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'In What Manner Did They Devide The Land' The Early Colonial Estate Landscape of Nevis and St Kitts

By ROGER H. LEECH

A three-year research project funded by the British Academy has focussed on the colonial landscape of two islands in the eastern Caribbean. Methodologically the project has set out to utilise both archaeological and documented data, to reconstruct, deconstruct and interpret an enclosed European landscape of the 1630s onwards. It is this European landscape that provides the focus for this paper - how were the English islands of the Eastern Caribbean transformed into estate landscapes and what was the wider European context to this process?

INTRODUCTION

The English Leeward Islands were colonised from the late 1620s onwards. By the end of the century the islands were densely settled and their wealth, shipped principally to Bristol and London, far outstripped that of the North American colonies in total. This is a remarkable story, explored by historians but scarcely at all through its archaeology. Much of what might be known of the early settlement of the islands still awaits telling. The archaeological examination of the 17th-century colonial landscape, the plantations and fields has still largely to be undertaken, enabling the material record to be considered alongside the meagre documentary sources, decimated by fire, hurricanes, earthquakes, tidal waves and war.

Current understanding of the colonisation of the English Leeward Islands in the 17th century is based predominantly on documentary research. Historical studies point to the need for an archaeological perspective. Dunn's single chapter on 'life in the tropics' highlights the lack of archaeological data: 'nearly all the early houses on the islands have long since disappeared, victims of storms, fires and tropical rot'.¹ Watts's study in historical geography again highlights the need for an archaeological perspective.²

Archaeological research into the English settlement of the Caribbean has been undertaken on a number of islands including Jamaica, Barbados and various of the Leeward Islands.³ For Jamaica there is now published Douglas Armstrong's monumental study of the Drax Hall plantation.⁴ On Barbados research has been focussed on the archaeology of slavery.⁵ In the Leeward Islands work has notably included Lydia Pulsipher's long-running research project on Montserrat, focussed on the Galway's Plantation, where fieldwork has now been halted because of the volcanic eruptions.⁶ On St Eustatius an extensive

research programme has been undertaken by William and Mary College at Williamsburg, accessible through a recent summary by Norman Barka and in a series of unpublished MA dissertations.⁷ On Nevis research has been focussed on the 18th century onwards, as at Coconut Walk and Port St George.⁸ On Barbados the widespread destruction of archaeology through modern ploughing⁹ increasingly highlights the potential of Nevis and St Kitts for providing an archaeological perspective on the 17th century.

This paper will draw upon the research project on Nevis and St Kitts (for the latter see Hicks in this volume) commenced in 2001 by the Universities of Southampton and Bristol with the support of the British Academy, the Society of Antiquaries and in association with Bristol City Museum and the historical societies for the two islands. A preliminary assessment in 2000 had shown the potential for an archaeological perspective on the 17th- and early 18th-century colonisation of the two islands. On Nevis sugar production had fallen dramatically before the mid 1940s.¹⁰ In the absence of post-war ploughing, archaeological deposits are often well preserved. On St Kitts sugar production continued until 2005, and there has been much more destruction of archaeological remains - but the early historic mapping and documentation for St Kitts is much better than that for Nevis.

The overall objective of the British Academy project was to formulate a strategy and plan for a wider study, reconstructing the colonial landscapes of the two islands from the sea to the mountains, using the field evidence in conjunction with documentary sources, to transform understanding of the 17th-century English colonisation of the Leeward Islands. The approach adopted was heavily contextual, using documentary and archaeological sources, using field survey alongside air photographic interpretation.

