Introduction

In the summer of 1753, fashionable Londoners were intrigued to read, in the August issue of the popular *London Magazine*, a vivid account of a murder trial that had taken place the previous winter in St. Kitts, one of the four islands that, along with Antigua, Montserrat, and Nevis, made up the federated British West Indian colony of the Leeward Islands. The magazine's editors explained that they had chosen to devote front-page space to these distant proceedings because the story "has of late been a subject of conversation, and contains some very extraordinary circumstances." Specifically, "the proof [of the defendant's guilt] was founded entirely upon presumption, without any one witness of the fact, which is a dangerous sort of proof, but more necessary to be admitted in the West-Indies than here at home, because negroes are not admitted as witnesses."[1] In other words, the defendant, a young attorney named John Barbot, had been found guilty of murder and executed for this crime largely on the basis of testimony of several black slaves, who under both English and colonial law were not legal persons and whose testimony had to be presented in court as hearsay evidence from the lips of white men. A careful reading of the *London Magazine* article and the transcript of the trial, which appeared in London in pamphlet form that same summer, makes it clear that, although both the victim, Matthew Mills, and his alleged murderer were white, they were very different sorts of men in the eyes of their fellow white Kittitians.[2] Mills was a third-generation islander, the owner

[1] "Tryal of John Barbot," *London Magazine*, August 1753, 1.

[2] The pamphlet, whose publication was presumably financed by friends of Barbot, was entitled *The Tryal of John Barbot, Attorney at Law, for the Murder of Mathew Mills,*

of a large plantation there as well as of a sugar-importing firm in London, and was known within his island community as a gentleman of unimpeachable honor and integrity. By contrast, Barbot was a man of faintly exotic Huguenot descent, a Londoner recently arrived in the islands, and a lawyer who owned neither slaves nor land, who had quickly made himself deeply unpopular throughout St. Kitts because, rather than accepting his relatively low social status in comparison with men such as Mills, he was a "most provoking" individual who constantly demanded that the local planters "treat him as a gentleman," despite the fact that neither his character nor his socioeconomic status entitled him to demand such a degree of respect.[3] When Barbot killed Mills, apparently over a trivial exchange of insults, the community was apparently so pleased to be rid of such a troublesome man as the former that it accepted the prosecution's deployment of hearsay evidence that had originated from the ranks of the enslaved, undermining a fundamental tenet of white legal and cultural dominance, in order to ensure that Barbot would be convicted and executed.

The story of John Barbot, an obscure man who came to brief public notice only through his inimical relationship with a West Indian planter of considerably higher social and economic status, may appear initially to be nothing more than a diverting footnote within the larger history of Anglo-American jurisprudence. But the Barbot trial can claim a broader importance to scholars interested in the histories of the West Indies and the Atlantic world, as the event itself and the reception it elicited in the metropole challenge long-held understandings of the nature of the societies that arose in the English settlements of the Caribbean. A close reading of the eighty-page trial transcript affords the reader a strong sense of the large degree of social diversity that characterized the populations of St. Kitts and its near neighbor, Nevis, in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The dramatis personae who appear in this account include not only the expected figures of planters and slaves, but also physicians and merchants, managers and attorneys, mariners and tavern keepers, free colored laundresses and wealthy white dowagers, constables and slave boatmen, men and women, white, black, and racially mixed, enslaved and free, English and foreign, immigrants and creoles, all of

Esq.; to which is added, The Prisoner's Narrative of the Cause of the Difference between Mr. Mills and Himself, and of the several Steps that led from thence, to the Commission of the Fact for which he suffered (London: John Whiston and Benjamin White, 1753).

