

# **The Penal Colony in French Guiana (la Guyane)**

as depicted in  
Henri Charrière, *Papillon* (1969)

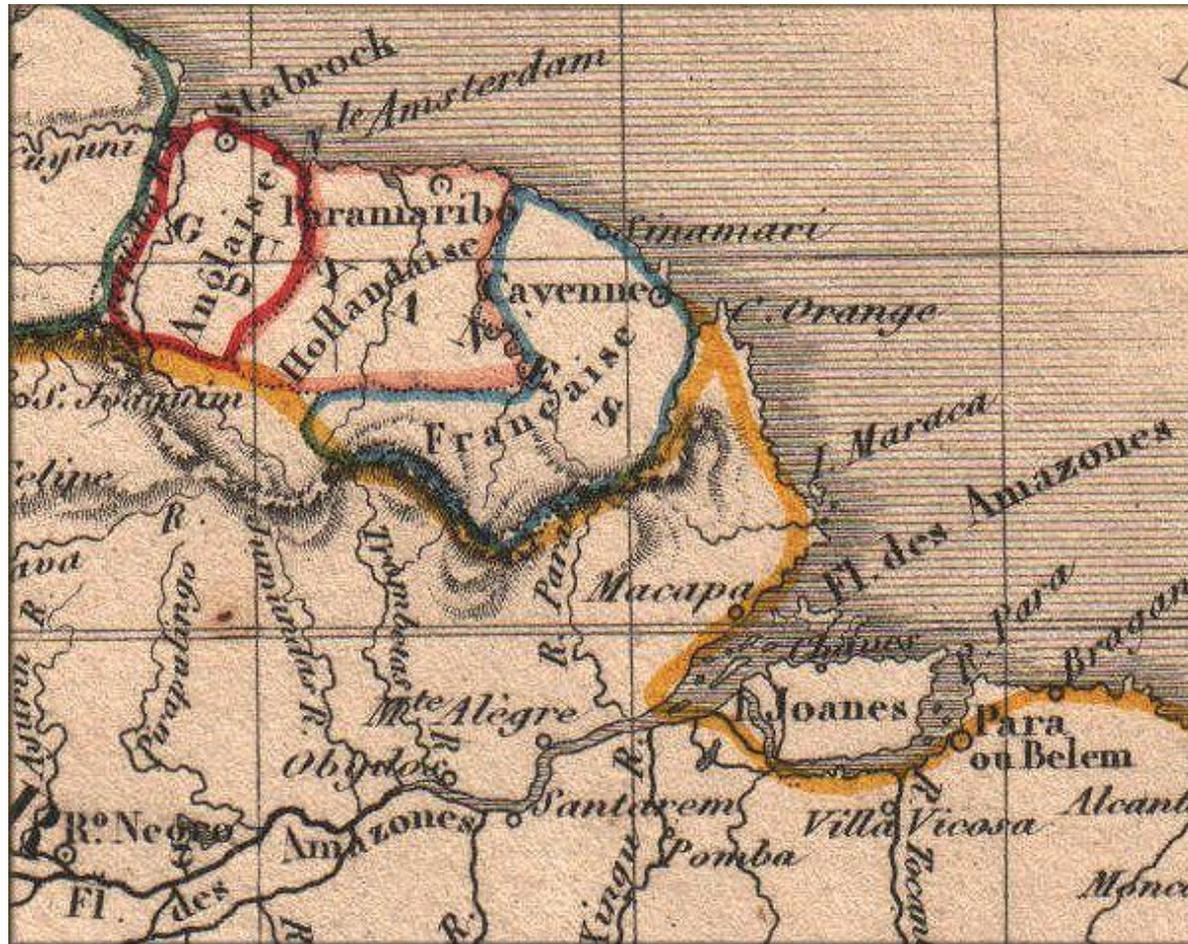
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FR325 Week 4

