

# MERMAID TOPONYMS IN THE WEST INDIES:

Traditional and non-traditional names<sup>1</sup>

[Received March 14th 2021; accepted May 3rd 2021 – 10.21463/shima.135]

Simon Young

University of Virginia, Siena, Italy <simonyoungfl@gmail.com>

**ABSTRACT:** The study brings together fourteen landscape place names with the element ‘mermaid’ from the West Indies. The locations range from a coastal cave in Bermuda, in the north, to an inland pool in Trinidad, in the south. Some of these names are linked to regional folklore; some are arguably confected names invented, for instance, to encourage tourism. The author asks what markers can help us distinguish between folklore and confected names and ends with a list of other mermaid place names in Africa, the Pacific and America that might have their origins in indigenous or colonial era folklore.

**KEYWORDS:** Caribbean, Folklore, Mermaids, Place names, West Indies

## Introduction

On one island, a mermaid princess dwelt in a deep freshwater pool: she would, at night, go hunting for women to bring back to live with her in the caves below. A panic was started on another island when children began to see a mermaid near a small lake. A boy went missing. On still another island, far to the south, a mermaid lived in a cave and bathed at Easter in a caldera on the heights above. Welcome to the world of the West Indian mermaid. These three legends are all connected to West Indian mermaid place names: respectively, the Mermaid Pool on New Providence (WIM13); the Mermaid Pond on Grand Bahama (WIM07); and the Mermaid Hole on Montserrat (WIM04). In what follows I will examine, for folklore ends, these and another ten mermaid place names from the region.

West Indies folklore is a fusion of African, European and indigenous Caribbean beliefs, customs and words (Hill, 2007 for a useful introduction to Caribbean folklore). Water spirits are no exception to this principle (Braham, 2018 for the best overview of Spanish and French island traditions). We have the seawater mermaids (confusingly male) and the freshwater fairymaids of Tobago (Meikle, 1958). There is the Orisha Yemayá in Cuba, who has been conflated with the Virgin (Braham, 2018: 162-165). We have the sea-mahmys/river mummas in Jamaica (Leach, 1961: 209; Sparkes, 2021). In Haiti there is Lasirènn (from the French *la*

---

<sup>1</sup> This article began life as a paragraph in a longer essay on British mermaid toponyms, evolved into an appendix and became finally an article in its own right. The West Indies is an area about which I knew relatively little before beginning to write and, unsurprisingly I depended on a great deal of (mostly) local expertise. I would like to thank especially Clarice Barnes, Gerard Besson, Graceyln Cassell, Jonathan Cassidy, Robert Ditter, Robert Erdman, Najla Kay, Paul David Mather, Ca Newry, Sonja Osborne, Karen Pascal, Shirley Spycalla, Margaret Sweeney, Keith Tacklyn and Matt Wade. In many instances more local knowledge would have resolved issues: but I sometimes failed to make contact with people in a given area (though not through lack of trying). I am also grateful to Philip Hayward and the two peer reviewers whose suggestions improved this paper.

## Young: Mermaid Toponyms in the West Indies

*sirène*) who is summoned by blowing on a conch and who frequently features in voodoo rituals (Szeles, 2011). Then we have the Mami Wata, a West Coast African water goddess, successfully transplanted to the Caribbean (Braham, 2018: 168-169). These are just some of the most celebrated folklore entities from the region.

In studying mermaid place names I will be looking at parts of West Indian tradition and some regions whose folklore has been neglected.<sup>2</sup> In preparing this study (and as part of a wider push on the part of a number of scholars to record mermaid toponyms around the world in this issue of *Shima*) I was able to find fourteen mermaid toponyms in the West Indies, some current, some forgotten: Mermaid's Chair in the American Virgin Islands (WIMo1, WIMo2); Mermaid Hole on Cat Island (WIMo3); Mermaid Hole on Montserrat (WIMo4); Mermaid's Hole on Bermuda (WIMo5); Mermaid's Lair Cave on Grand Bahama (WIMo6); Mermaid Pond on Grand Bahama (WIMo7); Mermaid's Pond on Rum Cay (WIMo8); Mermaid (and Merman) Ponds on San Salvador (WIMo9); Mermaid Pool in Trinidad (WIMo10); Mermaid's Pool on Antigua (WIMo11); Mermaid's Pool on Dominica (WIMo12); Mermaid's Pool on New Providence (WIMo13); and Mermaid Reef on Great Abaco (WIMo14).

