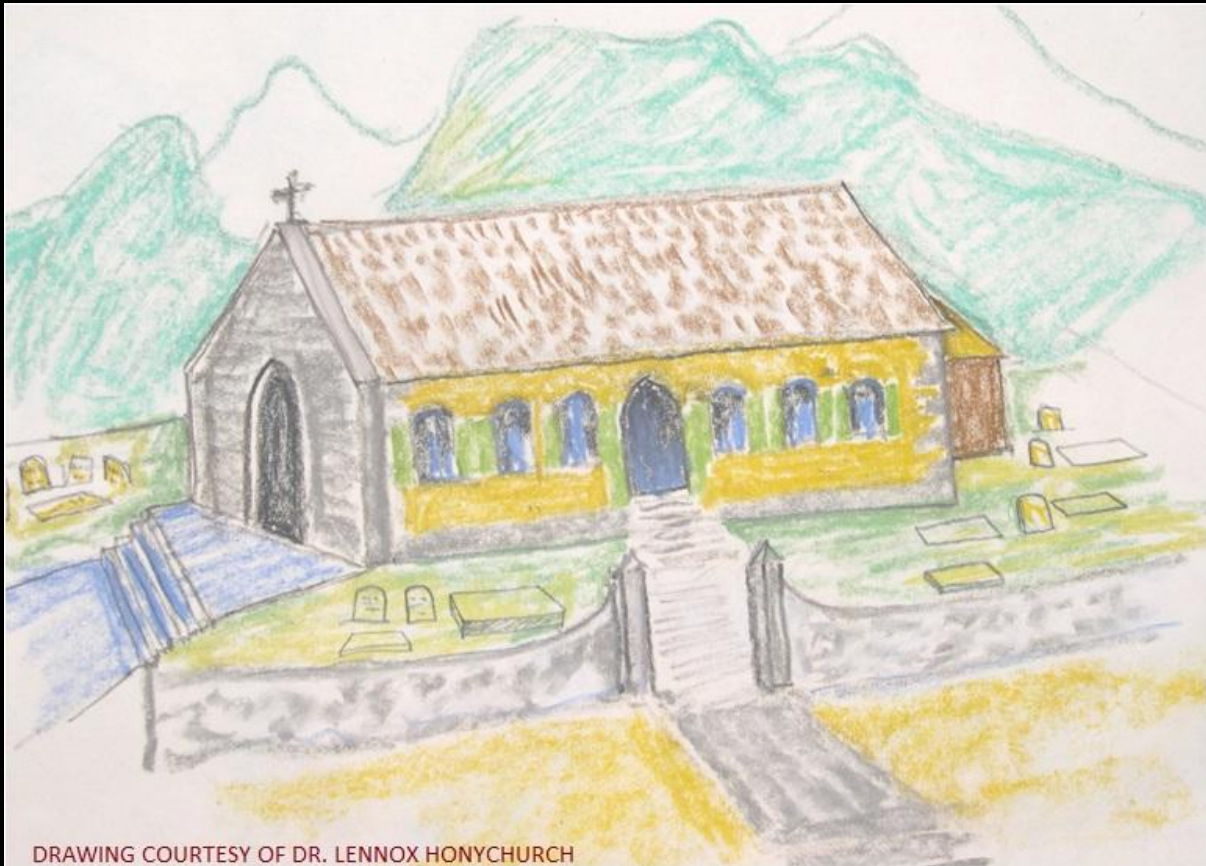


THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL

and terror in the streets of Roseau part I

by Bernard Lauwyck



DRAWING COURTESY OF DR. LENNOX HONYCHURCH

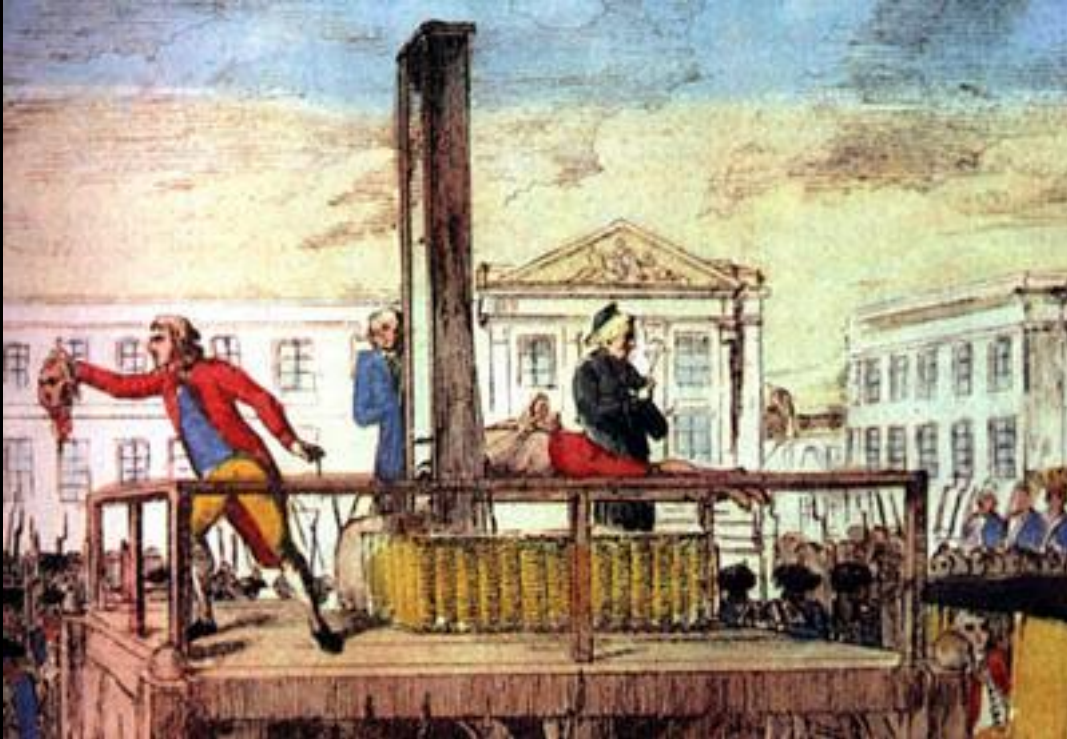
The old catholic cemetery around the Our Lady of Fair Haven parish church in Roseau