[3] "Tryal," 1.

whom, however they may have been advantaged or disadvantaged by virtue of their race, gender, or socioeconomic status, contributed to the formation of an English settler society in two small tropical islands that had by then become some of Britain's most profitable colonies.[4] Moreover, the document's "thick description" of Kittitian and Nevisian life belies the persistent historiographic conception of Britain's West Indian colonies as being as socially and culturally impoverished as they were commercially successful. The picture that emerges from these pages is of a small but vital community, one whose white inhabitants displayed a strong sense of identification with the mother country, an emotional as well as a financial investment in the island's continued peace and prosperity, and a commitment to upholding both metropolitan and local law and ideals of polite public and private behavior. The magazine and pamphlet offer a recognizable colonial echo of eighteenth-century Britain's self-image as a "polite and commercial" nation and of communities that had undergone a mimetic process in many ways comparable to what had been experienced in such North American mainland colonies as those of the mid-Atlantic and Chesapeake regions, rather than a strange new world that lay "beyond the line" and that was characterized by "a hectic mode of life that had no counterpart at home or elsewhere in the English experience."[5]

Contemporary commentators and modern historians alike have repeatedly depicted these colonies as social failures, as places in which fortunes were soon won and sooner lost, where indentured servants and, later, African slaves labored under worse conditions and their masters lived in greater luxury than in Britain's other plantation colonies in North America, and where skewed sex ratios, an unpredictable tropical environment, and the constant threat of foreign attack and slave rebellion forestalled the emergence of many of the institutions that are seen as having exerted a calming and civilizing force elsewhere in Britain's American empire. This lurid picture arose initially from popular but frequently inaccurate, and in some cases entirely fictitious, depictions in

[4] According to Margaret Rouse-Jones, St. Kitts was, for its size, the most profitable of Britain's American colonies in the half-century between the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) and the Treaty of Paris (1763); see Rouse-Jones, "St. Kitts, 1713–1763: A Study of the Development of a Plantation Colony" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins, 1977).

[5] Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 45.

popular narratives such as Edward Ward's *Trip to Jamaica* (1700) and William Pittis's *Life of Bavia, or, The Jamaica Lady* (1720), which gave the Anglo-American reading public what it wanted, a vision of the West Indian islands as tropical hells where, in the words of Thomas Hodges, "it is grown a Proverb with the English Merchants, that tho a Man goes over never so honest to the Plantations, yet the very Air there does change him in a short time."[6] Over the course of the eighteenth century, as many of the wealthiest West Indian planters left their estates in the hands of managers and attorneys and relocated temporarily or permanently to Britain to enjoy the luxuries and to influence the commercial policies of the metropole, they appeared on the metropolitan social scene as "the most conspicuous rich men of their time."[7] Whether in London's Portman Square, on estates in the English countryside, or at Bath and other fashionable watering places, West Indian planters "formed a social circle of their own and were bound together by intermarriages, common interests, and firm and lasting friendships," a circle from which the majority of Britons, even those of the greatest wealth and highest social status, felt themselves alienated.[8] Even George III professed himself surprised by the "Extravagance and Luxury … and a certain Species of Vanity" that he considered characteristic of the West Indian planters and was wary of the political and economic power wielded by the West India Lobby.[9]

If contemporary observers were often moved to dismiss West Indian colonists' repeated assertions that they were "but Englishmen transplanted" rather than examples of supposedly inevitable creole degeneracy, modern historians have frequently succumbed to the temptation to accept at face value the critiques of English West Indian colonial society posed by scandal-mongering pamphleteers, by metropolitan commentators appalled by and perhaps envious of what they considered the shameless excesses of wealthy absentees, and particularly by the many impassioned denunciations of plantation society produced by antislavery activists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although most current scholars of the West Indies would most likely dismiss as hyperbole Gordon Lewis's assertion that "the Caribbean plantocracy constituted the most crudely philistine of all dominant classes in the history

[6] Hodges, *Plantation Justice* (London: A. Baldwin, 1701), 10.
[7] Richard Pares, *Merchants and Planters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 38.
[8] Philip C. Yorke, ed., *The Diary of John Baker* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1931), 49.
[9] Robert Robertson, *A Detection of the State and Situation of the Present Sugar Planters of Barbadoes and the Leeward Islands* (London: J. Wilford, 1732), 3.

