enemy.

The Caribs by their resistance would keep Dominica free from European settlement for close to 300 years.

The notion that Caribs were cannibals also arose in a socio-cultural vacuum. That is to say, little attempt was made by the eyewitnesses to the “discovery” or by those who wrote of the episode from generation to generation to examine the “evidence” within the framework of the total life experience of the Carib peoples, particularly from the standpoint of their social and cultural life and of their ritual. Had this been done, interpretations alternative to cannibalism would most probably have been advanced. But such an approach would be least likely where, as was the case, accounts of Carib life were written in the main not by those with actual exposure to Carib life but, rather, by persons who relied absolutely on previously written accounts.

An alternative to the general view based on field research and, therefore on an appreciation of the total Carib cosmos was presented by Pere Labat, a French priest. Labat had spent 17 days in Dominica in January 1700, and he wrote in his Memoirs, an English translation of which was done in 1931, that it was “a mistake” to perceive the Caribs to be cannibals or to have engaged in warfare “for the express purpose of capturing prisoners in order to devour them.” While conceding that in the very early days of colonising activity many Englishmen and Frenchmen might have been “killed, boucanned and eaten,” his opinion was that this was due to the “inability of the Indians to take revenge on the Europeans for their injustice and cruelty.” He proposed, further, that it was “impotent rage and not custom that urged them to commit this excess after being hunted from the islands and done to death with unheard-of tortures.” Labat would also agree that upon killing an enemy the Caribs would “often boucan his limbs and fill calabashes with his fat.” The intention here, he asserted, was to keep these human parts as “trophies and proof of their victory and courage.” It was emphasized that “though the Caribs do boucan the limbs of the enemies they have slain, it is only done to preserve the memory of the fight and rouse them to future vengeance, and not with any idea of eating them.” A further reason for boucanning male captives was so as “not to take the trouble of making them prisoners”.

Labat referred to Carib treatment of captive women and children to illustrate their high level of civility. He wrote: “when they capture women, no matter what race they may be, they always treat them kindly and, if they marry them, regard them as belonging to their nation. When they capture children they bring them up as if they their own.” The priest’s account of his stay among the Caribs left the impression of a proud independent people who fed on crabs, fish, manioc, yams and a fermented potion called ovicou, rather than on human flesh. And Honychurch’s, *The Dominica Story – A History of the Island*, quotes American Anthropologist Robert Myers’ work entitled *Island Carib Cannibalism*, in which the following is stated: “Available data do not allow an absolute conclusion, but all the evidence is weak, circumstantial and largely second-hand. If the Caribs were on trial for cannibalism, they would be acquitted.”

The analysis offered by Pere Labat, supported by Myers’ conclusion, is a more credible interpretation of the dietary practices of the early Caribs of Dominica and the sister islands of the Lesser Antilles. So far as is known, no archaeological evidence whatsoever by way of drawings, paintings, sculpture, cooking utensils, tooth structure or otherwise has been uncovered to even

remotely suggest that the early Caribs were cannibals. Nor has there been reason for associating their descendants, past or present, with this propensity.

The notion, then, of the cannibalistic Carib may have arisen from a genuine error of judgement on the part of early European writers on the Carib past, that is to say, from their failure to place their observation in a total context. But a contextual analysis would not have served the ends of colonial conquest, expansion and domination. A more plausible explanation, therefore, is that the fallacy was calculated to provide theoretical justification for the extermination of the independent-minded Caribs, in much the same way that the myth of the lazy, stupid and dishonest African was justification for the continued enslavement of human beings on the plantations of the Americas. But so potent have been the mechanics of colonial indoctrination that Dominicans on the whole have only just begun to dissociate the term “savage” from the behavioural patterns of the present day Carib community. ([BACK UP](#))

