

Castries and the St. Lucia Renaissance

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In 1950, the year of the founding of the St. Lucia Arts Guild, there was little to suggest that St. Lucia was about to embark on a renaissance and that it was only 42 years away from winning not one but two Nobel Prizes. In fact there was little in St. Lucia's past that would have singled it out for such accomplishments. During the colonial era, unprecedented Carib resistance to the invading Europeans had meant that St. Lucia was one of the last of the Caribbean islands where European settlement took hold. And even after the subjugation of the Caribs, the island's rugged and mountainous terrain hindered the rate and extent of settlement. Moreover, the epic rivalry between France and England for the island that lasted well over a century, during which the island changed hands between the two nations no less than fourteen times, not only retarded the building of schools, infrastructure, and administrative institutions, but the ensuing instability, chaos, and prolonged periods of sovereign neutrality made the island a haven for deserters, smugglers and people fleeing from bankruptcy.

Dunstan St. Omer, however, has presented the contrary view that it is this very historical disposition that has set St. Lucia apart and helped explain the island's great artistic feats. He said that St. Lucia is an artistic country, and he believes St. Lucians are a free spirited and aristocratic people and this accounts for why such a tiny country like St. Lucia has produced two Nobel Laureates. Here is how he explained it. "You see although we were poor we were never really suppressed, at least not as much as some of the other Caribbean islands. St. Lucia had a history where slavery never lasted long. The longest continuous period of slavery is sixty years. Thanks to the French Revolution, St. Lucia was one of the first countries in the new world to gain its independence. Well they took it back from us, but during the French Revolution the fellows came and establish liberty, equality, and fraternity. St. Lucians have that kind of *logei*, that kind of pride, because for the most part they have always been a free people. When you are free, your mind is big, you see universal, nothing you see outside is bigger than you. How can such a tiny island as St. Lucia produce two Nobel Laureates? Derek Walcott is the mainstay of English literature today. How come a little country like this produce such greatness. St. Lucians may admire you but they don't worship you. There is a quality, an aristocratic trait in St. Lucians. Every St. Lucian is an aristocrat."

History may be on the side of St. Omer, at least concerning the relative freedom of St. Lucians, because St. Lucia did face certain situations most of which hinted at above that would suggest that slavery existed for a shorter period of time than in some of the other islands, and that the slaves faced an environment that afforded greater means of slackening the grip of slavery. First, because of the relatively greater hostilities of St. Lucian Caribs toward the invading Europeans, followed by lengthy squabbles between the French and English for St. Lucia, the island was one of the last West Indies territories where sugar and hence slavery took hold on a large scale. Yet, even after sugar and slavery were firmly established, the constant fighting between France and Britain for the island and the accompanying changing of ownership introduced frequent interruption in plantation life. Many slaves seized upon the chaos that accompanied these interruptions to escape from the plantations. Furthermore, unlike some of the other Caribbean islands like Barbados, Antigua, and St. Kitts, which were relatively flat and thus most of the land area came under sugar cultivation, the mountainous terrain of St. Lucia meant that large portions of land were deemed marginal and unsuitable for plantation agriculture, and

therefore were available to the slaves for planting their own crops, thus limiting their dependence on the plantations for their survival. Also, the mountains made it easier for the slaves to escape to freedom and to sustain that freedom. In fact, in his book *They Called Us Brigands: The Saga of St. Lucia's Freedom Fighters*, Robert Devaux reveals that, considering the number of discovered maroon sites, moronage activity was most prominent in Jamaica and St. Lucia. All this suggests that slavery may not have bitten as hard in St. Lucia as in some of the other islands, and so St. Omer may be correct in suggesting that St. Lucians have always enjoyed relatively greater freedom than have some of their Caribbean neighbors.

St. Lucia an Unlikely Place for A Cultural Renaissance

Nonetheless, if one is unwilling to conclude that St. Lucia's seemingly more benign slavery helps explain its artistic output, then one may agree that its history was less likely than not to make it the Caribbean island to lead a cultural renaissance.