The old catholic cemetery was located around the old Roseau parish church, later to be the cathedral of Our Lady of Fair Haven. As the building expanded, after the emancipation of slaves in 1834 and again after becoming the cathedral of Roseau in 1850, we presume that a lot of these graves were covered up by the cathedral floor. It remains to be seen if, during the present renovation works, evidence of this old grave yard will turn up. In this article I want to tell you about a time of terror in Roseau: the arrival of more than 3000 to 4000 refugees from Martinique in June 1793 and the ravages caused by yellow fever among them, which caused 800 to be buried in this old catholic cemetery.

To understand where these refugees came from we need to look at the history of France. Martinique was a royal domain. The anti-monarchy, anti-clerical, anti-slavery ideas of the French Revolution, which started in Paris in 1789, did not take long to divide Martinique between the revolutionary government, supported by the “Pierrotins” or inhabitants of Saint-Pierre, and the royalist békés or large landholders of white extraction.

On April 4, 1792, the French Parliament decreed that every colored person (“gens de couleur”) was a free person. This caused huge resistance in the french

colonies, especially in Martinique, where the nobility and large landholders, calling themselves “patriots”, organised a contra- revolutionary rebellion. As the revolutionary forces prevailed the Martinique General Assembly (“Assemblée de la Martinique”) recognized the French Republic on January 9, 1793. This put an end to the monarchy.



king Louis XVI lost his head in the guillotine

The french king Louis XVI lost his head in the guillotine on 21 January 1793. This created an important symbolic break with the old regime. The period known as “The Terror” (1793-1794) started in Paris. Heads of the nobility of France kept rolling day after day. Because of this, the nobility and upper class in Martinique took flight in terror. As St. Lucia was at that time also under french revolutionary rule, Dominica was their closest and easiest option to flee to. Some fled as far as Trinidad.

Redemptorist Father Proesmans wrote in his unpublished history of Dominica that around 3000 to 4000 refugees from Martinique arrived in Roseau around June 10, 1793.

Dr. James Clarke, a Scottish medical doctor, was a witness to this event and wrote “*a treatise on the yellow fever in the island of Dominica*” (published in London in 1797). He wrote about the arrival of numerous refugees from Martinique, which filled the streets and houses of Roseau. A few days after their arrival, by the 15th of June 1793, Yellow Fever exploded in the overpopulated town of Roseau. (see “*Du typhus d’Amérique ou fièvre jaune*” by Victor-Francois BALLY published in 1814, Paris). People started to get sick and many died.

Dr. Clarke noted that the spread of the sickness was limited to the small town of Roseau. During the month of July 1793, 200 english soldiers and 800 refugees from Martinique died, regardless whether they were white, colored or black slaves, who had arrived with their masters. Also newly arrived slaves from Africa were not spared. The local population however was not affected by this epidemic, only the recently arrived people. (see J.J.J. Cornilliac in his "*Recherches chronologique et historiques sur l'origine et la propagation de la fièvre jaune dans les antilles*" (1867).

What made the terror in the streets of Roseau still greater is that, at that time, the causes of yellow fever were still unknown. In his work "*Yellow Fever*" author R. La Roche speculated that Roseau used to contain a number of swamps which bred diseases. They had however been filled long before 1793. In "*An essay on the disease called yellow fever*" dated 1821 by E. N. Bancroft, the exceptional warm year was blamed: "Dr James Clarke in his treatise of the yellow fever which prevailed in the same and following years in the neighbouring island of Dominica says from the month of January to the 15th of June 1793, when this fever first broke out, the weather was extremely calm and much hotter than usual in this and the neighbouring islands. There was little rain, he adds, till the 15th of October, at which time this fever became less violent here and about the beginning of November it ceased altogether"

We know since 1900 that yellow fever is transmitted by a mosquito named "Aedes aegypti" which is the same mosquito that spreads dengue these days.

Father Proesmans published the names of the deceased in "one month of burial of French aristocrats (as he called them), in the old Roseau catholic cemetery in July 1793" (see *Pierre Baudrier: Fièvre jaune et Martiniquais réfugiés à la Dominique en 1793*). More died in August and September 1793.

What happened to the surviving refugees from Martinique, we do not know. The British Navy invaded Martinique with the help of the royalists in February 1794, the same month that the revolutionary government in Paris declared the abolition of slavery in all french territories. If the surviving refugees returned to Martinique they enjoyed only a few years of tranquillity as the british occupation only lasted 8 years from 1794-1802. But by then the "revolutionary terror" in France had somewhat subsided.

Yellow fever reared its ugly head again in Dominica in 1794 and later in 1841.....

Join me in the next week's chronicle to find out more.

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