### **JOURNEYS INTO OUR PAST - THE MYTH OF PRE-HISTORY**

The notion advocated by European historians that our earliest known settlers were a primitive people lacking culture or orderly social intercourse should not be surprising. It represented a logical, although irrational, progression from the contrived fallacy that these settlers were man-eating cannibals. And it was centered on a more embracing myth, namely, the myth of pre-history. By this, “backward”, essentially non-white, peoples were believed not to have civilized life, and therefore, the social and cultural raw material from which history is made. These peoples, that is to say, were considered to be incapable of independently making history. The origins of their history was the advent of the colonizer, and its substance was not their own experiences across generations, but rather, a compilation of outstanding facts, events and episodes in the confrontation between the colonizer and the colonized. English historian, Lord Acton, summed it up thus: “The Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and the Teutons are the only makers of history.... Other races.... attain to a certain state of cultivation which they are unable either to communicate or to increase. They are a negative influence in the world.... the Chinese are a people of this kind... so the Hindoos; being Pantheists, they have no history of their own, but supply objects for commerce and for conquest..... a nation can obtain political education only by dependence on another.... Theorists who hold it to be wrong that a nation should belong to a foreign state are therefore in contradiction with the law of civil progress.” Measured on this barometer the early Caribs would have been an uncivilized lot and the history of Dominica would have begun on Columbus’ arrival.

Nothing is further from the truth. There is overwhelming evidence that the early Caribs led a civilized life and, but for the fact that they moved their settlements from place to place to evade surprise attacks, their level of civilization might have been higher. They had a definite pattern of economic production and distribution and a set division of labour. Although there was ranking, the level of social or class segmentation was low, even by Arawak standards. There is evidence of a very high level of ritual and religious practice, both of which promoted social control. Despite the individuality of the Carib, a strong sense of community prevailed. And machinery existed for finding solutions to problems and resolving disputes.

The system of production was dictated by the Caribs' constant re-settlement. In these circumstances hunting and fishing were primary and agriculture, secondary; boat building, cloth weaving and basket and pottery making occupied a tertiary place in the economy. Although there are differing accounts of their hunting and fishing preferences, it is generally agreed that they shot birds with non-poisonous reed arrows and used dogs to chase wild pigs, agouti and iguana. Verin writes that they also smoked out parrots and agouti seeking refuge in trees. As to fishing activities, Breton observes that by use of pirogues Caribs travelled as far as Les Saintes to fish and to Marie Galante to catch crabs. He states further that they captured their prey by means of bow and arrow, harpoon, line with pin hook attached, nets and fishpots made from basketware. They were also thought to have caught sharks by dragging behind the pirogue a line attached to a hook covered with rags. Breton had lived intermittently among the Caribs in the West Indies for 12 years from 1641 to 1653, attempting to convert them to Christianity.

Not all the catch was consumed. In fact, save for the agouti, Caribs seldom ate meat from the hunt. Labat wrote that most of the hunt was used "for trading purposes". Fish, including eels caught by hand, and boiled crabs were favoured items of diet.

There was a clearly defined division of labour. While males hunted and fished, agricultural production was the exclusive domain of women. Manioc was the staple, but yams, sweet potatoes and other root crops were grown in a complementary capacity. Interestingly, Labat confirms that bananas were cultivated. These food items were prepared by roasting under the ashes of a fire, by barbecuing or by boiling in a pot over a fire. As to beverages, manioc constituted the principal ingredient in a fermented drink called Ouicou. There is no evidence that the early Caribs owned private property. According to Bryan Edwards, land and all other "Carib interests" were held in "common," production was carried out by the "joint labour of each separate community," the harvest was stored in "public granaries" and, as to distribution, "each family received its proportion of the public stock."

This communal pattern of ownership, production and distribution is consistent with the absence of class formation or social segmentation in early Carib society. And ranking was not well defined. Labat observed as follows: "...there is not a nation on earth more jealous of their independency than the Charaibes. They are impatient under the least infringement of it; and when at any time, they are witnesses to the respect and deference which the natives of Europe observe towards their superiors, they despise us as abject slaves; wondering how any man can be so base as to crouch before his equal." There were two social types in Carib society, namely, chiefs and commoners. There were four categories of chiefs: captain of a carbet (a house for men) and /or village; captain of a pirogue; an Ouboutou, that is, the equivalent of an Admiral and cratiques, in charge of an army. But these positions carried neither power nor authority. Labat wrote that "no one may lead them .. all are equal and even though one of them may be nominally chief, he is neither respected nor obeyed". Except that women were generally looked upon as subordinate to men, and the older folk were treated with an unusual measure of respect, social prominence was determined essentially by military expertise.