THE COLONIAL LANDSCAPE OF NEVIS AND ST KITTS

In 1624 the island of St Christopher, commonly known as St Kitts, was the first of the Caribbean islands to be colonised by English settlers under a patent granted to the Earl of Carlisle as Lord Proprietor for the settlement of the Caribees. The landings and settlement of St Kitts and then Nevis (from 1628) are described in the account of John Hilton c.1675, descendant of Anthony Hilton who led the first settlement of Nevis in 1628.¹¹

It is from Hilton's account that my quotation is derived, 'In what manner did they divide the land?'.¹² Hilton's answer focuses on the division of St Kitts between the English and the French - a path was cut around the island and found to be 32 miles in length. Leaving aside the dry savannah at the south end of the island the English took 8 miles to the leeward and windward of the centre line across the island. The French took 8 miles to the leeward and windward of the English lands, giving themselves each end of the island. Hilton's account goes on to describe the settlement of Nevis. Hilton's account does not then enlarge upon how this was carried out or how the lands within the divisions of St Kitts or of Nevis were then further subdivided to form estates. The accounts of Hilton and Sir Henry Colt make it clear that c.100 settlers, widely scattered, were involved in the initial settlement of Nevis.¹³

Historians and their documentary sources are silent on how the initial division of St Kitts, Nevis and the other English islands of Barbados, Montserrat and Antigua into separate

estates was effected. Historical attention on the estates of these islands has instead focussed more on the gradual reduction in the number of estates, and on the later management of these increasingly large estates, notably those of the Pinney and Stapleton families.¹⁴ The principal question that this paper seeks to answer is therefore 'how did they divide the land', how were the English islands of the Eastern Caribbean transformed into estate landscapes?

The present day map of Nevis¹⁵ reveals an underlying structure of regularly laid out geometric linear estate boundaries. Many of these disappear into what is now forest. Iles's map of 1871¹⁶, the first to show the settlement of the island in detail, shows many plantations in what is now forest. Iles's map did not though show land divisions and boundaries, and overall the cartography is grossly inaccurate; Burdon's map of 1920 is similarly inaccurate being derived from Iles's map.¹⁷ The map of 1848 by Capt. Barnett is much more accurate, but does not show land divisions.¹⁸ The earliest island-wide maps to show land divisions are of 1959 and of the 1970s, by the Directorate of Overseas Surveys.¹⁹ By this date forest and scrub covered much of the former plantation landscape. To reconstruct the estates and enclosed fields now concealed by forest it is necessary to turn to documentary research, air photography and archaeological field survey.

Figure 1. Air photographic survey of 1956, the colonial landscape to the north of Hermitage Plantation, fields disappearing into regenerated forest (Government of St Kitts and Nevis, photograph for Directorate of Overseas Surveys).

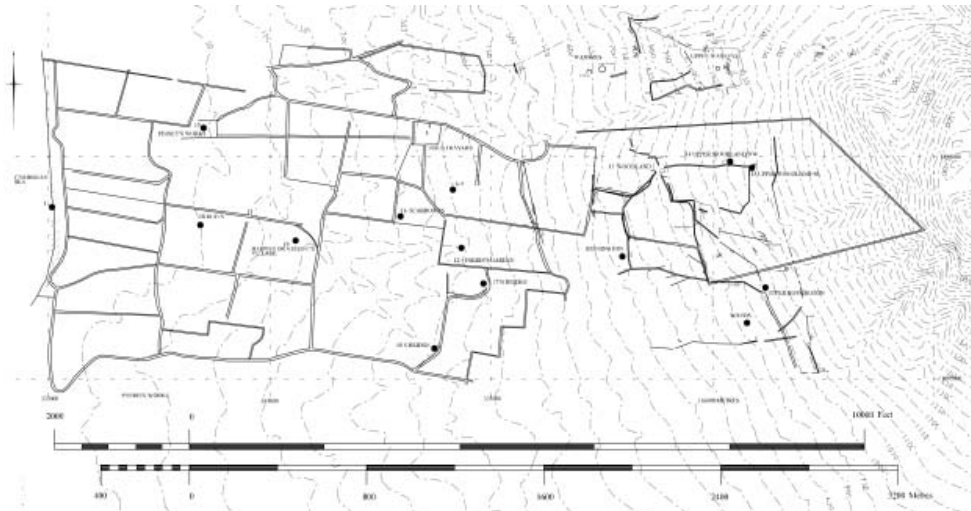


In the absence of any detailed island-wide mapping earlier than the 1950s, estate maps of the 18th to early 20th centuries are of especial value. Maps of the 18th century exist for a small number of estates, such as that of 1755 for Jessops in the parish of St Thomas.²⁰ Some ostensibly of the 19th century are probably copied from earlier maps, for instance of Coconut Walk, the Potworks Estate and the Old Manor Estate.²¹ Many more are new surveys of the 19th and earlier 20th centuries. The tenorial history of these estates can then be traced through documentary sources, notably the Common Records of 1707 onwards held in the Court House of Nevis.