In fact, for many other reasons, when the St. Lucia Arts Guild was formed in 1950, few would have picked St. Lucia as the Caribbean island that would lead the way in West Indies theatre or as the country that 42 years later would produce not one but two Nobel Laureates. To begin with, St. Lucia was by no means the most populous. In 1950, with a population of 79,000, four of the twelve British West Indies territories that are now independent had more people than St. Lucia. Neither was St. Lucia the most developed or prosperous, for as we have seen St. Lucia was not only one of the last islands to be properly settled but during the colonial era it was one of the most neglected and least developed.

St. Lucia's educational system was by no means the pick of the basket. For a long time the chaos and discontinuity caused by the island constantly changing hands between two nations of different languages disrupted schooling and retarded the establishment of schools and other supportive institutions. The mountainous terrain of St. Lucia was also an impediment, increasing the cost of transportation and the building of infrastructure. And, after the English finally gained lasting control of the island, the conflict that arose from imposing an English administration on a largely French speaking country, and the necessity of switching the official language of state from French to English, must have also retarded schooling in St. Lucia.

Moreover, unlike most of the West Indies, the fact that the English settlers never saw St. Lucia as their home, but a place to make a fortune and retire in wealth and luxury in England; or, in the case of civil servants and administrators, a place to serve as a career stepping stone, meant that they were not very committed to providing schools and other infrastructural institutions. So the British were more given to sending their off-springs to British schools than building schools in St. Lucia. Accordingly, the task of educating the recently freed slaves fell mostly to the generosity of religious institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church. In 1950 there were only two secondary schools in St. Lucia and both were founded and administered by the Roman Catholic Church. Both schools were in Castries, so given the difficulty back then of commuting from the out districts to Castries, two-thirds of the population didn't have ready access to a secondary school.

By way of comparison, consider Barbados. Not only did the first British sailors to land on Barbados in the 1620s find the island uninhabited and therefore did not have to deal with the Caribs who on St. Lucia had fiercely repelled European invasions, but from the arrival of the first British settlers in 1627 to independence in 1966, the island was under uninterrupted British

rule. Throughout this time Barbados was a self-funding colony with considerable local autonomy and stable administrations as reflected in the fact that its House of Assembly, which began in 1639, is the third oldest legislative body in the Western Hemisphere, preceded only by Bermuda's legislature and the Virginia House of Burgesses. This suggests that the island's British settlers may have been much more committed than those of most other islands to taking up lasting residence. This historical aberration along with Barbados's relatively flat terrain help explain why from early on the island has enjoyed a wealth of infrastructure and have been known as having both one of the highest rates of literacy and one of the best public transportation systems in the Caribbean, if not the world.

Likewise, St. Lucia wasn't blessed with literary magazines like the *Beacon* of Trinidad, the *Bim* of Barbados, the *Kyk-over-al* of Guyana and the *Focus* of Jamaica that made significant contributions to the advancement of art and literature in the region. Neither had it coughed up writers of the stature of Claude McKay of Jamaica, Jean Rhys of Dominica, or CLR James of Trinidad and Tobago, to lay a foundation upon which members of the St. Lucia Arts Guild could build on. Nor did St. Lucia have any great institutions of culture, for even today, much less in the 1950s, the country has no museums, or theatre houses, or concert halls to speak of. A fact that Derek Walcott laments as one of the great travesties of St. Lucian governments. The folk Research Center, founded by Monsieur Dr. Patrick Anthony to help preserve the island's folk traditions, was established in 1973, just about the time the St. Lucia Arts Guild was no longer functioning. Likewise, the Cultural Department renamed the Cultural Development Foundation was established long after the St. Lucia Arts Guild had already weaved its magic. In fact, it can be argued that it was the St. Lucia Arts Guild that inspired the founding of these institutions and not the other way around.