of Western slavery," and that "the general Caribbean society formed during the four centuries after the Discovery was marked throughout by a spirit of cultural philistinism probably unmatched in the history of European colonialism," scholarly opinion has for the most part echoed Richard Dunn's contention that "ever since the eighteenth century the sugar planters have *deservedly* received a bad press."[10] In his recent monograph on seventeenth-century Barbados, Larry Gragg astutely summarizes the prevailing historiographic view of English settlers in the West Indies as "grasping capitalists intent on getting rich quickly by exploiting their slaves and servants, but also as ill-mannered and immoral … as men who made fortunes, turned over their plantations to an abusive overseer, and returned to England; or as degenerates who sank into a hopeless moral torpor."[11] The largely unquestioned image of West Indian colonists either losing their Englishness under the negative influences of a tropical climate and a lack of necessary checks on their behavior, or clinging too tenaciously to an English identity and thus failing to develop a recognizable version of the creole nationalism that eventually resulted in the mainland colonies in a rebellion against imperial authority, has continued to influence even the most recent historiography of colonial British America. To T. A. Milford, the Leewards in the revolutionary era were notable for their "grotesque character of life," and in his award-winning biography of Alexander Hamilton, Ron Chernow quickly dismisses mid-eighteenth-century Nevis as "a tropical hellhole of dissipated whites."[12] Alternatively, Andrew O'Shaughnessy's otherwise exemplary study of the American Revolution in the Caribbean attributes the West Indian colonies' continued loyalty to Britain to "the strength of the social and cultural ties with Britain [which] restrained the development of a nationalistic creole consciousness among whites." In his view, "These British sojourners … bequeathed shamefully little toward developing an infrastructure in the islands" and their ethos was "materialistic, individualistic, competitive, [and] exploitative."[13]

[10] Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought: The Historical Evolution of Caribbean Society in Its Ideological Aspects, 1492–1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 109; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 335, emphasis mine.

[11] Gragg, *Englishmen Transplanted: The English Colonization of Barbados, 1627–1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8.

[12] Milford, *The Gardiners of Massachusetts: Provincial Ambition and the British-American Career* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005), 89; Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 8.

[13] O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 4, 5, 7.

Some recent scholarly work has, however, begun to explore English West Indian society in a more nuanced way. In his survey of the history and historiography of colonial British America, Steven Sarson has made the welcome claim that "there was a common pattern of historical development throughout the [English] West Indies, and it matched that of most of the mainland colonies," and recent work by Trevor Burnard, Sarah Pearsall, and B. W. Higman has delved deeply into manuscript sources to present a vision of eighteenth-century Jamaica that calls into question long-established stereotypes of the island's planters as profligate philistines and debauchees.[14] Yet given their commercial and strategic preeminence in the eighteenth-century British Empire, we still know very little about the West Indian colonies, in comparison not only with Massachusetts or Virginia, but with less exhaustively studied Anglo-American colonies such as North Carolina and Georgia. Without a doubt, the study of these islands presents scholars with particular challenges. The base of documentary evidence, particularly for the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, is far narrower than that which has survived for the majority of the North American settlements; warfare, natural disasters, and the effects of a tropical climate have damaged or destroyed many records. The ongoing imperial rivalries between Britain, France, Spain, and the Netherlands meant that some of the islands passed repeatedly back and forth between empires, complicating their histories and rendering them problematic objects of study within a dominant historiographic paradigm that remains centered on the study of the nation-state. Moreover, the islands' physical separation and distance from British North America, as well as their non-participation in the American Revolution, has placed these settlements in an awkward position in relation to teleological narratives of American history. Taken together, these factors have rendered these islands historiographically marginal, too Anglo-American to be part of a circum-Caribbean story focused on the syncretic "black Atlantic" cultures developed by slaves and free people of color in the French and Spanish colonies, and too Caribbean to figure significantly in the story of the formation of the United States.

[14] Sarson, *British America, 1600–1800: Creating Colonies, Imagining an Empire* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 117; Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Pearsall, "'The late flagrant instance of depravity in my Family': The Story of an Anglo-Jamaican Cuckold," *William and Mary Quarterly* s3: 60 (2003), 549–82; Higman, *Plantation Jamaica, 1750–1850: Capital and Control in a Colonial Economy* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2005).