The earliest air photographic coverage of Nevis is of 1946, taken by the US Air Force.²² This is of especial value in showing estate and field boundaries, which are totally obscured on later photographs by forest and scrub. Later coverage is of particular value in providing greater clarity of landscape features still visible: by 1952, when the coastline of Nevis and other islands was photographed by the US Navy, and 1954, when the island was first photographed for overall mapping. By then superior cameras of German origin were possibly in use.²³ The 1968 larger scale coverage of the island shows a still more forested landscape, but with even greater clarity (Fig. 1).

The mapping of features concealed by forest and scrub even on the earliest air photographs can be achieved through archaeological field survey. North and south of Mountravers, GPS (Global Positioning by Satellite) survey over a four year period has reconstructed a landscape of fields and boundaries previously invisible (Fig. 2). Handheld GPS using the WAAS (Wide Area Augmentation Service) differential is sufficiently accurate for the mapping of features that will appear on maps of a scale of 1:1000 or smaller; using GPS here and then in Britain one is struck by the immediately greater number of satellites rapidly accessed in a Caribbean context.

Figure 2. Estate and field boundaries within and adjacent to the Mountravers Plantation, St Thomas's parish, Nevis, from documentary sources, air photographs and field survey (author).



Here and in other parts of the island it is evident that the majority of longer boundaries are on a series of common alignments. In most instances these alignments run inland from the sea at approximately 90 degrees to the adjacent coast. In the central southern division, the alignments of the majority of the longer boundaries run approximately parallel to the coast. From the analysis of boundaries thus recorded from maps, documents, air photographs and field survey, it can be argued that, outside the towns of Charlestown and Jamestown, the land boundaries of Nevis have been laid out in some nine separate divisions characterised by consistent direction of land parcel and estate boundaries; the two towns may have constituted a further two divisions (Fig. 3).

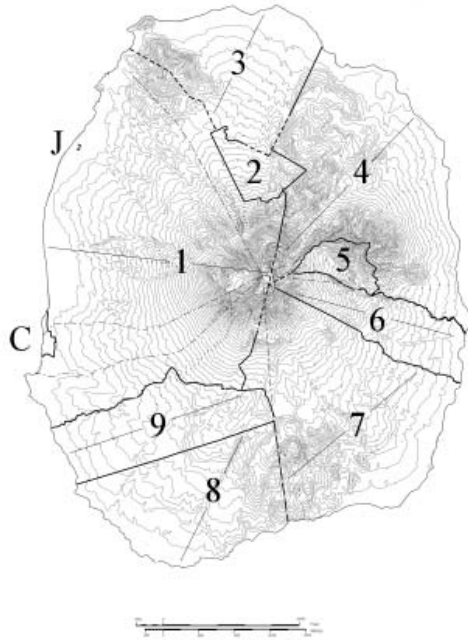
Further archaeological study would probably enable the sequence in which the divisions were laid out to be established. The central southern division, with its property boundaries running parallel to the coast, was possibly the last division to be set out. On the west the inner round the island road forms part of the division boundary. The road must have been in use by the time that the division was laid out.