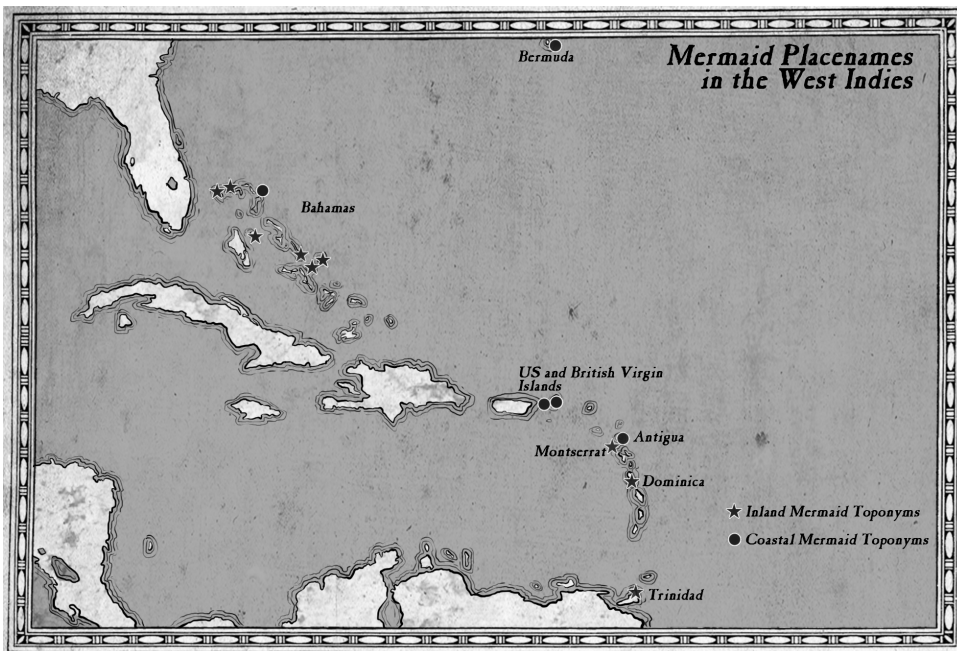


Figure 1 – Distribution of mermaid Place names in the West Indies (Najla Kay, 2021)

Supernatural place names are notoriously difficult to trace even in administrative states with centuries of records to draw on. First, they tend to be used to refer to micro-toponyms: very small parts of the landscape including rocks, streams and fields (see the examples given in

---

<sup>2</sup> I have not, note, looked at equivalents in other languages – e.g. Playa Sirena on Caya Largo (Cuba) – interesting as these would be.

the introduction: a cave, a pond and a pool). As such they only appear in unusually detailed surveys, for instance, estate listings or parish tythes. Second, they are frequently by-names: they are not necessarily the only name for a landscape feature, nor even the principle one and they are often ignored in official documents. In the United Kingdom these two points make any attempt to collect supernatural place names challenging. In the West Indies matters are a good deal more difficult: records are rarer and have less often been digitised and there is an absence of Ordnance Survey-style maps for the 19th century.

### West Indian Mermaid Toponyms

Before making any deductions about West Indies mermaid place names it is necessary to situate the fourteen names. Unsurprisingly they all appear on English-speaking or predominantly English-speaking islands.

**WIMo1 -Mermaid's Chair (St John).** The American Virgin Islands are a small group of islands to the east of Puerto Rico. Mermaid's Chair is a rock outcrop about thirty yards from a small, isolated beach (known as Mermaid's Chair Beach or Very Little Hawksnest), on the northern edge of Hawksnest Bay (Traveltalk Online, 2020). Jumbie Bay (another supernatural name<sup>3</sup>) is immediately to the east.

**WIMo2 - Mermaid's Chair (St Thomas).** This is another site in the American Virgin Islands. On the western extremity of the island of St Thomas there is a cay (see Figure 2). This cay (Cochran, 1937: 3) or the beach connecting the cay to the mainland (Wade, 2016) is known as the Mermaid's Chair.<sup>4</sup> It is a difficult-to reach destination, but one that occasionally appears online in the descriptions of more adventurous tourists (Wade, 2016). The earliest reference I have found to this site dates to 1937 (Cochran, 1937: 3).



Figure 2 - Mermaid's Chair on St Thomas (photo by Matt Wade [n.d], reproduced with permission)

**WIMo3 - Mermaid Hole (Cat Island):** Cat Island is in the Bahamas, a Commonwealth state. The Mermaid Hole is a large blue hole. A local website includes this passage:

---

<sup>3</sup> The jumbie is a usually malevolent Caribbean spirit.

