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"A FORGOTTEN OUTPOST OF EMPIRE":  
SOCIAL LIFE IN DOMINICA AND THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

The literary history of the island of Dominica, Jean Rhys's homeland, begins most auspiciously in the final decades of the nineteenth century with a generation of writers of whom Rhys is the best known and most widely read. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century Dominica, small and sparsely populated by Caribbean standards, with a population that still preferred its French-derived Kwéyol (or Patois as it was then known) to the official English language, nonetheless provided within the space of two decades a nurturing environment for a remarkable group of novelists and poets that included Rhys, Phyllis Shand Allfrey, Daniel Thaly, and Ralph Casimir. Born during an extraordinary period in Dominica's history, their literary careers followed surprisingly different directions but remained profoundly marked by the social history of their home island at a specific moment in time.

Dominica's complex history had left it suspended between French mores and English institutions, a fact that still marked it deeply at the turn of the twentieth century. Despite having been one of the sundry territories granted by the English Crown to the Earl of Carlisle in 1627, it had not been successfully settled until the mid-eighteenth century, and then only by French sugar planters from the neighboring islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe. It changed hands repeatedly between the French and the English during the eighteenth century, and despite coming firmly under English control in 1805 remained, until well into the twentieth century, a French colony at heart. The peasantry adamantly held on to their French Patois even though the English authorities made every possible effort to impose English as the language of business, commerce, government and education. In 1899, when Hesketh Bell arrived to assume his post as Administrator, he found that "the great majority of the coloured people [spoke] nothing but patois." "A knowledge of English is spreading but slowly through the island," he concluded, "and it is sometimes difficult to realize that one is in a colony which has been British for more than 120 years."<sup>1</sup>

The population of about thirty-thousand at the time of Rhys's birth was also overwhelmingly Roman Catholic; the French and Belgian priests may have conducted services in English as prescribed by English officials, but Patois was the language of choice for private consultations, confessions, and sickbeds. The peasantry, particularly, looked upon the Church hierarchy as its natural leaders, a fact that gave it a most powerful influence over island affairs. As a result, English authority over Dominica was never unproblematic; it was always dependent on subtle accommodations and negotiations-- cultural, economic, and political. Such was the power of French language and culture in Dominica at the time that many English visitors concluded, not without some bitterness, that Dominica was English only in name.<sup>2</sup>

English influence, if not evident in the language and culture, was still manifest in the institutions, the administrative and legislative patterns, the political models, and the style of social life among the community of English settlers. This white English community of Dominica, however, unlike that of other Caribbean islands, was rather small and generally not very wealthy. Unlike the societies of the neighboring islands of Antigua and Barbados, the Dominican "upper classes" - to which the families of Jean Rhys, Phyllis Allfrey, and Daniel Thaly belonged - were not overwhelmingly English or of English

descent, a fact that has left an acute mark on all aspects of Dominican culture, from religion, healing practices, and patterns of dress, to language, folklore, and the arts. According to Bell, the great majority of the proprietors of large estates, chief officials, and heads of important businesses who comprised these upper classes were born Dominicans (by which he meant Creole descendants of the early French and English settlers, many of them light-skinned mulattos) with no more than one hundred purely English (i.e. white) people among them, although it was his opinion that "the proportion of well-to-do people of light colour and good education was steadily increasing."<sup>3</sup>

It was perhaps the very "foreignness" of Dominican society, coupled with the island's reputation as an inefficient producer of sugar, which had led English landowners to leave their estates in the hands of local overseers. The island, as a result, lacked the planter society rooted in grand estate houses that characterized the white upper classes of Antigua and Jamaica. By the time of Rhys's birth, in any case, the plantation economy had already seen its heyday. It had been virtually wiped out by the collapse of sugar prices in the 1880s. Those among the newer settlers (medical officers, government officials, vicars and tutors) who ventured into plantation agriculture (as did Rhys's father and Allfrey's grandfather) did so with varying degrees of moderate success. The island's rugged terrain and poor communications by force kept the size of plantations small, and the topography had always made the black population much less dependent on plantation work than in other islands. There had been in Dominica, even before emancipation in the 1830s, large settlements of free black and mulattos who owned land or lived as squatters in abandoned or neglected estates, a situation that did not augur well for would-be planters seeking a large and reliable working force.

Social life in Dominica, as a result, centered on Roseau, the island's capital, a pleasant, unpretentious small town, not prosperous even by late nineteenth century West Indian standards. It had its exceedingly beautiful natural setting to recommend it, and boasted its new Carnegie-built library - a graceful and airy Victorian building with a broad verandah built on the edge of a precipitous cliff overlooking the sea - but its economic growth was slow and the legislative council's principal concerns - as evidenced by the legislation proposed and enacted throughout the period - revolved around ways to modernize the infrastructure in order to provide the impulse for more rapid economic growth. The legislative council, elected through limited male suffrage, was dominated by the Creole elite, whose interests called for better roads to bring crops to market, better port facilities, improved intra-island communications, more favorable trade tariffs, and measures to discourage squatting in neglected estates and push the peasantry into paid labor. They had found an ally in Hesketh Bell, a young and energetic administrator (1899-1905) credited with almost single-handedly modernizing the Dominican infrastructure. This "Mr. Hesketh," described by Rhys in *Smile Please* as having asked her to dance the first waltz at a fancy-dress ball he gave at Government House, "improved the roads out of all knowledge and triumphantly carried through his better idea of an Imperial Road across the island so that the Caribbean and South Atlantic sides were no longer cut off one from the other....He arranged for a small coasting steamer called *The Yare* to carry passengers and goods from one end of the island to the other."<sup>4</sup> It was primarily due to his efforts that Dominica had telephone and electric systems by 1909.