The early Caribs did not believe in the Christian concept of God. Hence, they had no fixed form of worship. Labat's view is that they recognised two principles, namely, good and evil. They were not pre-occupied about the former, arguing that "the Good being naturally good does not

require their prayers, as to the Good always gives them what they want without praying for it.” By contrast, they sought protection against evil. This force, called Manitou, was thought to be the cause of all misfortunes such as lack of success in fishing or a failed hunting expedition. Protection was sought through the instrumentality of shamans and priests by means of offering prayers. In this, ritual was notably absent. And there was neither a fixed place of worship nor a fixed time for prayers.

Ritual, though, was central to their life cycle. For example, on the birth of a first male child a father would undertake a 3-month retreat during which time he would live under a separate roof and avoid those leading a normal life. And for a period of 6 months he would abstain from eating certain items of meat. Further, the child’s mother would fast for 40 days, save for drinking warm water and eating dry manioc. There was also the practice of bathing the child immediately upon birth and, if this took place at night, all male occupants of the carbet would get up and do the same in order to insulate the child against contracting a cold. Other rituals, including fasting, occurred on the advent of menstruation, on the death of a Carib, on the attainment of adolescence by boys, upon being wounded away from home, during the course of a raid or while travelling, and in the course of making a hammock.

Evidently there was room for community within the framework of individualism. Community interaction was largely recreational. There were sports like wrestling and boat racing, and there was ceremony and festivity. This took place, for example, following the restoration of good health, after completion of a house, on the first cutting of a child’s hair, on the initiation of a new warrior, on the clearing of new fields, before the departure of a raiding party, upon celebration of a victory and upon the launching of a new pirogue. On these occasions there was much music, singing and dancing, ouicou was plentiful, and the festivity was said to last all day and all night.

Politics for the early Caribs was mainly concerned with the preservation of national security. And the agenda focussed almost exclusively on the timing of military raids and the appropriate strategies and tactics for offence and, if need be, defence. Labat’s observation was that such an agenda would be quite noisily discussed in a meeting after participants had imbibed considerable ouicou and had thereafter been harangued by an old woman “to excite them to vengeance”. He further observed that execution of promises made under the influence of the ouicou was “quite a different matter and depends entirely on the mood they are in when it is time to put their hands to the work. For they are absolutely free and independent, and will obey no leader.” In these circumstances, there was no place for law, and behaviour would be regulated principally by religious belief, ritual and the force of habit.

It is difficult, then, to escape the conclusion that on the eve of the European arrival in Dominica the mode of production by the Caribs, and their patterns of behaviour, created an environment in which social order and cohesion prevailed. It had evolved to that stage during the period of settlement by these first inhabitants. And it would evolve further during the course of another 300 years or so, during which the European attempts at conquest would be successfully confronted. This constitutes the early independent history of Dominica. The notion of pre-history has been, in effect, a chauvinistic concept aimed at discarding the accomplishments of a vast section of the world and thereby distorting the course of human development. It has long since lost all semblance of credibility. ([BACK UP](#))