The use of the term 'division' can be contextually grounded in contemporary usage of the term. First, in the earliest land titles, estates on Nevis were located by reference to the division in which they were situated. In 1678 Sir William Stapleton's estate in the parish of St John was described as '... A certaine Plantation or Parcel of land Situate ... at or in the South West division ... Extending in length from the Sea near long Point to the figg tree Pond.'²⁴ In 1685 one Anne Kyrkland, widow, sold to John Haynes eight acres in the same 'South West Division' of the island.²⁵ In 1701 Stapleton's 'River Plantation' was said to be in the Old Windward Division of the island.²⁶ In 1738 the Potwork Plantation was said to be in the North West Division.²⁷

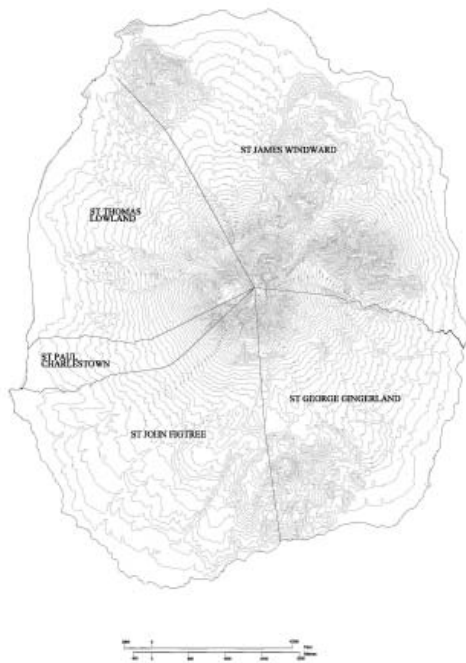
A second contemporary use of the term 'division' was for the defence of the island. In 1678 the militia for the island consisted of thirteen divisions or companies. The lists enumerate for each division the white and negro men, women, and children.²⁸ The number of divisions here corresponds approximately to the number of divisions identified above by analysis of land boundaries. Possibly some of the largest land divisions were served by more than one division or company of people. The location of some of the divisions can be identified by correlation of personal names in the militia lists with those in land titles.

In early and later land titles and today, the island is divided into five parishes. Plotting of the parish boundaries in relationship to those of the eleven divisions reveals that the boundaries of the former are co-terminous with the boundaries of the land divisions. Each parish is therefore constituted of one (Charlestown) or more divisions (Fig. 4).

In the early 18th century visitors to Nevis described the island as cleared almost to the top of the mountain.²⁹ This clearance can be argued from the above to have been accomplished within the context of the island divided into eleven divisions, certainly in existence by the 1670s. These divisions are therefore likely to represent the way in which the island was initially divided and parcelled into separate estates. Archaeological and documentary records together provide some evidence as to how this was accomplished. Except in the central southern division the principal land boundaries run inland from the coast, approximately at right angles to the shore at that point. Within each division



LEFT
Figure 3. The Divisions of Nevis, reconstructed from documentary sources, air photographs and field survey (author).



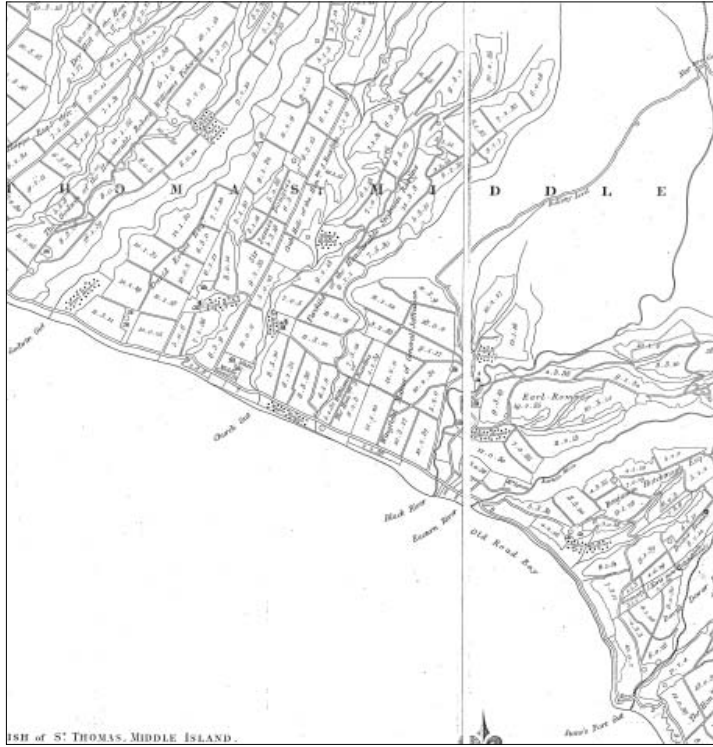
LEFT
Figure 4. The Parishes of Nevis (author).