Roseau's social life at the time was typical of the colonial West Indies in its stratification along class, race, language, and religious lines. It centered around Government House, the Governor's residence, and was, at least for the English population, firmly within the framework of English colonial life, with fortnightly receptions at which those who had signed the Government House book would be invited. There were, as Hesketh Bell acutely perceived, no definite rules about "calling" at Government House, but there appeared to be an unwritten

law as to the qualifications that would justify such a course, qualifications that, as in most colonies, were inextricably linked to color and wealth. To write one's name in the visitors' book must, he thought, be a milestone in the life of many a colonial man or dame, and marked a distinct promotion in the social degree, although it did not necessarily guarantee an invitation to the fortnightly receptions held in the Government House gardens, which seemed restricted to the small English enclave. As Bell pointedly explained, "[o]nly in the case of the annual Birthday Ball is there a marked official atmosphere, as the occasion is one on which everybody who has written his or her name in the book is invited."<sup>5</sup>

The tiny expatriate English society of colonial Roseau was fairly unworldly. It was a fairly homogeneous set of mid-level officials and their families whose entertainments, almost as a matter of course, were "free from all the affectations and pretenses that prevail in more sophisticated places."<sup>6</sup> Their amusements fell into a pleasant and placid pattern of small and unpretentious gatherings, with frequent garden parties, dinners, and small dances at which local jing-ping bands - a concertina, a steel triangle, a boum-boum (or bamboo pipe), and what they call a shakshak, and perhaps a piano or a violin - would play. Musical evenings were particularly popular, with young and old contributing to the entertainment. Rhys, in her autobiography, recalls the allure Roseau's musical evenings held for her, opening windows onto the world beyond her tiny island:

Again the whisky and soda and ice, but who'd want to drink when they could listen to Mrs. Wilcoxon singing 'When We Are Married Why What Will We Do?' or 'The Siege of Lucknow' - that was Mrs. Miller. I didn't know where Lucknow was but I'd get very excited hearing about the sick Highland woman who heard the bagpipe of the relieving Highlanders before anybody else, 'The Campbells Are Coming' at the end, and my hands damp with emotion. Before I was old enough to be allowed down during the musical evenings, I would sit on the staircase and look through the banisters into a dark passage. Beyond was the room where the music came from. (65)

The nature of these entertainments, with their heavy English country flavor, marks them as fairly segregated from the more established French-influenced entertainments of the Creole elite. The English influence, as Dominican historian Lennox Honychurch has argued, was felt particularly strongly towards the very end of the nineteenth century as "moneyed people" began sending their children to expensive finishing schools in England. On their return home, Honychurch explains, "drawing-room concerts and smoking concerts became the style and almost every guest at a party was expected to provide an item: Some sang solos, others took part in duets, trios, four part songs or played the piano or violin."<sup>7</sup> The English colonial enclave and the Creole elite were not divided from each other by sharply-drawn social lines and would meet as a matter of course in larger social events such as the grand balls and fancy dress balls given at Government House or the "Commissariat" or at the subscription picnics and subscription dances that would come into their full force after World War I.<sup>9</sup> But the nature of their more private entertainments had a segregating effect, dependent as they were on more intimate intercourse and personal invitation and relying, for the English community, on an English country-town mode of amusement.

By contrast, the entertainments favored by the Creole elite - the group of white and light-skinned planters and merchants with close financial and familial ties to the neighboring French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe to which poet Daniel Thaly belonged - followed patterns dating back to the early French settlement of the eighteenth century, reinforced by continued links through marriage between the Dominican and Martinican Creole middle- and upper-classes.

Such marriages were still quite common at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries - Daniel Thaly's father, as a case in point, was a Martinican who had married into the prominent Bellot family of Dominica. These familial ties to Martinique also accounted for Phyllis Allfrey's connection to the Dominican Creole elite; her maternal grandmother had belonged to a family of French émigrés whom she traced to an uncle of Napoleon's Empress Josephine.

This Creole elite was in most cases trilingual, being able to move with ease between English, French, and the local Patois - an ability with powerful segregating effects of its own. It guaranteed them a natural link to what Bell described as "the coloured people," the "great majority of [whom] speak nothing but *patois*."<sup>9</sup> They still gravitated to Martinican schools (the Lycée St. Pierre being a favored institution) and to French universities for their children's education - although they would gradually give in to the English colonial pattern of seeking advanced education in England - and favored in their celebrations "all things Creole." Their dances were styled along "the old Creole quadrilles, Lancers, Mazurka, and Flirtations" that competed successfully against the polkas and Viennese waltzes that had come into fashion.<sup>10</sup> Their literary allegiances tended to French and francophone literature, their architectural styles favored "French provincial charm," their religious feasts followed the Catholic almanac. This sector of the Dominican elite was also more familiar with and tolerant of the African-derived system of beliefs known as "Obi" because of its close links to Roman Catholicism, which had provided a fertile ground in Dominica for the spiritual world of West Africa. In a development closer to that of Catholic islands like Hispaniola and Cuba, in Dominica the "incense, saints and ceremonies of the eighteenth-century church were easily interwoven so that even obeah drums were secretly baptized with saints names."<sup>11</sup> There were fewer cries among this Creole elite for the abolition of Obeah - a particular obsessive concern of some Anglican and Catholic Bishops of Roseau - as there were fewer members among them of the League for the Suppression of French Patois, an English movement whose members considered the continued use of Patois a "deterrent to progress in the community."<sup>12</sup>

There were manifest political tensions between these two fairly distinct groups that went beyond language and social patterns and spilled into the dominant political debates of the period. The Creole elite used its dominance over the Legislative Council to counter the strength of the British colonial administration at every possible turn. The best colonial governors of Dominica, as a result, were those who, like Hesketh Bell, were able to adapt their managerial style to the complexities of the local situation. The Creole elite was successful in keeping those among the more recent English settlers whom they perceived as conservative in political, social, and racial matters off the Legislative Council, despite the power open to them as members of the colonial administration. Such was the case, for example, with Phyllis Allfrey's grandfather, Henry Nicholls, a conservative in all matters important to the Creole elite, who failed at numerous attempts at election despite being an appointed Chief Medical Officer for the colony and inspector of hospitals. Decried as a racist by his opponents, he was accused in the press of donning gloves when treating coloured or black patients.