These problems are particularly characteristic of the study of the Leeward Islands. By virtue of their small size and population, as well as their distance from the Greater Antilles and the North and South American mainlands, the islands can seem to constitute a margin of a margin, existing historically and historiographically in the shadow not only of Barbados, with its self-image as the "civilised island," but of Jamaica, the source of the greatest sugar fortunes in the era of slavery and the site of the most powerful political and cultural struggles for black liberation and enfranchisement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1702, the Leewards' governor, Christopher Codrington, observed that "ye Sugar Ilands dont much love One An'Other," and indeed, all that bound the four Leewards together in 1670, when the Board of Trade removed them from Barbadian jurisdiction and reconstituted them as a separate, federated colony, was their relative geographic proximity to one another and their long-standing resentment of what they considered to be Barbados's unwillingness to protect them from foreign attack or to aid them in the development of their sugar industries.[15] Initially, Antigua, Montserrat, Nevis, and St. Kitts were rivals at least as much as they were partners. By 1682, the Leeward planters had recognized that their patterns of social and economic development diverged sharply from one another and that, although the four islands might share a governor general and commander in chief, each island required its own governing council and assembly.[16] The Leewards' proximity to the French stronghold at Martinique left them vulnerable to invasion in the seemingly endless rounds of Anglo-French hostilities that raged between 1660 and 1713, and the prevailing paths of the trade winds made communication and trade with Britain more difficult than with any of England's other West Indian colonies. The term "Leeward Islands" itself epitomizes their apparent marginality, as "leeward" is a term that holds meaning only in relation to some other, more central location.

But despite the Leewards' small size and population, and the challenges their settlers faced from French attack and from the natural disasters – floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes – that occurred more

[15] Codrington to William Blathwayt, March 15, 1702, Blathwayt Papers 351, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

[16] The laws of each of the Leeward Islands were not binding in the other islands, unless the individual laws received the specific approval of the General Assembly of the Leewards; see Wavell Smith, *Two Letters to Mr. Wood, on the Coin and Currency in the Leeward Islands, &c.* (London: J. Millan, 1740), 11.

frequently and wreaked greater devastation there than almost anywhere else in the Caribbean, they are not marginal to the histories either of the West Indies or of the Anglo-American world. From the records that have survived the ravages of fire and water, time and neglect, it is possible to learn a good deal about the day-to-day lives of the men and women, white and black, free and enslaved, who lived in these islands and who in many instances considered them home. We can see these people struggling, individually and communally, to find solutions to the same problems that vexed the populations of New England or the Chesapeake. As Trevor Burnard has observed, "However oddly constructed West Indian society might appear in England, it took little time for the English coming to the islands to be caught up in a system that seemed internally logical and perfectly natural."[17] The same comment might be applied to modern scholars as to contemporary visitors: Antigua or St. Kitts might initially appear exotic and chaotic when compared with Plymouth, Providence, or Philadelphia, but sustained inquiry into the island colonies' patterns of social development encourages the observer to see these patterns as logical responses to the particular circumstances that confronted emigrants and creoles in this part of colonial British America.

The principal challenges that Leeward colonists faced over the period from their political separation from Barbados in 1670 to the outbreak of the American Revolution, the event that would recast the Anglo-Atlantic world in terms highly unfavorable to the continued economic prosperity of the British colonies in the West Indies, were those that challenged all colonial Anglo-American societies:

developing and maintaining an identifiably English society in territories with large Scots and Irish elements within their populations;
benefiting from the commercial acumen and trade networks of Huguenots, Jews, and Quakers while promoting the Church of England's spiritual monopoly and material welfare;
regulating sexual and marital relationships in a way that accommodated the unbalanced sex and race ratios, yet established formal and informal institutions to manage difficulties that might result from interracial or nonmarital sexual relationships;

[17] Burnard, "Thomas Thistlewood Becomes a Creole," in Bruce Clayton and John A. Salmond, eds., *Varieties of Southern History: New Essays on a Region and Its People* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 100.

developing ideologies and practices through which island residents could develop and express their political allegiance both to their colonies and to British imperial authority; and

creating what they considered to be recognizably English societies on small and isolated tropical islands whose most numerous inhabitants by far were African-descended slaves.