And it cannot be said that St. Lucia had a more artistically enabling environment than other Caribbean islands. St. Lucian authors and newspaper publishers would be the first to admit that St. Lucia as a reading public leaves a lot to be desired. In many of Derek Walcott's interviews he bemoans the governments' shortsightedness in their lack of support for the arts, especially when simply giving a few art or writing scholarships each year to deserving members of the art community could make a huge difference on the cultural landscape. The Nobel Laureate is not alone. He is joined by a host of artists who constantly criticize the government and the business sector for their neglect of the arts, and the masses for their preference of events appealing to the senses over those that feed the intellect such as literary and theatrical events.

Neither is there any evidence to suggest that St. Lucians were any more enlightened than citizens of other Caribbean islands. For despite the cultural renaissance and the island's more recent institutionalized (the Folk Research Center) embracing of its folk culture, and despite all the race consciousness movements that have taken place such as the Marcus Garvey back to Africa movement, the civil rights movement, and the black power and Rastafarian movements, the legacies of slavery and colonialism in the form of self-loathing and subtle racial dispositions linger. Parents still favor their "light" skin children over their "dark" skin offspring, "straight hair" and "fair skin" as evidence of beauty are still part of the lingo, up to the 1970s the front desk and teller counters of banks were largely populated by young women meeting the "fair skin" and "nice hair" description. And one wonders whether it's simply coincidental that since the political reign (1951 to 1964) of George Charles, the only politicians who have successfully contested elections as leaders of their party and then headed the government for a term or more, namely Sir John Compton and Dr. Kenny Anthony, could have passed as mulattos. Additionally, one may even be tempted to conclude that the vast majority of

the population are anti-intellectual. The willingness of businesses and even government institutions to sponsor carnival, pageant shows, and other events appealing to the senses over events that feed the intellect such as literary and theatrical events, is one such indication. The regularity with which the island's most famous journalist daily lambasts the country's college graduates and intellectuals as if he has some kind of grudge against them is another. And the aggressiveness with which political constituencies thwart the will of their party executives to offer candidates with college education by opting for less capable and less educated but more accessible candidates is yet another.

So back in 1950, when the St. Lucia Arts Guild embarked on its epic journey of capturing and giving artistic expression to the very essence of St. Lucian society, there was little to suggest St. Lucia as the Caribbean island to lead West Indies theatre or to win two Nobel Prizes within a generation. How such a small island can give rise to such artistic and intellectual prowess is likely to remain a mystery, unless if one was to accept Dunstan St. Omer's theory that since slavery in St. Lucia was relatively benign, St. Lucians have always enjoyed greater freedom of spirit which has imbued them with boundless creativity and imagination, the very stuff that greatness and Nobel Prize winners are made of.

Addressing similar issues, Derek Walcott was much more circumspect. He has attributed his gift to genetics, to a nurturing and supportive artistic home environment, to a rigorous secondary education steeped in Latin and a reading of the classics, to knowing early on that what he wanted to do with his life was write, and to having the good fortune of being born and raised in a land of such breathtaking and dazzling beauty that one is left with no choice but to try and encapsulate or give expression to that beauty. And on top of that for this land culturally speaking to be so freshly made that it was upon him that the Adamic tasks of naming things fell.

Castries an Overwhelming Choice to Birth a Renaissance

St. Lucia may not have been the most likely of the West Indies territories to lead West Indian theatre or to win Nobel Prizes, but once the powers that be had given St. Lucia the nod, of the island's ten districts Castries would have no doubt been their overwhelming choice to birth a renaissance and Nobel Laureates. Situated at the northwest end of St. Lucia, Castries the capital city, has been by far the nation's most populous town. Home to the island's busiest seaport and airport, Castries is also St. Lucia's commercial and financial center and along with the adjacent district of Gros Islet serves as the hub of the nation's tourism industry.

Yet the Castries area must not have strike the first wave of European sailors as an agreeable place for the seat of government nor for the commercial and financial lifeblood of a country, nor for the making of a renaissance, for they found a bay mostly under water, hemmed in by mountains and populated by mangrove swamps. It experienced high rainfalls and trapped by mountains provided little relief from the oppressive tropical heat and humidity. Situated in a flood plain made worst by poor drainage, it was prone to flooding and standing water that presented a constant threat of water borne diseases as cholera and yellow fever.