Dr. Nicholls's failure to gain election to the Legislative Council is evident of the power of the Dominican opposition press to shape public opinion along liberal lines. Turn-of-the-century Dominica was remarkable for the number of newspapers contending for writers and readership. To judge by the proliferation of weeklies, Roseau's was indeed a most literate society. If the number of papers attests to the sharp divisions in public opinion, they also testify to the large number of professional and amateur writers living in the small colony. Readers could choose from among a spectrum of possibilities

ranging from government publications to opposition newspapers whose pages were peppered with heavy doses of irony. Upon receiving news of his appointment as Dominica's Administrator, Hesketh Bell's joy was tempered by his knowledge that the island's finances were "in a bad way," that there were "practically no roads," and "that the local newspapers are usually very abusive of the Government."<sup>13</sup>

The government's official publication at the time was the *Dominica Official Gazette*, which had begun publication in 1865 and remains the longest-running and most reliable record of historical events for the period in question. Published weekly by the Government of Dominica, it chronicled official colony activities and served as a record of the legislation proposed and enacted. Like the *West India Committee Circular*, published by the West India Committee of the House of Commons, which began publication in 1886 as a bi-weekly and circulated widely in Roseau with occasional Dominican contributions, the *Dominica Official Gazette* had the advantage of high moral tone and officialdom. Both publications could be counted on for reliable economic, political and social information as they sought to inform planters, merchants, and investors of the current state of affairs in Dominica and the other islands of the British Caribbean. The *Dominica Official Gazette* was a particularly good source of information on trade and agricultural matters on Dominica.

Countering the blander offerings of these official publications were four independent weeklies covering the range of political opinion: the *Dominica Colonist* and the *Dominican*, both founded in 1840, the *Dominica Guardian*, which began publication in 1893, and the *Dominica Dial*, the often acerbic voice of the liberal Creole elite. It is in these four papers, but particularly in the last two, that we find the delight in the written word, the inventiveness of expression, and the nuances of a Dominican vernacular that could plant the seeds of the native literature to come. As a vehicle for the contestatory opinions of Creole liberals, the *Dominica Dial* in particular strove to make itself appealing to readers for the literary quality of its writing.

The *Dial's* sustained satirical attacks on Dr. Nicholls' career are a case in point, especially as he was not only Phyllis Allfrey's grandfather but also one of the *Dial* editors' *bêtes noires*. In 1875, to take one salient incident, Dr. Nicholls and a colleague had gone on a guided expedition (with local peasants as guides) through the region known as the Valley of Desolation - a rock-strewn and barren rumbling valley of bubbling fumaroles, bursts of hot steam, and simmering pools of black, blue, and yellow water nestled deep within the mountains of southern Dominica - with the objective of reaching Dominica's Boiling Lake. The Lake itself, fenced in by perpendicular banks of ash and pumice sixty to a hundred feet high, extends about seventy yards across, and appears to the traveler as "a gigantic seething cauldron, covered with rapid steam, through which, when the veil is for a moment blown apart by the mountain breeze, appears a confused mass of boiling water."<sup>14</sup> Upon their return to Roseau, Dr. Nicholls and his companions, who shared his penchant for scientific discovery, had announced their feat through a report of the Lake's existence in the *Illustrated London News*, *The Times*, and English scientific journal *Nature*, recounting the "strenuous hike in the tones of dramatic Victorian adventure, similar to exploring the Congo or reaching the source of the Nile."<sup>15</sup> In Dominica, the "discovery" of the Lake immediately became the focus of fierce debate over differing constructions of history, a debate in which the *Dial* had assumed a leadership role.

While Nicholls attempted to bask in the glory of an accomplishment he had publicized heavily abroad, he and his companions became the object of public ridicule in the mulatto-controlled *Dial*, which chastised them as "*soi-disant* Columbuses" for "discovering" what "any hunter in Laudat worth his name had been familiar with since childhood." The perceived audacity of Nicholls and his

companions in naming the salient features of the surrounding landscape after themselves (we have as a result Morne Nicholls and Morne Watts) made the power to "name" (and to have these new names permanently inscribed in official maps) a corollary to this politically and racially-charged struggle. The tensions between local, "native" knowledge, and its commodification abroad for the benefit of a white colonial elite (Dr. Nicholls's reputation as a specialist in local geology and various tropical sciences earned him a knighthood in 1926) were at the heart of a political tug-of-war headed by the *Dial* that would lead to *de facto* mulatto control of the local legislature and economy by the early twentieth century, despite the continued weight of British colonial administration.

Hesketh Bell attributed much of his success as an Administrator of Dominica to his awareness that "the harm that even a single little miserable paper can do is incalculable."<sup>16</sup> The West Indian papers, as he wrote in his memoirs, are "perhaps not very impressive organs, but they have much local influence," and the Governor "who treats them as irresponsible 'rags' makes a great mistake." Bell was acutely conscious of "the immense respect" that the "coloured folk" felt for the "printed word," and of how negative reports of the administration's proposals could lead to any government measure "being looked upon with suspicion." He consequently endeavored to have a "private chat" with newspaper editors to inform them of "exactly what the Government intended" when "meditating a measure the object of which might not be clearly understood by the mass of the people." Thus he sought to avoid a situation such as that of Montserrat a few years before, when the "weekly lucubrations" of the press alarmed "the ignorant people" to such a degree that disturbances and riots had broken out in various parts of the island and the Commissioner had been beaten to death.

The role of the Dominican liberal press in this ideological struggle created a contestatory space that was both political and proto-literary. The *Dial*'s main weapons to counter its opposition were wit, irony, and satire - deployed through impassioned argument and mordant commentary and inviting public participation through writing. The period, if judged from the pages of the *Dial* and other independent newspapers of the time, was one of great creativity and originality of expression which, although not yet "literary," spoke to the power of writing and found men generally praised for "wielding a facile pen."