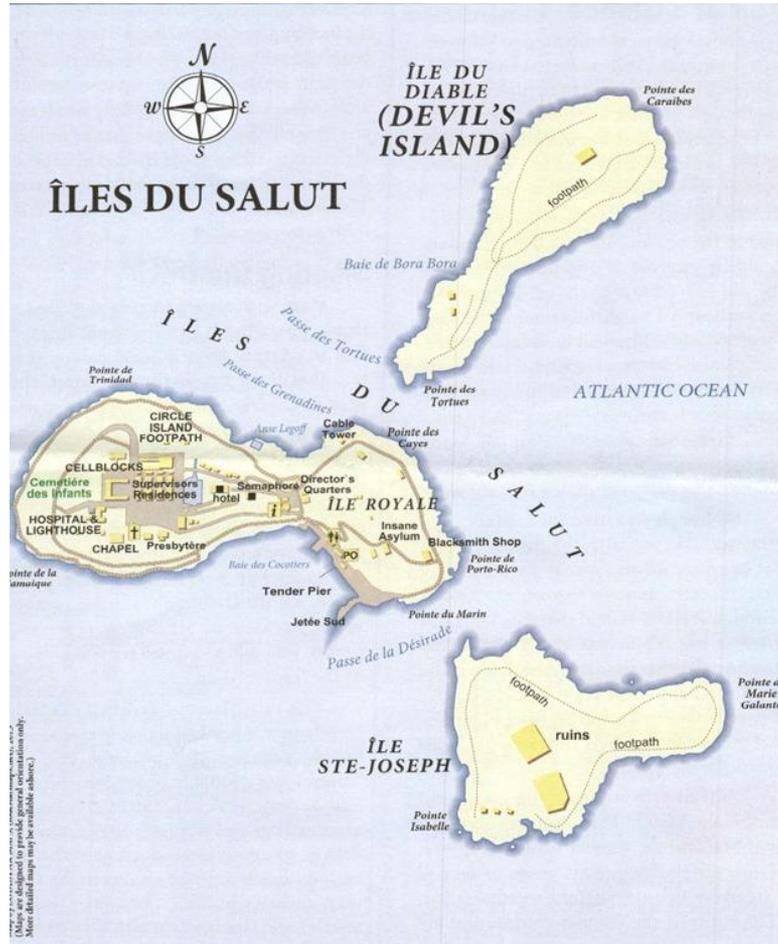
# Situating (French) Guiana







(1843)



# The French Penal Colony (Guiana)

- French Guiana: both prison and colony
- galley-ships (until 1748) then dockyard prisons (*le bagne*): Toulon, Brest, Rochefort
- opens as penal colony in 1852 (Dufour, 144)
- a network of prisons, forestry and road-building camps, trading operations and agricultural plantations
- ‘une sinistre réalité : celle du véritable travail forcé’ (Dufour, 140)
- colonial administration (Governor) based in capital Cayenne vs. Administration Pénitentiaire (Director) based in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni (‘Capitale du Bagne’)
- 1880 decree established Saint-Laurent as ‘commune pénitentiaire’: largest prison in France (Dufour, 136)
- AP in Guiana ‘État dans l’État’ (Dufour, 145) or ‘Criminopolis’ (Mimande, 1897)
- ‘une institution totalitaire, où tout est régi dans les plus petits détails, est systématiquement détournée par une communauté “sensible”, dont la règle est de contourner les règlements. [...] La loi se met en mélange avec le crime. Et le résultat de cet adultère est le bagne. L’immoralité fait principe. La loi du plus fort, celle des caïds qui assurent l’ordre de façon efficace selon leurs propres critères, avec la complicité passive et parfois active de l’administration lorsque l’élimination d’un individu particulièrement néfaste s’impose.’ (Dufour, 146)
- in 1913 population estimated at 50,000 of which 13% part of AP (Dufour, 144)
- introduction in 1885 of la Relégation => expansion to Saint-Jean-du-Maroni

# Categories of prisoner

- *les déportés* (political prisoners, including Dreyfus => Île du Diable)
- *les transportés* (with *doublage* from 1854)
- *les relégués* (multiple repeat offenders, or recidivists) sentenced to life from 1887
  - 1887-1917: average further life expectancy of a new *relégué* was 6 years (Sanchez, 'Les incorrigibles', 72)
- in total (1857-1953): 17375 men, 519 women

# Escape attempts

- la 'belle' = la cavale
- jurisdiction of TMS (le Tribunal Maritime Supérieur)
- punished by Réclusion (Île Saint-Joseph) from 1887
  - 2 years for first attempt
  - 5 for a second attempt (Sanchez, 'S'évader', 229)
  - 'La vie ici n'est pas rose, mais elle était certainement moins désagréable qu'a bien voulu l'écrire Papillon dans son livre.' (Michelot, 310)
- scale of the 'problem':
  - 1852-1921: 7636 escaped prisoners (Pierre, 168).
  - 1906: some 879 attempts, 250 successful (Sanchez, 'S'évader', 169)
- policy of surrounding countries on returning escapees changed from year to year (Pierre, 168)
- attempt to criminalize giving assistance to escapees in 1934: 5 years imprisonment and fine

# **Review of *Papillon* summaries**

# Discussion: Charrière's self-presentation in *Papillon*

1. religion
2. his negotiation of the question of his guilt or innocence of the crime for which he was initially sentenced
3. his ethical or moral values
4. his awareness of and interactions with other cultures
5. the motivation(s) for his escape attempts
6. his relationships with other convicts
7. his resilience and any other salient character traits