the boundaries are remarkably consistent in following an identical compass bearing over distances of several miles (Fig. 3). How was such consistency achieved?

When first settled much of the island was densely forested. The consistency of the alignments over tracts of land up to four miles in extent along the shore was most probably achieved through the use of compass bearings. In some of the early land titles these compass bearings are actually given as a point of reference; the wording of the titles may in such cases be taken from the initial grants of land. For instance in 1728 the Windward Plantation in the Old Windward Division was said to be 'taking its beginning at the sea and running up south west half a point southerly to the farthest extent being the mountain'.³⁰

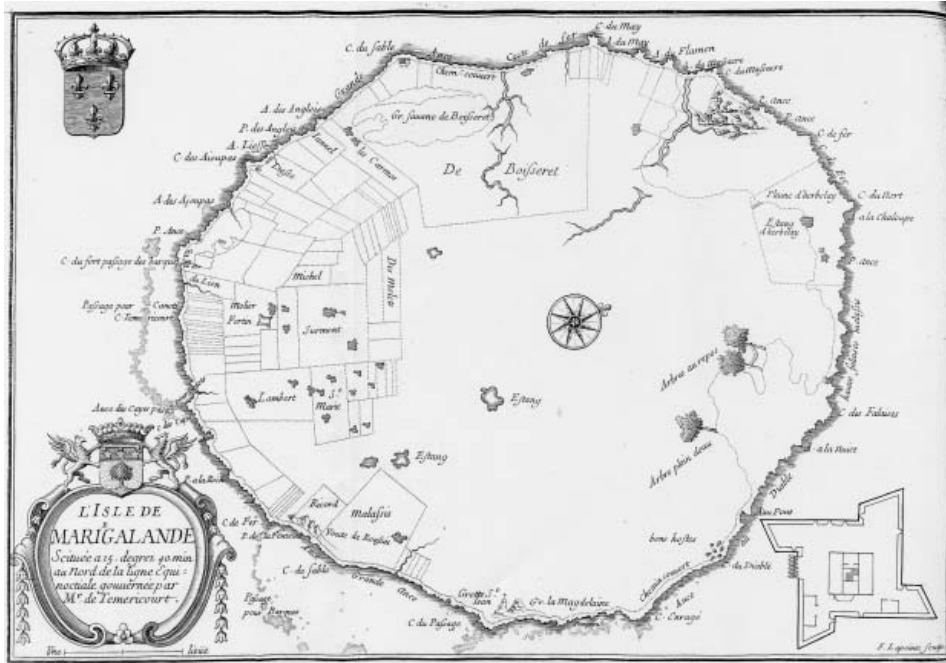
Nevis was one of the Caribee islands settled in the 1620s and 30s through the patent granted to James Hay, Earl of Carlisle. Archives relating to his life are held in the Hay of Houston collection in the National Archives of Scotland. These contain no direct evidence as to how land on the islands settled under his direction was actually apportioned, but do reveal that surveyors were employed. On Barbados in 1638, less than ten years after settlement of that island had commenced, one settler wrote to Archibald Hay expressing his concern 'that the surveyors would not bound out' part of his lands. The surveyor had demanded of him 1000 pounds of tobacco for laying out 1000 acres of land, but notwithstanding his agreement to pay, he still could not get the surveyor to do the work.³¹ On Nevis there was a similar consciousness of the need for estate boundaries to be confirmed by field survey. In 1676 the Assembly of Nevis ruled on the claim of one Captain William Digby touching the bounds of his Plantation. In 1643 the Assembly had adjudged that there must be 'an extent line' from Fig Tree Pond to Saddle Hill. In 1676, the present Governor had caused the Surveyor 'to draw a Platform', i.e. a plan, of all those Plantations that might cross one another. The Assembly now ordered that there be made 'an extent line' between certain Plantations from the Fig Tree Pond southerly down to Saddle Hill.³² Extent lines that formed the boundaries between divisions were called 'division lines'. In 1726 a plantation of Richard Abbott esq., c.140 acres in extent, was bounded on the east with 'the Division Line'.³³ Running north to south down the middle of the island was the centre line, mentioned in many land titles. For instance, in 1714 the estate of John Symonds at Batchelors Hall in the parish of St George was said to be bounded on the south-west with 'the centre line; in 1725 John Ward esq. held c.148 acres of land late of Sarah Houblon, bounded on the east with 'the centre line.'³⁴