The Castries Bay was so waterlogged that to build the Chaussee throughway, the road strip had to be elevated above the level of the swamp, and in developing the town, instead of land, the authorities gave settlers an expanse of water which they had to displace before considering themselves owning usable land. Even after some settlement, the area stretching from

Micoud Street to the port was still under water, and for a long time Jeremie Street, one of the town's main streets, was called *Rue des Mangles*, the street that run along the mangroves. It is no wonder that up to the late 18th century, although Castries was the military and administrative center, the southwest town of Soufriere was still the island's most prosperous and populous settlement.

But in those days of European conquest and rivalry, gaining or claiming territory was one thing, holding onto it was another, and who controlled the waterways invariably ruled the land. So obviously these disadvantages were pale in comparison to the strategic and trading advantages Castries offered with its easily defended, deep water, natural harbor. The uniqueness and strategic value of such a harbor no doubt partly explained the constant battles and squabbles between the French and the English over the island. So it is safe to say that Castries owed most of its development and prominence to its harbor.

In fact, the Castries bay with its protective harbor and its then abundance of seafood and ample supply of water provided by the La Pansee and Morne Dudon streams, had been attracting people and serving as a place to congregate long before any permanent European settlement. Early on it provided refuge for adventurers, freebooters, and pirates seeking a safe haven, and served as a place to anchor and stock up on fresh water and supplies and to repair and ready boats for the next sailing. Suggestive of its original use, the bay was first called La Carenage, a name given to it by the French to mean a place for careening and repairing. Similarly, its motto was: *Statio Haud Malefida Carinis*, A Safe Harbor for Ships.

Port Castries Key to the Cities Prominence

Once settlement and the laying down of national stakes took hold, Castries and its harbor gained greater importance. In the 19th century, serving the northwest region from the Cul-de-Sac Valley to Gros Islet, the port became the island's principal dock for shipping agricultural products. Ships brought in passengers and manufactured goods and left burdened with produce from the estates. To facilitate these operations, the port underwent successive stages of development. Warehouses sprang up, a northern wharf was added in 1886 to accommodate large freighters, the Prince Albert Basin where schooners and coastal boats docked was filled in to create more wharf space. Soon, as a trading and ship repairing center with commercial warehouse facilities, Castries became one of the busiest ports in the Caribbean. Moreover, the advantages of functioning as the island's administrative center and possessing what may have been the Caribbean's most prized port, made Castries the port of entry and the windfall beneficiary of large and eventful port and military operations that further expanded the population and importance of the town and brought the population into greater contact or interaction with the outside world. Around 1863, as the only port in the Caribbean that could accommodate the Royal Navy, Port Castries was modified to serve as a major coal refueling station for British naval and maritime vessels. Ships brought in coal that was piled on the pier into mountains that dwarfed not only the waterfront but the coal-bearing ships themselves, and then subsequently loaded unto coal steamers calling in for refueling. The coaling station operation was a labor intensive affair: all the unloading and then loading of the coals was done by armies of women carrying hundred-weight basket of coals on their heads and men filling the baskets and helping to lift the baskets unto the women's head. Thus both the construction that went into transforming the port into a coaling station and the coaling operation created

considerable employment and migration to Castries from other parts of the island.

Twenty-five years later, in 1888, the British spent five million pounds establishing a naval garrisoned station (spread across the hills of the Morne and La Toc and the Vigie peninsula) to house the 1st battalion of the West Indies Regiment. The brick buildings in these areas that once garrisoned the troops are still standing but are now home to educational and training facilities including St. Mary's College, Sir Arthur Lewis Community College, the School of Music and the police training school. Some of the canons and other such installations of the West Indies Regiment and of other previous military initiatives have become tourist attractions. The construction and subsequent operation of the naval station created an employment boom that attracted workers not just from the villages and countryside of St. Lucia but from neighboring islands like Barbados.