Not surprisingly, as a note of historical interest in this context, another period of intense political fervor and somewhat frantic press activity also accounted for a second wave of literary creativity in Roseau in the 1970s and early 1980s, when Phyllis Allfrey edited the *Star*, the newspaper she had founded in the mid-1960s, and fellow Dominican poet Edward Scobie edited the *Dominica Herald*. The papers engaged in often-rabid political battles concerning Dominica's bid for independence, the abuses, corruption, and disdain for civil rights of the Labour government headed by Edward LeBlanc and his successor Patrick John, and the government's efforts to control the press through the Seditious and Undesirable Publications Act.

The *Star* appealed particularly to readers for the quality of the writing and the many literary and political voices for which it provided the first and only outlet. People bought the newspaper for Allfrey's "invisibly scathing editorials," her satiric poems signed with her pseudonym of Rose O, the sharp critiques of the Labour government written by Loftus Roberts, a retired civil servant who wrote under the pseudonym of Androcles, Ralph Casimir's militant poetry, and Cynthia Watts's tales of Ma Titine (the half-Patois, half-English conversations of a poor Roseau housewife and her friends). The *Star* brought together the voices of three writers nurtured by that seminal turn-of-the-twentieth-century period - Allfrey, Casimir, and the post-Herald Scobie - and frequently reminded its readers, through reprints of their poems and short

stories and articles on their careers, of the work of Jean Rhys and Daniel Thaly.

Two additional factors contributing to the promotion of literary production in Dominica in the early years of the twentieth century were the construction of the new Carnegie-sponsored library in Roseau and Hesketh Bell's own public presence as a published author, albeit not of literary texts. The Library, designed by Bell himself as a bungalow with a very broad verandah, had a varied if perhaps somewhat outdated collection of literary classics and contemporary volumes of literature, history, politics, and science, as can be judged by casual references in memoirs and correspondence of the period. (Bell himself was able to find "some books on Uganda" when he learned of his appointment as Governor of that colony, even if they were "rather out of date and probably misleading," 92.) The Library's beautiful site in the Public Gardens, overlooking the sea, had soon made it a popular spot for social meetings and intellectual discussions. How many of these debates may have revolved around the young Administrator's own literary effort, which included a volume entitled *Obeah, or Witchcraft in the West Indies* (1899) and the more utilitarian *Hints to Settlers* (1904), we can only guess. But his slight vanity about his inroads into writing, and the obvious pleasure in narrative evident in the many anecdotes and descriptions offered in his published texts (also evident in his memoirs, *Glimpses of a Governor's Life*, which he was composing at this time), provide yet another possible model for a writing life.

If it is this essay's contention, then, that the specificities of the social situation in Dominica at the turn of the twentieth century, as outlined in some detail above, profoundly marked the writers growing up in the island during this period, what was the nature of that impact? It is not my intention to claim an over-deterministic relationship between social environment and the creative imagination that could account for specific styles, themes, and approaches, but merely to suggest ways in which an understanding of this social setting can inform our appreciation of why it was at this particular juncture in the history of Dominica that we witness the beginning of its literary tradition. The discussion below suggests some of these possible connections, beginning with the sadly neglected figure of poet Daniel Thaly and touching upon the work of Rhys, Allfrey, and J.R. Ralph Casimir.

If Rhys is Dominica's most famous writer, Daniel Thaly is its most neglected. Born Désiré Alain Thaly in 1879, he is the author of eight volumes of poetry written in French, "rich in images of the Antilles and in particular his native land."<sup>17</sup> As a member of the French-Dominican Creole elite, Thaly would move as easily between Martinique and Dominica as between French and English. He was educated at the Lycée St. Pierre and, like many members of his circle, gravitated to a French university, training as a doctor in Toulouse. In 1905, upon his return to the West Indies, he set up a medical practice in Roseau - as a competitor to Roseau's more established physicians, Rhys's father and Allfrey's grandfather - but his heart was never in this profession (he was known for invariably prescribing the same rhubarb medicine regardless of the nature of the patient's complaints). Between 1905 and his death in Dominica in 1949 he pursued a series of vocations - as an ornithologist, as an archivist at the Schoelcher Library in Fort-de-France, as Director of the Victoria Museum in Roseau, but primarily as a writer. Between 1899 and 1932 he not only published the eight volumes of poems for which she should be better known,<sup>18</sup> but he contributed to a number of Parisian and West Indian reviews, later in his life writing as a regular contributor for the *Canada-West Indies Magazine*.

Thaly, ten years Rhys's senior, was already a published author in his mid-teens, having contributed a number of poems to local newspapers in Roseau, St.

Pierre, and Fort-de-France while still a student at the Lycée St. Pierre. When he left Roseau for Toulouse to study medicine in 1898, Thaly had with him the manuscript of his first collection of poems, *Lucioles et Cantharides*, which he published in Paris the following year, at the young age of nineteen. His successes as a poet were suitably recognized in Roseau, as they had been reported in Dominica's fairly numerous newspapers. Budding writers like Jean Rhys could not have been unaware of the successes of this fellow Dominican in Paris, where she herself would soon search for literary fame and recognition.

What relationship, if any, existed between Thaly and Rhys's family is open to speculation. They belonged to different social circles (it has been hinted by some that Thaly was a light-skinned mulatto), but the bourgeois enclave of Roseau was small enough to make it impossible for Rhys to be unaware of there being a young published poet in their midst. She was still in Roseau when he returned to Dominica after finishing his schooling in 1905 - arriving with the freshly-printed copies of his second collection of verse, *La Clarté du Sud* - and would have had numerous possibilities of contact in the two years that she remained in Dominica before leaving for England in 1907. Thaly, moreover, is known to have established deep and long-lasting friendships with others in Rhys's circle - he was a life-long friend of Allfrey's aunt, Margaret Nicholls, a contemporary of Rhys's whose library held lovingly inscribed copies of all of his books.