The surveyors responsible for apportioning each estate were possibly working to a master plan. The earliest map to show Nevis in any detail has already been mentioned – Iles' map of 1871. However there was an earlier map, two centuries or more earlier, now lost but cited in at least two 17th-century records. Sir William Stapleton's 532 acre estate in St John's parish granted to him in 1678 had at an earlier date been on 'Mr Hiltons mapp ... Called by the name of Jennings and Balls Range'.³⁵ These same lands were held by one John Jennings by 1652. Hilton's map is also possibly mentioned in 1675 in a letter from Sir William Stapleton to his masters in London:³⁶



LEFT
Figure 5. St Kitts, the Wingfield and adjacent plantations, plan of 1828; note how the plantations of Wingfield Manor and Romney manor, two of the earliest on the island, are less regular than those to the north and south (McMahon 1828).

BELOW
Figure 6. Map of the island of Marie Galante, to the east of Guadeloupe, c. 1670 or earlier (du Tertre 1671, 360-1; reproduced by permission of the British Library).



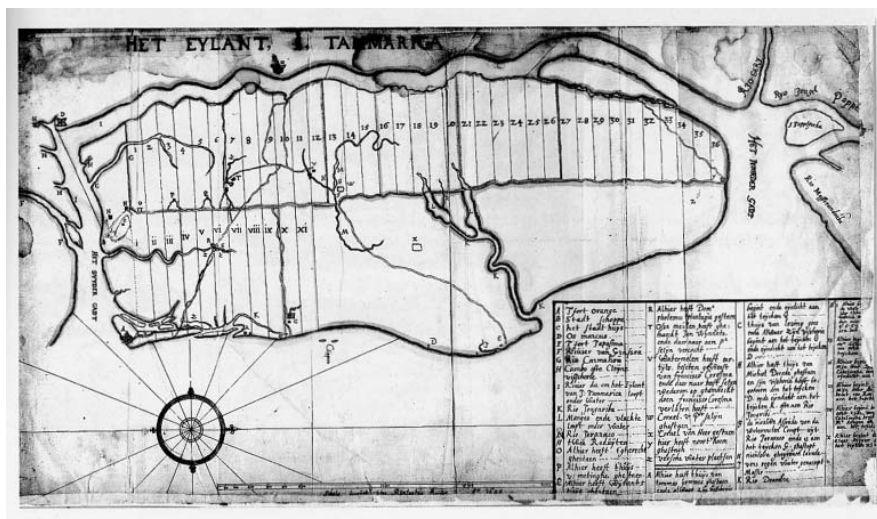


Figure 7. Plan for the division of land on the island of Itamaraca, off the coast of Brazil, 1648 (Algemeen Rijksarchief, Den Haag, VEL 707).

Nevis Jun.9.1675

My lords

By the annexed papers whereof here is a list I hope you have full satisfaction in what is required of me in your commands of 27.Oct.74, with an addition of acts and maps

Following sundry matters Stapleton annexed various papers – these included:

Narrative of St Xprs and Nevis by John Hilton old planter.