In 1941, as part of its World War II efforts, the Americans leased from the British 221 acres of land in the neighboring district of Gros Islet, which they promptly transformed into a Naval Air Base. The construction and operation of the base represented another source of employment and draw of people to the Castries-Gros Islet corridor.

Taking off in the early 1950s, bananas quickly replaced the failing sugar industry as the island's main export and source of income and employment. Coinciding with the growth of the banana industry, a banana shed was added to the wharf to allow Castries to serve as a banana shipping point. Bananas were trucked from the countryside to the port, off loaded and stacked under the shed, and when the Guest banana boat called to port an army of women, scurrying like ants, carried the bananas on their heads, in much the same way their coal-carrying counterparts had done a decade or two before, to the entrance of the boat where a chain of men relayed the bananas onto the ship's storage facility. This operation continued into the wee hours of the morning until every single stem of bananas was onboard the ship. Banana shipping operations served as yet another draw of people to Castries.

In modern times, with Castries and the adjacent town of Gros Ilet serving as the hub of the St. Lucia tourism industry, the port was further modified. Pointe Seraphine, which includes a dock and shopping mall, was built across from the harbor to allow cruise ships to dock comfortably, and a second shopping mall, La Place Carenage, geared towards visitors was built on the wharf. Visitors from the French island of Martinique represented another source of tourism, which along with travel to and from Martinique by St. Lucians and other nationals contributed to a booming ferry trade between the two islands. By then the banana industry had declined considerably and was a distance second to tourism as the leading source of income and employment. With the contraction of the banana industry, Castries no longer served as a banana shipment point, so the banana shed was transformed into a full-fledged ferry terminal to serve the hundreds of weekly ferry passengers traveling to and from Martinique.

Clearly, from the very beginning Castries' prized harbor has been the linchpin of the settlement and development of Castries. Its construction and operations and the military establishments and activities it engendered acted as a magnet, drawing people to Castries from other parts of St. Lucia, the Caribbean and beyond. Up to the establishment of the St. Lucia Arts Guild, sea-travel by interisland schooners was one of the few means by which Caribbean nationals could visit other islands. As to be expected, Port Castries was at the center of this interisland travel. More recently, with the advent of cruise ship tourism and ferry trade between St. Lucia and Martinique, Port Castries is playing a significant role in the development of the island's tourism industry.

All these port and affiliated activities have brought a steady stream of people to Castries from the Caribbean and elsewhere, representing different ways of life, different aesthetics, and bringing news of the outside world: the latest trends in art, music, and fashion, and political movements and ideologies. Having greater exposure to the cross currents of world news, trends and ideas, meant that it was Castries folks who would be the most influenced by the outside world, expanding their realm of possibilities, raising their expectations of life and dissatisfaction with the status quo and fueling their artistic inspirations. All this suggest that Castries, more than any other part of the island, offered the best climate or breeding ground for the instigation of a renaissance.

Harbour Log, a poem by John Robert Lee on the actual log of Port Castries on a day in August 1955, provides a sense of the vitality and all encompassing nature of the port in the days before air travel.

In Port yesterday:

Schooners: Augustus B. Compton,

Acadius, Adalina,

Columbia, Enterprise,

S. Enid, Rebecca E. Mitchell.

Steamer: Electra.

Sloop: Lady Edwards.

Motor Vessels: Biscaya, Privateer, Nanin, Wanderer.

Yacht: Phenix.

Arrivals:

Motor Vessel Lady Stedfast, 87 tons, under capt. L.A. Marks, from St. Vincent, consigned to Peter & Co.

Departures:

Schooner Grenville Lass to Martinique.

Motor Vessel Fernwood to Barbados.

Expected:

Motor Vessel Nina on August 11.

H.M.S. Burghead Bay on August 24.

