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The Importunate Revolution on the Main

I

On 11 November 1814, a tiny boat arrived at Trinidad’s Port of Spain. On board the vessel was a small, bedraggled group of free coloured women and their children. It may have been like any other arrival that month – Port of Spain was, after all, a very busy harbour – but for the fact that those on board had come from Venezuela and that, for the last two months at least, this traffic had been increasing alarmingly. Only days before, the harbour authorities had begun to collect the names and details of those who stepped ashore in an effort to provide some much-needed regulation and to try and control what was fast becoming an exodus.

By 1808 the Venezuela that Governor Picton had known, with its social tensions, spies and subterfuge, had finally collapsed into what would become 12 years of bloody civil war – the most violent of all the wars for America. The Venezuelan Civil War was an ugly, often three-sided affair that dragged on almost interminably, drawing in ever-larger groups of people until it eventually engulfed, in one war of independence or another, the whole continent. Towns and villages on the coast opposite the Southern Caribbean changed hands repeatedly and whole provinces were destroyed. Frightened residents on nearby islands could see the fires of burning settlements just across the water, the nervous mood only punctuated by vicious tales of murder and systematic rape.¹ A quarter of all Venezuelans would eventually die in this terrible, revolutionary conflict. The Venezuelan Civil War disgorged thousands of people onto neighbouring shores, whose presence is often ignored in the historiography yet whose transience and independence is a distinguishing feature of the region.

¹ K. Candlin, *The Last Caribbean Frontier, 1795–1815* © Kit Candlin 2012
One of the passengers on the little boat from Venezuela was Rosette Buipon, who came ashore with her mother, Florence, and her three children: eight-year-old Antoine, seven-year-old Jose and five-year-old Jon. Born on French Guadalupe, Rosette and Florence had, many years before, travelled the length of the Caribbean to start a new life on the coast of South America. Florence had once had a husband, but he had been dead for some time. His wife and his daughter had looked after themselves. For a few years, these two women had stuck together, mainly living in a ‘small place on the coast’ that had been given to them by Florence’s sister. When asked who the father of the children was, Rosette replied that, despite the closeness in their ages, they each had a different father, men who were now nowhere to be seen.²

With this group came two other free coloured women, Marie Detacilland and her ten-year-old cousin Hélène. Marie had originally come from Trinidad and so, in a sense, many years later, she was returning ‘home’ from Guyria on the mainland. Like Rosette, she too had no husband to speak of and travelled alone with just Hélène, her ward. Marie had been looking after her mother, but following her death, and with the deteriorating situation in Spanish Venezuela, she and Hélène had decided to take what they could and get passage to Trinidad and the British Empire.³

II

Buried deep in the recesses of Britain’s National Archives is a box marked out only by its banal serial code of 385-1. In it is a series of documents, bound up loosely as a large folio that has probably not been opened since the day it was completed, 190 years before. Looking like a large family bible, 385-1 is kind of harbour record for Port of Spain written up between late 1814 and 1816. It is over 300 pages long and contains the details of just under 900 people who had fled to the British colony from the violence of the Venezuelan Civil War—folks just like Marie Detacilland, Rosette Buipon and her mother. Many of these people were in desperate straits, having fled quickly from the life they had known. Arriving at the Venezuelan town of Guyria and other points on the coast, they had made a perilous journey, often in small, open boats, across the Gulf of Paria to the safety of the British Empire on the opposite shore. It was a migration of people that had been a trickle in the years up to 1814, but by the end of that year had become a flood, with scores arriving every month. There were other islands that were also