His connection to Allfrey can be traced more accurately. Because of his friendship with Maggie Nicholls, Thaly was a frequent visitor to Allfrey's childhood home, where he would come bearing treats and books for the four Shand daughters. He was particularly keen on imparting to young Phyllis an appreciation of contemporary French verse. A stanza from one of his poems would serve as the epigraph for Allfrey's novel *The Orchid House* (1953) and her own poetry, gathered in four collections published between 1940 and 1973, would echo many of his themes and motifs. She was, moreover, fascinated by the man himself and by the mystery she sensed behind his having remained a bachelor to his death, and speculated about the reasons in one of her short stories, "It Falls into Place," the romantic tale of a poet "dying almost unrecognized and certainly unappreciated in a hot and barely civilized country," which hints at his possible unrequited attachment to one of her own relatives. The story's fictional poet, Chrysostome, shared with Thaly membership in the Légion d'Honneur and a "delicate affection for portraits of little girls in his verses," one of whom he adopted (as Thaly had unofficially adopted one of Allfrey's illegitimate coloured cousins).

Thaly's work gives ample evidence of the combined strengths of the English and French literary traditions in turn-of-the-century Roseau. Although writing in French, the language in which he was educated, he was fully conversant with English poetry. The many epigraphs with which he frequently opens his poetry attest to the breadth of his readings in both traditions: Paul Verlaine, Alfred de Musset, Charles Baudelaire, Christopher Marlowe, Rupert Brooke, Joachim du Bellay, John Keats, François Maynard, Edmund Gosse, Walter Scott, Matthew Arnold, Lafcadio Hearn, Percy Shelley, Rudyard Kipling, and François Villon, among many others.

Thaly will write, under this mixed tutelage, with a certain Baudelairian abandon modulated by a languid sweetness that comes from his perception of his home island as an earthly paradise, his "île mélancolique." His turn-of-the-century poetry, however, has little of the *poète maudit* and more of the "note of musical nostalgia" of Verlaine's *Chanson d'automne*. Like the symbolists he so admired, Thaly's poetry will return repeatedly to *le rêve* for evocative purposes, but he sings more often than not of the enchanting concreteness of the West Indian landscape - his nostalgia is less for an unreachable ideal of beauty and more for distant realities to which he yearns to return.



Thaly's evocation of the Antillean landscape is etched with the searing pain of the loss of so many friends when the town of St. Pierre was destroyed by the eruption of the Mont Pelée volcano in 1902. The loss of thirty thousand lives within minutes of the main eruption touched Thaly profoundly, as he had been for many years a student at the Lycée St. Pierre and lost relatives, former classmates, teachers, and lifetime friends. He will return again and again to the eruption as a theme in his poetry, as a sort of *leit motif* that permeates all the collections. But the concreteness of Thaly's evocations are not limited to the destruction of St. Pierre - they form the core of a profoundly autobiographical element in his poetry, through which he often constructs a version of himself as a citizen divided between Roseau and the St. Pierre that vanished under a cloud of ash while he was away. Thaly, while never a political poet, is a writer with an acute perception of history, as attested by the numerous poems in which he addresses slavery and the Caribbean's African heritage, or his frequent meditations on American and British societies and political relations, and their implications for both Dominica and Martinique. His poetry's evocation of beauty is firmly grounded on the specificities of his time and place, on his position as a Dominican born at an important intersection of the island's history when the balance of culture and language is about to shift from French to the English language and English mores. His poetry, with its invocation of both literary traditions, seems to seek to establish itself as a bridge between the two.

If Thaly is the Franco-Dominican poet who seeks to meet Anglo-Dominica half-way, Phyllis Allfrey is his mirror image. Thaly's close personal connection to Allfrey, for whom he acted in many ways as a literary mentor, allows us to see them as constituting an embryo "tradition" - if a literary tradition requires indeed such an explicit link. They represent, more importantly perhaps, different, albeit interconnected responses to the realities of their times. Thaly could be thus seen as bridging the intersection between a French and an English Dominica - Allfrey as the writer of an English Dominica who finds her most powerful influences in literature written in French.

Allfrey's writing wavered uneasily between three different avenues: she looked upon herself as a poet, is best known for her prose, and dedicated most of her best writing years to journalism. As a poet, her most powerful and influential model was Daniel Thaly. While still in Dominica, he guided her readings of other poets along lines similar to his own. With her near-native command of French and competent knowledge of Patois, she had been quite ready for immersion in both traditions. She was, moreover, as deeply interested as he was in a poetry that did not disregard aesthetic concerns but nonetheless rooted itself in the historic moment. As she drifted away from Dominica in her twenties, and during the years she lived in London - passionately involved in socialist politics - she discovered other poets, W.H. Auden among them, whose influence matched that of Thaly, but her themes and style would always evidence the same hybridity, the same eclecticism as his, leading the reader familiar with both to conclude that, whatever the challenge from other possible models, as a poet she remained constant to her first.

As a novelist, likewise, Allfrey would find the principal model for her only published novel, *The Orchid House* (1953), not in the English novelistic tradition, but in a somewhat obscure French novel of 1913, Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, a neo-romantic work - "the most delicate rendering so far achieved...of the romantic adolescent consciousness" - she had been prompted to read by the young Anglican rector who tutored her in religion and mathematics.<sup>19</sup> *Le Grand Meaulnes* is characterized by the same "sort of poetry of regret for lost innocence and vanished enchantment" that Thaly had expressed so well in his poetry and that Allfrey sought to recreate in *The Orchid House*.<sup>20</sup> *Le Grand Meaulnes*, like *The Orchid House* and like Thaly's many volumes of poetry, is a novel dominated "by memory, and the continuance of sensations which were most

deeply held in childhood" but have to give way to the realities of adulthood and history.<sup>21</sup> It is also a book dominated, as Allfrey's and Thaly's work would be, by the *persona* of the storyteller, by the unifying voice of a narrator attempting to explain things beyond his understanding and clinging to the past as the only comforting and safe space. The protagonist of *Le Grand Meaulnes*, like the narrator of *The Orchid House* and Thaly's poetic voice, is a "thorough-going nostalgician ... hypersensitively attuned to the beauty, the mystery, and occasionally, the menace, of natural landscape."<sup>22</sup>