Meanwhile:

Sylvestre Jn Baptiste, alias Master,

Seaman of Mary Ann Street, Castries,

was found guilty by the Magistrate in the First District Court,

on a charge of unlawfully assaulting and beating

Dorothy Drayton, Laundress of Brazil Street, Castries,

on July 23.

The Castries of St. Omer's Childhood

In the decades leading to the formation of the St. Lucia Arts Guild, Castries was a town of four primary schools, two secondary schools (St. Mary's College and St. Joseph's Convent), and three churches, namely the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist Churches. The overwhelming majority of the population were Roman Catholic, so the Roman Catholic Church dominated the social and religious life of the city. It was an age before access to television, when a radio (and after 1954, transistor radio), or a gramophone was a prize possession.

St. Omer describes the Castries that he grew up in as a very quiet, clean, peaceful, beautiful, poetic and even romantic little town with a village atmosphere. St. Lucia was so poor that many people in Castries walked barefooted, mothers sewed their family's clothes, and children made their own toys. But "we were always very proud, never bitter about the situation. I can never understand why we weren't bitter."

However, according to St. Omer, Castries was a virtually crime-free town of kerosene street lanterns, of one or two cars, where the garbage was taken away by a horse cart, and the sewage system consisted of porters (whom residents often referred to as the bucket brigade) moving from house to house at 9PM, picking up night soil, loading it onto a sloop that dumped its cargo out in the open sea.

St. Omer said, "Castries and St. Lucia were 99 percent Roman Catholic. The church was the centre of the life of the people. Everything was centred around it. There was the Anglican Church but it was more like the church of the colonials. The St. Lucians who worshipped there were more of Bajan or Antiguan descent. St. Lucians for the most part were Roman Catholic people. When one said Roman Catholic they meant a real, original St. Lucian."

St. Omer said that because of its hectic port activities Castries always had lots of sailors and there were plenty of rum shops to cater for the sailors' seemingly unquenchable appetite for women and alcohol.

Adding to St. Omer's impression of Castries, in *The Light of the World*, Derek Walcott remembered:

... a childhood of wandering gas lanterns
hung on poles at street corners, and the old roar
of vendors and traffic, when the lamplighter climbed,
hooked the lantern on its pole and moved on to another,
and the children turned their faces to its moth, their
eyes white as their nighties; the Market
itself was closed in its involved darkness
and the shadows quarreled for bread in the shops,
or quarrelled for the formal custom of quarrelling
in the electric rum shops. I remember the shadows.

Castries Most Conducive to Development of the Arts

Besides port related implications, there were other realities that made Castries the more likely setting for a St. Lucia Renaissance. In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, Jared Diamond contends that, all other things equal, technology develops fastest in large productive regions with large human populations, many potential inventors, and many competing societies.”

In 1950, when the St. Lucia Arts Guild was founded, the district of Castries, which includes the city, was already by far the largest settlement on the island. And if we were to add the number of visitors and foreign nationals to this total, then on any given day the effective population of Castries would far exceed the census or official population data. Therefore, replacing technology with art and culture (technology of sorts) and potential inventors with potential artists (inventors of sorts), the above statement would suggest Castries as the place on the island where art and culture would develop the fastest.

In terms of the number of potential artists—poets, playwrights, composers, theatre directors, writers generally, and painters—Castries would again be expected to be the most productive in art and culture because as the commercial center and seat of government most of the professional and civil service jobs were located there thus giving rise to the greatest concentration of technocrats and persons with secondary and higher education. Further aiding the concentration of educated persons in Castries was the fact that until the opening of the Vieux Fort Secondary School in 1963, Castries was home to the only two secondary schools on the island—St. Mary’s College and St. Joseph Convert. In those days transportation was such that commuting from the out districts to school in Castries was impractical, so the only way to attend school in Castries was to reside there, which clearly was a considerable hurdle. Therefore, the fact that both of St. Lucia’s Nobel Laureates were from Castries and products of St. Mary’s College is no mystery. St. Mary’s College was the only place where a secondary school education was on offer to male students.