## **THE CARIB RESERVE ACT - EVERY DOMINICAN SHOULD KNOW**

- The Carib chief holds office for approximately 5 years unless he or she resigns of his or her own accord or is removed from office.
- At the end of a term of office the Chief may contest for re-election for other terms.
- Only persons registered in the Carib Reserve are entitled to elect the Chief.
- The Chief may be removed from office before his or her term comes to an end, if
  - (a) he or she steals property which comes under his or her control because of the office of Chief,
  - (b) he or she is convicted of so doing,
  - (c) the Carib Council has passed a vote of “No confidence” in him or her,
  - (d) he or she becomes a bankrupt, or
  - (e) approximately 5 years have passed since he or she was elected to office.
- A person is not qualified to seek election as Carib Chief, if within 10 years before the date of election he or she has been convicted of stealing property under his or her control by virtue of his or her position as Chief.
- An Acting Chief may be appointed by the Prime Minister based on the advice of the Chief to perform the duties of Chief, when the Office of Chief is vacant or the Chief is out of State or the Chief is unable for one reason or the other to carry out his or her functions.
- The Carib Council, properly called “Carib Reserve Council” is a local government body consisting of the Chief as Chairperson and 6 other elected members.
- In addition to these powers given to Village Councils, the Carib Reserve Council has special powers?
- Such special powers include
  - (1) holding, managing and controlling the lands of the Carib Reserve on behalf of the residents of the area;
  - (2) collecting and spending for the benefit of the area of all monies which under the law may be raised for that purpose, and
  - (3) providing for the good government and improvement of the area.
- The Council has power to settle disputes among residents of the Carib Reserve but is not entitled like a Court of law to try cases or impose fines.
- It has power to impose licences, rates, dues and fees within the boundaries of the Carib territory in respect of matters pertaining to any by-law.
- No by-law made by the Carib Council goes into operation unless it is approved by Cabinet.
- Only persons resident in the Carib Reserve can stand for election to the Carib Council.
- A duly elected member of the Council is disqualified from remaining a member of he or she is no longer resident in the Reserve.
- The Carib Reserve consists of about 3,700 acres.
- Shortly before Dominica gained its independence in 1978 Government granted the said lands to the Carib Council for and on behalf of the people of the Reserve, and made it possible for the Council to obtain a Certificate of Title to these lands.
- Government may from time to time make grants of more land to the Carib Council to form part of the Reserve.

- No person residing outside the boundaries of the Reserve is entitled to take possession of land in the Reserve or otherwise acquire lands or an interest in lands there.
- The Reserve is bounded as follows: on the North, by Big River, by Lot 63 and by the Balata River; on the East, by the Sea; on the South, by the Raymond River and State lands; and on the West, by the Pegoua River, Concord Estate and by parts of Lots 61 and 63.
- None of these lands may be sold, exchanged, mortgaged, encumbered or disposed of without the written permission of the Prime Minister.
- The lands in the Reserve are held in the custody and under the control of the Carib Council for and on behalf of the people of the Reserve.
- Only the Council is authorized to sell, exchange, devise, mortgage or otherwise dispose of and deal with any lands in the Reserve.
- No one, except residents in the area, are entitled to Reserve lands for agricultural or other approved purposes.
- The Council has power to prevent persons who do not normally reside in the Reserve from working there or from occupying and cultivating lands there in their own right.
- It also has power to prevent people who have no right in the reserve from entering and remaining there.
- A person who normally resides in the reserve is entitled to invite non-residents there, so long as the visit is for a lawful purpose.
- No one can be prevented from lawfully passing on a public road inside the Reserve.
- The Carib Council may with the approval of the Minister responsible for Local Government expel from the Reserve persons who have no right to remain there.
- A person who has resided in the Reserve for more than 12 years cannot be required to leave or give up possession of any lands occupied by him or her.
- A person is deemed to have a right to reside in the Reserve if (a) he or she was born there; (b) at least one of his or her parents is a Carib, (c) he or she has lawfully resided there for a period of 12 years or more.
- Under the laws of Dominica it is not known what characteristics make this or that person a Carib.
- There is a Carib Reserve Fund made up of monies derived from the following: land and house taxes, dues and fees charged by the Carib Council; fines for breaches of the Council's by-laws; revenue from the sale, hire or mortgage of properties held by the Council; and other sources of revenue, including any funds provided by Government.
- While the annual estimates of revenue and expenditure are prepared by the Carib Council, they must be approved by the Minister.
- The Government of Dominica is responsible for the overall planning and development of the Carib Reserve.

The foregoing state of affairs exist by virtue of the Carib Reserve Act which came into operation at the end of March 1978, that is to say, seven months before the island's accession to Independence. The Act was amended in 1980, 1984, 1990, 1994 and 1996. The terminology "Reserve", is a painful reminder of the horrors of colonial rule when native peoples were herded like cattle, and restricted to small unproductive areas of their own country, while the colonialists enriched themselves by exploiting the vast expanses of arable. As a mark of respect for the Carib population and a recognition of their historical and continuing contribution to the building of this

nation, an appropriate gesture on the eve of the 21st century might be to erase that racist term from our Statute Books, once and for all. [\(BACK UP\)](#)