As a creative writer, Allfrey gravitated to French models readily available to her in a bilingual/bicultural island. As a member of the Dominican bourgeoisie, however, she was as passionately alive to the vitality of the most powerful examples of the written word in her social milieu - newspaper writing. As a child growing up in a Dominica where every issue of every newspaper was scrutinized weekly for traces of venom, and as the granddaughter of a man who was alternately praised to the skies and vilified by the press, Allfrey would never be able to resist a newspaper. Her career as a writer - even when focusing on her literary work - always revolved around her connection to some newspaper or other. In London she was most proud of her connection to the newspaper of the Labour Left, *Tribune*, edited during the years of her contributions by George Orwell. She had been gratified by the publication of her early prose in the pages of the *Manchester Guardian*. While a Cabinet member in the West Indian Federation she took every opportunity to write for the *Trinidad Guardian*, the *Dominica Herald*, and any other newspaper interested in publishing her work. Upon her return to Dominica after the collapse of the Federation, she would edit the *Dominica Herald* and go on to found and edit her own opposition paper, the *Star*. "Politics ruined me for writing," she was wont to complain in her poverty-stricken old age, but many of her friends agreed that it was ultimately her passion for engaging in political debate through newspaper writing which accounted for the neglect of her literary work.<sup>23</sup> As such, she was a true daughter of the social milieu of her childhood.

This very passion for political debate through the Dominican press linked Allfrey to another poet who would have been seen - from their differences in social origin - as an unlikely political and literary ally for a member of the white upper-middle class. Ten years Allfrey's senior (he was born in 1898), Joseph Raphael [Ralph] Casimir was the son of a lower-middle class black family, worlds apart from the circles in which Allfrey, Rhys, and Thaly moved in Dominican society. Casimir, a native of the town of St. Joseph, some ten miles north of Roseau, had been educated at the St. John government school. Swayed as a young man by the ideals of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, Casimir became founder and (from 1919 to 1922) General Secretary of the Dominica Branch of the Association. He was also an agent for Garvey's Black Star Line. His up-from-the-bootstraps career included work as a Commission Agent, a solicitor's clerk, bookseller, bookbinder, poet, and elected member of the Roseau Town Council.

Casimir's literary career followed a pattern very similar to that of Thaly and Allfrey, perhaps the only pattern possible for such a career in a small island where a writer could not sustain him or herself as a writer except through journalism. A poet by vocation, he became a newspaper writer almost as a matter of course. Given his connection to the Garvey movement, he could count on more of an international audience than would have been possible had his concerns been more insular, and his articles appeared in local, regional, and United States newspapers, among them the *Pittsburgh Courier* for which he was a regular correspondent. Casimir shared with Allfrey not only his political ideals but the passion for encouraging reading and writing by Dominicans that also drove Daniel Thaly. Like Thaly, he was an anthologist of West Indian poetry, an archivist interested in the preservation of the island's literary legacy - the result of

his work was a four-volume compilation of poems by Dominican writers of undoubted historical value.

Casimir's career illustrates the power of those very leftist political principles on which Allfrey based her own political career. As eventual allies in their political struggles--they worked closely after Allfrey co-founded the Dominica Labour Party in the mid-1950s, and he was a frequent contributor to the *Star* - they serve to illustrate the narrow confines within which a writer could insert him/herself into the public discourse of an island where politics have drawn more interest than writing - except in the case of political writing. Casimir's own work, included in six collections of poems,<sup>24</sup> displays a proud awareness of his African ancestry and a celebration of Blackness akin to that of the Martinican poets of Négritude, but it is never a bitter poetry, despite the often painful encounters in the texts with the legacy of racism and exploitation to which Garvey's movement addressed itself. Casimir, like Allfrey, was quick to find that in the Dominica of the twentieth century, the surest way to be read was to enter the political fray and make that the avenue for the creation of a broader readership. Allfrey and Casimir, as writers who combined the more purely aesthetic/literary tradition initiated by Thaly with the mordantly witty heritage of political writing of the turn-of-the-century Dominican press, exemplify better than anyone else the Dominican literary tradition of the twentieth century.

And finally, what of Rhys in this somewhat speculative discussion of the impact of social conditions on the Dominican creative mind? Of the writers approached thus, she was the only one never to return to Dominica (except on a brief visit), and as such is the only one whose career did not unfold against the background of a Dominican life. Rhys's Dominica is the island of childhood memory, not the social and economic setting that determines the material conditions for mature creativity, as it was for Thaly, Allfrey, and Casimir. Her Dominica is, nonetheless, the dominant landscape of her formative years as a writer.

Rhys's emergence as a writer out of the "forgotten outpost of empire" that was Dominica at the end of the nineteenth century has always been a subject for critical conjecture. Part of the riddle that is Rhys is linked to the extraordinary appearance of such an important and powerful literary voice out of such inauspicious territory. An examination of the social history of Dominica during this formative period of her life, however, provides a context that is in no way as barren as previously thought. Models, if not absolutely plentiful, were nonetheless available ... and writing, even though mostly confined to political debate, was a passion of sorts in the colony. Her ambition to write emerges as a rather natural inclination in a colony where everyone seemed to write - and where the written word had the strength of conviction and the power to spearhead change.

What, then, of the kind of writer Rhys could have become had she remained in Dominica? If we are to judge by the examples of Allfrey, Thaly, and Casimir - who merged aesthetic, historical, and political concerns into their writing - such a career would have required an embracing of the social environment quite alien to Rhys's interests and temperament. Given Rhys's tendency to wall herself against the concerns that were so central to such political creatures as Allfrey and Casimir, would she indeed have found scope for her writing in such a setting? The answer to such a question would by necessity be conjectural, as it would be based on a speculative reading of what is known about her life against the description of her cultural milieu offered here. A review of Rhys's collected papers in the light of this assessment of the social world of her childhood may yet yield evidence to support such speculations, but that work remains to be done.