Narrative of St Xprs by ancient inhabitants to which is annexed the articles betwixt the English and the French at the taking of it or rather surpriseng of itt contrarie to old articles.

Mapp of Nevis

[and]

Mapp of Montserrat

The ‘Narrative of St Xprs and Nevis by John Hilton old planter’ is probably the account published by Tarlow, from the manuscript in the Egerton MSS in the British Library. The map of Nevis cannot today be found in the Public Record Office / National Archives, but the map of Montserrat may survive, as the series of seven scenographic coastal profiles in the Blathwayt Atlas in the John Carter Brown Library, Providence, Rhode Island. These profiles were discussed at length by Lydia Pulsipher and dated to 1673, just two years before Stapleton’s letter; Pulsipher identified Sir William Stapleton as the probable author of the coastal profiles, and of a scenographic map of the fortification at Pelican Point, Charlestown, Nevis.³⁷

Since Stapleton had access to Hilton's narrative, it is likely that he had access also to Hilton's map of Nevis. The map sent to London in 1675 could have been that prepared originally by Hilton, or Stapleton's updated version. Possibly Stapleton's own inspiration for preparing the coastal profiles of Montserrat came from seeing Hilton's earlier map of Nevis. Such a map would have been drawn in large part from the sea.³⁸ Hilton's map would then have further demonstrated, as many might anticipate, that the settlement, division and apportionment of Nevis and other islands was accomplished from the sea. Maps similar to the Montserrat coastal profiles would have been necessary for the initial settlement of the island. On Montserrat too, estates were laid out in long narrow strips running from the sea to the mountain.

Looking briefly at other islands and lands newly cleared and settled in the first half of the 17th century we can discern a similar pattern. On St Kitts the subdivision of the island is clear on McMahon's map of 1828. The least organised area of landscape is that around the Wingfield plantation, probably the first of the island plantations to be established (Fig. 5). On St Kitts too the island was subdivided into units known as divisions, both as units of land and as components of the militia. In 1711 John Helden conveyed to Peter Millotte a parcel of land in 'the Old Road Division and in the parish of St Thomas Middle Island'.³⁹ On Barbados the organisation of divisions and estates follows closely that of the parishes, as on Nevis.⁴⁰ Looking further afield we find a similar mode of land parcel allotment being made by the Massachusetts Bay Company in New Hampshire in the mid 17th century. In

Figure 8. The settlement of the north shore of the St Lawrence, 1641 (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris: Département des cartes et plans, portefeuille 200, pièce 5233).



the subdivision of the Squamscott Patent of the 1650s long narrow estates were laid out at right angles to the Great Bay and to the coast.⁴¹

The colonial landscapes of other European countries were often formed to similar principles. Both St Eustatius, a Dutch possession, and Marie Galante, a French island, were laid out in a similar way to Nevis (Fig. 6).⁴² Further afield Itamaraca, a Dutch island off the coast of Brazil, was similarly laid, as shown on a map of 1648 (Fig. 7).⁴³ On the north and south banks of the St Lawrence, the French subdivision of New France followed a similar pattern, recorded on a map of 1641 (Fig. 8).⁴⁴ Here the initial apportionment of land was probably achieved by survey undertaken initially from the wide estuary of the St Lawrence River.

CONCLUSIONS

The settlement of Nevis from 1628 onwards can be seen then in the wider context of contemporary European methodologies for land allotment. The processes of land division used by the surveyors of the Earl of Carlisle for islands such as Nevis, St Christopher, Montserrat and Barbados were similar to those being used for the settlement of French Canada, the French settlement of Marie Galante, the Portuguese settlement of Itamaraca, and the English settlement of the coast of the Massachusetts Bay Company. Plans for the division of an island or coast made from coastal profiles would have enabled settlement to proceed in an orderly and profitable manner.

Regularly laid out divisions and land parcels were very much part of the mentality of 17th-century enclosure. The surveyors of the Earl of Carlisle would have been familiar with the application of such principles in the contemporary English landscape: in the draining of the Fens, the enclosure of waste and the reorganisation and enclosure of agricultural land formerly farmed in scattered open strips.