It is on these concerns that this book centers its analysis.

At its outset, this study delineates what Fernand Braudel called "the limits of the possible," by exploring the significant challenges settlers faced in their attempts to establish political, social, and religious institutions in the Leewards. The islands were subject to frequent natural disasters, menaced by foreign invasion, threatened by an ever-increasing imbalance between the white and black populations and thus by a constant and frequently justified anxiety about the individual or communal revolt of slaves, and unsettled by the challenges inherent in the relationship between local and imperial authority. By understanding the difficulties under which Leeward residents lived and labored, individually and communally, we can better comprehend the development of both their mentalities and their societies in the period with which this study deals.

The monograph then addresses the significant elements in the white population of the Leewards that were other than English by birth and/or expressed confessional allegiance to a faith other than that of the Church of England. Island societies that were as small as those of the Leewards, with respect to both geography and population, and that faced so many internal and external challenges, could not afford to discourage such people from settling among them, nor could they either disperse them within a larger English population or concentrate them in a distant hinterland. The "deficiency laws" that were reissued regularly over the course of the period under study show that both colonial and imperial authorities were determined, and even desperate, to increase not only the absolute number of white residents, but the percentage of whites in the total population. At the same time, however, they expressed considerable concern over the presence of potentially "dangerous tenants," and the legislative records of the islands, as well as the occasional censuses that Leeward governors commissioned and sent on to the Board of Trade in London, display ongoing anxieties about the extent to which these at least initially suspect groups could be trusted to work for the peace and prosperity of the islands.

Sizable populations of Irish and Scots were present in the Leewards throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Popular opinion, supported by some historians and anthropologists, has long conceived of Montserrat as "Ireland's only colony" and as "the Emerald Isle of the Caribbean," simultaneously emphasizing the importance of the island's Irish settlers and claiming that the majority of them were political prisoners transported by Cromwellian and later by Stuart authorities as rebels against English authority, and that these indentured servants made common cause with African slaves, creating a syncretic "Black Irish" culture that, they assert, characterizes Montserrat to this day. But this picture is both limited in scope – all four of the Leewards had Irish populations, although Montserrat's was the largest both in raw number and as a percentage of the total white population – and historically rather inaccurate. Many Leeward Irish were indeed indentured servants or former servants who led materially impoverished lives in Montserrat's isolated St. Patrick's Parish, but their masters too were often Irish, many of whom were members of the "Fourteen Tribes" of Galway, powerful and prosperous merchant families who dispatched younger sons and cousins to the West Indies to take advantage of new commercial opportunities as planters and merchants. Descendants of these Frenches and Lynches, Skerretts and Trants, among others, established planting and mercantile dynasties that persisted in some cases up to the era of Emancipation. Some maintained private or, on occasion, public adherence to the Church of Rome, which would have prevented them from acquiring political power in Britain and throughout its North American colonies, yet at least some of these Irish Montserratians entered the ranks of local officeholders, in which positions they worked to consolidate the political, social, and economic dominance of the islands' great planters, rather than attempting to ameliorate the harsh conditions in which their poor Irish Catholic neighbors lived.

Surviving census data show that the Leewards, like other Anglo-American colonies, were home to few Scots prior to the beginning of the eighteenth century. But there, as elsewhere in the British Empire, the Act of Union (1707) unleashed a great wave of Scots emigration to the colonies, a wave that included many men of little fortune but good education, who thus were well positioned to gain a measure of success as the managers, attorneys, and bookkeepers who played a crucial role in the commercially maturing plantation societies of the West Indies. By examining these white subpopulations at both the communal and the individual level, utilizing census data to discern the general