Rhys's maternal family was firmly ensconced in Dominica's English colonial enclave, almost defensively so, given the vicissitudes of English planter life in Dominica after Emancipation and their isolation from the more established French-Creole upper class. As planters and slave owners who had settled in Dominica towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Lockharts had experienced the most intense period of Anglo-French tensions. Their pride in being of "pure English descent"<sup>25</sup> must be seen in the light of the struggles for English ascendancy that characterized Dominican society throughout the nineteenth century, struggles that forced them into a posture of somewhat militant segregation that had the effect of isolating Rhys from the mainstream of Roseau's social life. The obsession with the disturbingly dark great-grandmother of doubtful racial and national (i.e. Cuban) origin of which Rhys speaks in *Smile Please* could be read as stemming from a desire to establish a connection with that French Creole class from which her own family's "Englishness" insulated her, and where such ancestresses were common enough.

Rhys could not bolster her links to the mainstream of Dominican society through a sense of security in her family's respectability and financial position. The Geneva estate that was the foundation of the family's fortunes was by the time of Rhys's birth "almost derelict." Her father's medical practice - despite his official appointments as Medical Officer and Health Officer to the Port of Roseau - was never overwhelmingly prosperous. In *Smile Please*, Rhys writes of the "end of my comfortable certainty that we were not people who had to worry about expenses." Confronted with her mother's fears about money, she "vaguely wondered" for the first time "if my father's reckless, throwaway attitude to money wasn't a cover-up for anxiety."<sup>26</sup> Privately, he was a man excessively fond of playing cards (one can imagine for money, at least some of the times), passionate about English and local politics ("far too engaged in either abuse or praise of various English politicians," 72), and an outrageous flirt. In addition, his occasional public fits of bad temper, a certain propensity to excessive social drinking, several accusations of malpractice widely publicized by the local press, and his usually failed attempts at elective office had damaged his reputation and made him the target of attacks in the local newspapers. These attacks, one can only surmise, must have been very painful to a young girl of Rhys's acute sensitivities, and it is quite possible that, as she did later in her life - during periods of her life much better documented - her reaction was to withdraw into herself, closing herself off from the virulence of the local press towards her father and other members of her English set. Her apolitical nature - whether an innate element of her character or the result of such a withdrawal - ill suited her for the fiercely political society of turn-of-the-century Roseau. It could not have done much to tempt her out of any self-imposed shell.

There is very little evidence from which one could speculate on Rhys's relationship with the French-Creole elite - other than negative evidence. The youthful, formative readings to which she alludes in her writings and correspondence seem limited to English literature; there is very little in them to indicate that she lived in a trilingual society in which French culture and literature played a prominent role, other than her allusion in *Smile Please* to her father having arranged for her to take extra lessons in French. "So as well as being assaulted by English poetry, I was assaulted by French poetry," chiefly Victor Hugo's "Un peu de musique" (59). Her mother "knew patois well," but Rhys herself seems not to have learned, thereby isolating herself from the peasantry and the servant class, many of whom spoke little English. Her closest connection to the Creole elite came through what she calls in *Smile Please* her "religious fit," the period she spent in the Catholic Convent School while her parents traveled to England. There had been "general surprise" at her having been sent there for her schooling for a year, given the "certain prejudice against Catholicism among the white people" and the fact that "most of the girls at the convent were coloured" (77). Even there, Rhys managed to remain isolated from

these daughters of the coloured elite, choosing her friends from among the few white students in the school and making no significant friendships with Creole students. Although she recalls in "Heat" the eruption of the Mont Pelée volcano in 1902, she is silent about the great suffering and anxiety the devastation of St. Pierre created among this Creole elite for the relatives and friends in St. Pierre. Bell speaks in his memoirs of the intensity with which the Dominican people reacted to the tragedy - recognizing that "there has always been much connection between the people here and the Martiniquans" - making Rhys's silence on this most tragic and devastating natural catastrophe in *Smile Please* perhaps the most convincing evidence of her disconnection from this stricken Creole elite.

Not surprisingly, the years Rhys describes in *Smile Please* as the happiest of her life coincide with those years during which Hesketh Bell was Administrator of Dominica. Bell had done much to consolidate the English administration in the island, serving as a mediator between the English and Creole elite and establishing the foundations of a more truly-Dominican upper-class. His energy and enterprise did much to enhance the prestige of the English enclave, who enjoyed some of his reflected glory. And as a rather handsome, unmarried, and quite charming young man (he was thirty-four at the time of his appointment), one fond of amusement, he contributed greatly to the consolidation of English-style entertainments and cultural practices. As Administrator during Rhys's adolescence, and thus the leader of the English social set, he did much to establish a pattern of entertainments whose "Englishness" provided the nurturing environment necessary to make of Rhys at least a temporary "extrovert": "As I grew up" - she writes in *Smile Please* - "life didn't seem monotonous or dull to me. Even apart from books, life was often exciting. It was not, of course, anything like as wonderful as England would be, but it did to be going on with" (64). Like most young women in Roseau at the time, she seemed a little in love with "Mr. Hesketh," but was nonetheless unaware of the source of their happiness being so inextricably linked to his success in bringing Dominica so firmly (even if temporarily) into the English-colonial mold, a place of comfort for her and her set.