On Nevis and on other islands of the Caribbean, many of the land divisions laid out from the 1620s onwards remain today as prominent features in the post-colonial landscape, as the divisions between ecclesiastical parishes, as the boundaries of properties and as the limits of land parcels. They form an important element in the historic landscape of the islands. These same land divisions and boundaries must also be considered as archaeological data, illuminating the first years of European settlement, the survey of the coast and hinterland from the sea, and the division of the land into estates and plantations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. Dunn 1973, 287.
2. Watts 1990, 335.
3. Watters 2001, 82-99.
4. Armstrong, 1990.
5. Handler & Lange 1978; Loftfield 2001.
6. Pulsipher & Goodwin 2001.
7. Barka 2001; unpublished MA dissertations in the library of William & Mary College.
8. Chiarelli 1999; Meniketti 1998.
9. Handler & Lange 1978.
10. Innis 1983 43-59.
11. Harlow (ed.) 1925; Hilton's account is BL, Egerton MSS 2395.
12. Ibid., 4.
13. Ibid., includes Sir Henry Colt's contemporary account of his voyage past Nevis to St Christopher in 1631.
14. Pares 1950; Johnston 1965; Mason 1993.
15. Ordnance Survey 1984.
16. Iles 1871.
17. Burdon 1920.
18. Barnett 1848.
19. Directorate of Overseas Surveys 1959, 1975 et al.
20. SRO, D/MW35/8a.
21. SuRO, HA178/1/56; Nevis Court House, Land Titles, Nevis Book 1, Old Manor 1893, Potworks 1904.
22. Formerly held by the Directorate of Overseas Surveys / Ordnance Survey, negatives now with the Government of St Kitts & Nevis.
23. Ibid.
24. JRL, Stapleton MSS, 2/1.
25. NCH, Common Records 1728-40, fol.21.
26. Bangor, Stapleton-Cotton MSS 1(1).
27. *Caribbeana* 3, 55 (*Caribbeana: being miscellaneous papers relating to the history, genealogy, topography, and antiquities of the British West Indies ...* Edited by Vere Langford Oliver, vols. 1-6. Jan. 1909 - Oct. 1919)
28. *Caribbeana* 3, 27-35, 70-80.
29. Smith 1740.
30. NCH, Common Records 1728-40, fols.87-91.
31. Hay of Houston MSS, letter of 24 May 1638, Mr Austen to Archibald Hay.
32. PRO Col. Entry Bk., No. 49, pp. 13, 14.
33. NCH, Common Records 1728-40, fols.92-7.
34. NCH, Common Records 1728-40, fols.39 and 98.
35. JRL, Stapleton MSS, 2/1.
36. PRO CO/1/34, item 85.
37. Pulsipher 1987.
38. Ibid., 414-6.
39. NCH, Common Records 1728-40, fol. 10.
40. Watts 1990, 205, Fig.5.5.
41. Merrill, Phineas, 1793. Town of Stratham, New Hampshire (copy annotated by Bruce Parker to show land divisions, archives of the Great Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, New Hampshire)
42. Eastman 1996, Fig. 9; du Tertre 1671, 360-1.
43. Zandvliet 1998, 203.
44. Bibliothèque Nationale, Département des cartes et plans, portefeuille 200, pièce 5233 (map of the St Lawrence, 1641); Département des cartes et plans, Service hydrographique de la Marine, portefeuille 127.2. (map of the St Lawrence 1709).

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- Suffolk Record Office, HA178/1/56
- University of Wales, Bangor. Stapleton-Cotton MSS: 1(1)

ABBREVIATIONS

JRL John Rylands Library
 NCH Nevis Court House
 SRO Southampton Record Office
 SuRO Suffolk Record Office

MAPS

- Barnett, Captain E. & assistants, HMS Thunder 1848, St Christopher and Nevis, 1:56,700, London: Admiralty (PRO WO78/603).
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