In terms of productive regions, up to the 1970s, besides sugar production, whatever little manufacturing taking place on the island was to be found in Castries, and as noted previously, Castries provided most of the shipping, commercial, and government administrative services, also Castries was situated at the crux of the island’s three great agricultural valleys—Mabouya, Cul-de-Sac, and Rosseau—which were central to the island’s sugar industry and then when sugar died out to the banana industry. Besides agricultural production, throughout the island’s modern history (1930 to present) these valleys served as the harbingers of St. Lucia’s labor and political movements.

Castries then was the most likely setting for a renaissance because it had the largest population, the largest number of productive segments, and the largest number of potential artist brought about by the incidence of schools and professional and civil service jobs and by the fact that its residents had the most contact with the outside world, a condition fostered in part by Port Castries serving as the island’s main port of entry.

Castries a City of Rebirths

However, the St. Lucia renaissance was by no means Castries' only or first reawakening. In fact the city had been no stranger to rebirths, new beginnings. Besides the changes and starting over that Castries and the island endured each time it changed hands between the French and the English, Castries has gone through so many baptisms of fire and rebuilding, that *City of Fire* would have been an apt description of it.

The first recorded of these baptisms was in 1796 when fire so completely demolished Castries, that no documents, private or public, escaped the destruction. This was followed 17 years later, in 1813, with a fire that destroyed most of the town, and adding insult to injury, in 1817 a cyclone wrecked what the fire had left standing. In 1927 another fire destroyed seventeen blocks of the city, including many residential houses, most of the business district and such buildings as the post office, a government warehouse, the magistrate's court-house, the Attorney General's Office, and a society hall.

Then came the great 1948 fire that incinerated three-quarters of the city, turning it into a wilderness of ashes, smoldering coals, burnt galvanized sheets and concrete foundations. When the smoke and ashes settled, the commercial section of Castries was completely gutted, many government buildings were destroyed, 809 families or 2,293 people were homeless, nine million dollars of property was lost, and many irreplaceable documents were destroyed, prompting a commentator to describe the tragedy as "the greatest calamity to befall a colony of its size and resources in so short a space of time."

Astonishingly, there was no loss of life.

If the 1948 fire could be considered the greatest baptism of fire to hit a city, then the rebuilding process could be considered the greatest rebirth or comeback. Following the fire, with the Colonial Development Corporation in charge of the rebuilding effort, and with a one million pounds relief grant from the British Crown and over half a million dollars from other sources, Castries found itself in the midst of what probably was the greatest nonmilitary construction boom the island had experienced, attracting workers from throughout St. Lucia and from neighboring islands. The city was rebuilt with larger and more modern buildings, along boulevards and broader and straighter streets laid out following a grid pattern not unlike metropolitan cities like New York. The rebuilding effort also gave rise to some of Castries' suburbs like La Clery as families opted to rebuild their homes on the outskirts of the city.

Whether or not the 1948 fire that forced such a dramatic rebirth of Castries had anything to do with the renaissance the St. Lucia Arts Guild had sparked, is likely to remain unknown, but for sure it did inspire the then eighteen year old Derek Walcott, the most famous exponent of the St. Lucia Renaissance, to immortalize the fire in one of his earliest and most popular poems, *A City's Death by Fire*:

After that hot gossamer has levelled all but the church'd sky,
I wrote the tale by tallow of a city's death by fire;
Under a candle's eye, that smoked in tears, I
Wanted to tell, in more than wax, of faiths that were snapped like wire.
All day I walked abroad among the rubble'd tales,
Shocked at each wall that stood on the street like a liar;
Loud was the bird-rocked sky, and all the clouds were bales
Torn open by looting, and white, in spite of the fire.
By the smoking sea, where Christ walked, I asked, why
Should a man wax tears, when his wooden world fails?
In town, leaves were paper, but the hills were a flock of faiths;
To a boy who walked all day, each leaf was a green breath
Rebuilding a love I thought was dead as nails,
Blessing the death and the baptism by fire.