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To the memory of Gill Nicholls
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# Contents

*Preface*  
ix  

*Acknowledgments*  
xi  

Chapter 1  
Introduction: Duvalier and After  
Paul Sutton and Kate Quinn  

Chapter 2  
True *dechoukaj*: Uprooting *Bovarysme* in Post-Duvalier Haiti  
J. Michael Dash  

Chapter 3  
From François Duvalier to Jean-Bertrand Aristide: The Declining Significance of Color Politics in Haiti  
Alex Dupuy  

Chapter 4  
The *Macoutization* of Haitian Politics  
Patrick Sylvain  

Chapter 5  
The Moody Republic and the Men in Her Life: François Duvalier, African-Americans, and Haitian Exiles  
Millery Polyné  

Chapter 6  
Haitian Exceptionalism: The Caribbean’s Great Morality Play  
Anthony P. Maingot
Chapter 7
Haiti and France: Settling the Debts of the Past 141
Charles Forsdick

Chapter 8
Haiti and the Regional and International Communities since January 12, 2010 161
Reginald Dumas

Postscript 185
Paul Sutton

List of Contributors 193

Index 197
Those who had the pleasure of meeting the Venerable William Paley, Archdeacon Emeritus, will never forget the first occasion. In my case it was in Trinidad on Christmas Day 1972 when, as a lonely British research student, I had been invited by Dr. David Nicholls, then working as a lecturer in government at the University of the West Indies, to have Christmas dinner with him, his wife Gill, and several others. It was a long and hot walk in the afternoon sun up the Santa Margarita Circular to the top of the hill where David then lived, and as I turned the corner into the yard, there was the Venerable William Paley, splendidly bedecked in blue and yellow with black and white facial markings, shrieking his greeting to me in kréyol and shuffling under the veranda in a most agitated manner. It was his normal mode of dress and address and entirely suited to a macaw but perhaps a trifle disconcerting for someone who expected to meet a “reverend” as David had earlier explained to me would be one of the other guests at dinner. David, his owner, was a genuine reverend (ordained in 1963) and meeting with him could be equally disconcerting for those who had fixed ideas as to how such a person should look and behave. David, astride his motorbike, with his ponytail and poncho flaring behind him as he sped to conduct church services in rural areas in Trinidad, was not your usual Anglican priest and what his congregations made of him was a matter of much comment in and around the university. In and around the countryside, as I found out, he was a welcome visitor and the churches always filled when it was known that he was to be taking the service. He took his parishioners seriously but not the established order, hence the name of the macaw.
At the university also, David did not fit the mold. He chose to research Haiti, then practically “unknown” in the academic community of the English-speaking Caribbean, and he chose to present his findings as drafts of “work in progress” to the senior seminar program, which was a regular feature of the Social Science Faculty. These drafts were invariably written and presented by him in a robust and critical manner that was deliberately designed to discomfit those who had fixed opinions on Caribbean issues. They were challenging times for a non-Caribbean origin person to be researching the region (it was the aftermath of the Black Power events of 1970, which had nearly toppled the government of Dr. Eric Williams in Trinidad and Tobago), and David’s arguments met with much resistance but little rebuttal, since his audience were nowhere near as well informed as him and had certainly not visited, let alone undertaken fieldwork in Haiti, as he had done. The arrival on the Trinidad campus of a distinguished Haitian academic who agreed to comment on David’s “work in progress” was therefore awaited with much anticipation. I remember the event well. David gave his presentation and the distinguished academic, later to become, briefly, the president of Haiti, gave his response. “Yes” he said, “there are some interpretations of people and their ideas about which I disagree with David, but in all the essentials he has it right and his insights into Haiti for a non-Haitian are outstanding.” The “showdown” his critical colleagues had been expecting had turned into the opposite and David’s work had been vindicated by what they saw as an authentic authority they could not deny. Thereafter David’s work on Haiti was seen in a new light and when it was published in From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti (1979), his reputation as a leading scholar on Haiti was assured well beyond Trinidad.

These vignettes suggest an extraordinary person—amusing and studious, irreverent and committed, tongue-in-cheek and serious, and more. The celebration of his character and of his commitment to the Caribbean and critical thought is commemorated in The David Nicholls Memorial Trust founded shortly after his death. This has provided research bursaries and
travel grants for postgraduate students to visit the Caribbean for fieldwork and for Caribbean postgraduate students to visit the UK. It has also sponsored an annual lecture at Oxford University that has examined various aspects of David’s work, including his contributions to Caribbean Studies and to Haiti. In those lectures David has received not only praise but also criticism, and in recent years the question has been raised as to whether his work on the Caribbean needs to be revised in the face of more recent scholarship. The conference “From Duvalier to Préval: Haiti Today, Yesterday and Tomorrow,” held at the Institute for the Study of the Americas in London in June 2010, was designed to accomplish this end, with a particular focus on his work on Haiti. The chapters included in this book were originally papers delivered at the conference, with an additional one by Charles Forsdick later commissioned by the editors. The conference was supported by The David Nicholls Memorial Trust. It was opened by his wife Gill who played a major role as chair in the work of the trust since its inception. Sadly Gill died later that year and it is to her memory that this book is dedicated.

Paul Sutton
Kirk Ella
East Yorkshire
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We are grateful to the David Nicholls Memorial Trust for their generous funding of the conference “From Duvalier to Préval: Haiti Today, Yesterday and Tomorrow,” held at the University of London on June 21–22, 2010.

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