"Mr. Hesketh" left Dominica in 1906, just as Rhys was preparing for her own departure for England. It is significant that Rhys had experienced her happiest period in her home island just as the social life for those of her group and class had become most "English." After Bell's departure - and without his charm and mediating influence - social and political conditions would soon revert to very much what they had been before his arrival in 1899, and Dominica would soon face new political crises - the war, the collapse of the plantation economy, the abandonment of estates, the organization of the estate workers into labor unions - that would push Dominica away from the temporary English's it had enjoyed during the Bell administration. What Rhys would have made of these new crises and of the new directions in which they plunged her home island we are not to know, as from then her literary career would develop away from Dominica. Would she have found a niche as a writer in that society? Perhaps not. But it could be argued that even her failure to do so would have been conclusive evidence of how profoundly, for better or worse, she had been marked by the period in Dominica's history in which it fell to her lot to be born.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Hesketh Bell, *Glimpses of a Governor's Life: From Diaries, Letters and Memoranda* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston & Co., Ltd., 1936), 27.

<sup>2</sup>E.C. Eliot, *Broken Atoms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1938), 221.

<sup>3</sup>Bell, 25.

<sup>4</sup>Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 89-91.

<sup>5</sup>Bell, 45.

<sup>6</sup>Bell, 45.

<sup>7</sup>Lennox Honychurch, *Our Island Culture* (Roseau: Dominican National Cultural Council, 1988), 53

<sup>8</sup>Honychurch, 53.

<sup>9</sup>Bell, 27.

<sup>10</sup>See Lennox Honychurch's chapter on "Music and Songs of Dominica" in *Our Island Culture*, 48-55.

<sup>11</sup>Honychurch, 44.

<sup>12</sup>Polly Pattullo, "Phyllis Shand Allfrey Talking with Polly Pattullo." In *Writing Lives: Conversations Between Women Writers*. Edited by Mary Camberlain, 223-234. London: Virago, 1988, 231.

<sup>13</sup>Bell, 2.

<sup>14</sup>William Palgrave, quoted by Lennox Honychurch in *Dominica: Isle of Adventure* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 68-69.

<sup>15</sup>Honychurch, *Dominica...*, 62.

<sup>16</sup>Bell, 73. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from pages 72-73.

<sup>17</sup>Robert Myers, *Dominica* (Oxford, England: Clio Press, 1987), 146.

<sup>18</sup>Thaly's published collections are: *Lucioles et Cantharides* (Paris: Ollendorf, 1900); *Le Jardin des Tropiques* (Paris: Editions du Beffroi, 1911); *La Clarté du Sud* (Toulouse: Société Provinciale d'Édition, 1905); *Chansons de Mer et d'Outre-Mer* (Paris: Editions de la Phalange, 1911); *Nostalgies Françaises* (Paris: Editions de la Phalange, 1913); *L'Île et le Voyage, petite Odyssée d'un poète lointain* (Paris: Editions du Divan, 1923); *Chants de l'Atlantique suivis de Sous le ciel des Antilles* (Paris: Editions de la Muse Française, 1928); *Héliotrope ou Les Amants inconnus* (Paris: Le Divan, 1938). In addition he published an anthology of Antillean poetry in French in collaboration with André Thomarel, *Les Antilles Poétiques* (Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe: S. Jackson, 1936).

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in "Alain-Fournier," *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 6, 11. For a more detailed discussion of Alain-Fournier's influence on Allfrey's work, see my biography of Allfrey (*Phyllis Shand Allfrey: A Caribbean Life*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996, esp. 85-87) and my "Introduction" to the edition of *The Orchid House* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup>"Alain-Fournier," *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 May 1929, 390.

<sup>21</sup>David Paul, "The Mysterious Landscape: A Study of Alain-Fournier." *Cornhill Magazine* 162, no. 972 (Autumn 1947), 447.

<sup>22</sup>Robert Gibson, *The Land Without a Name: Alain-Fournier and His World*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975, 300.

<sup>23</sup>Polly Pattullo, "Phyllis Shand Allfrey Talking to Polly Pattullo." In *Writing Lives: Conversations Between Women Writers*. Edited by Mary Chamberlain. London: Virago, 1988, 224.

<sup>24</sup>Casimir's works, all published in Roseau by the Chronicle Press, which he owned, are: *Pater Noster and Other Poems* (1967), *Africa Arise and Other Poems* (1967), *A Little Kiss and Other Poems* (1968), *Farewell and Other Poems* (1971), *Dominica and Other Poems* (1968), and *The Negro Speaks* (1969). Casimir also edited four collections of Dominican verse: *Poesy, Book I* (1943), *Poesy, Book II* (1944), *Poesy, Book III* (1946), and *Poesy Book IV* (1947).

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Carole Angier's *Jean Rhys: Life and Work* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), 7.

<sup>26</sup>Rhys, *Smile Please*, 44.

CONNECTIONS: JEAN RHY'S

I mean this paper to be a first step towards a longer discussion, a kind of sketching in of a landscape. The century ends Caribbean writing is burgeoning not only in the region itself, but in even more syncretic Caribbean cultural space within Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

female and for some male writers. The debates over her place in Caribbean literary history can be located within the larger fields of post-colonial political and cultural concerns.

I have chosen Jamaica Kincaid and Robert Antoni to compare with Rhys because, firstly, they have such more demonstrable textual links with Rhys than do many other Caribbean writers.

Ellie Samia and Lorna Goodison, both of whom have written poems for Rhys. Secondly, they each take calculated and different risks in writing after her, just as Rhys did in her day and context.

Kincaid and Antoni have both emerged as major Caribbean literary figures in their own right. Both found their creative literary voices outside the region. But some of Antoni's novels are located within Caribbean cultural space, and some of five of Kincaid's novels are set in the Caribbean. Kincaid has established her literary voice in Paris and in Britain, and the Caribbean as either explicitly or implicitly present in her writing. Just as Rhys looked back to her homeland of Dominica and Antigua constantly and never lost sight of their complex connections, Kincaid with Antigua, Antoni with Trinidad. In the case of Kincaid and Rhys, there are a number of biographical, thematic and stylistic connections which are...

Both committed themselves to writing early and both began their writing careers in the United States. Ellie Samia and Lorna Goodison and Elaine Potter...

written career was established. Kincaid moved to the United States, where she worked as an au pair and received her education as finishing up her education and beginning to write. Rhys, born in...