<sup>4</sup> Thinking of British Mermaid Chairs (see Section 3), I would expect a dramatic rock seat like WIMo1. Perhaps there is one on the ocean side of the cay. Mermaid's Chair sounds like a sailors' name that might then have been given to the cay as a whole? Note that the cay is now known as Little St Thomas Island.

*Young children would fearfully stay away from the water's edge as not to be captured by mermaids. It is believed that the folklore around blue holes was created to protect children from drowning. (The Out Islands, 2017: online)*

**WIMo4 - Mermaid Hole (Montserrat).** Montserrat is a British overseas territory in the eastern Caribbean. It is best known today for the eruption, in 1995, of the volcano in the Soufrière Hills and the subsequent evacuation of much of the population. Mermaid Hole is a cave and the mermaid's lair (Greenaway, 2011: 131); the mermaid is supposed to bathe in a lake at the top of the volcano. The only reference to the toponym in print is from 2011 (Greenaway, 2011: 129) although correspondence with locals shows that the name dates back at least to the Second World War.<sup>5</sup>

**WIMo5 - Mermaid's Hole (Bermuda).** Bermuda is a British overseas territory, lying north of the Caribbean at about the longitude of the US state of Georgia. In 1911 a geological report from the island included a reference to a Mermaid's Hole where "[c]oarse recent sand" had been collected (Bullen, 1911: 435). I have not been able to establish where this Hole was to be found, but given the other places in which samples were found it seems to have been a maritime location. Very possibly it was at the Scaur near Somerset Bridge where one report (Unattributed, 1902: 3) includes details about a "famous" 'Mermaid's Cave'. Or do we have a second Bermudan mermaid toponym? There is another candidate: an old mermaid carving can be found in a cave on John Smith's Beach (Figure 3; I owe Margaret Sweeney for this reference).



Figure 3 - Mermaid carving from a cave on John Smith's Beach, Bermuda (photo by Angeo Speech, 2004).

---

<sup>5</sup> For instance, on the Facebook group page 'Montserrat Culture Modern and Traditional', 13th February 2021, a member used the name: "I grew up in Brodericks where the cave was. it was called Mermaid Hole." Two other correspondents, including, authoritatively Clarice Barnes, tell me that the mermaid was originally known as the 'merrymaid' and the cave as the Merrymaid Hole.

**WIMo6 - Mermaid's Lair Cave (Grand Bahama).** Grand Bahama is the largest island in the Bahamas. According to a local website:

*Mermaid's Lair Cave is an 'inland blue hole' located in an old abandon [sic] settlement known as Old Freetown. To keep kids from playing at the cave, local parents told a story of a Mermaid which pulls little children into the water and into its cave, hence the name. Actually, it is not a blue hole, the term cenote would be more appropriate, but it is simply the entrance to a water filled cave system. (Showcaves.com, 2020: online)*

**WIMo7 - Mermaid Pond (Grand Bahama).** Mermaid Pond is to be found on the western edge of Freeport, inland but close to the sea. One local website claims that it was named for supernatural happenings that took place there in the 1990s (Stubbs, 2018; see further below). In 2009 the Mermaid Pond was declared an official heritage site with an accompanying information board for visitors (BIS, 2009).

**WIMo8 - Mermaid Pond (Rum Cay).** Rum Cay is a thirty-square mile island on the eastern edge of the Bahamas. It has a tiny population: about fifty people. A 1990 ornithological study reported the existence of a Mermaid Pond in the north-east of the island near Lake George (Buden, 1990: 453). I have been unable to determine whether this is a salt pool or a freshwater pool: it is though, as the name suggests, an inland site.

**WIMo9 - Mermaid Pond (San Salvador).** San Salvador is one of the most eastern of the Bahama islands. Mermaid Pond is "an anchialine pond on the south-east corner of the island" (Ditter, Goebel and Erdman, 2015: 1). It is twinned with a second pond named 'Merman Pond'. Mermaid Pond is the southern, and partly isolated extremity of Stout's Lake; Merman's Pond is perhaps two hundred metres to the east (Ditter, Goebel and Erdman, 2015: 2, Figure 1).



Figure 4 - Mermaid Pond, Grand Bahama (WIMo6), courtesy of Jennifer Campbell).



**WIM<sub>10</sub> - Mermaid Pool (Trinidad).** Trinidad and Tobago is a two-island Commonwealth state to be found just off the coast of Venezuela. The Mermaid Pool (aka Mermaid Pools, Mermaid's Pool and Matura Basin) are three small, connected freshwater pools, which stand about half an hour's walk from the road. Tourist hikes are organised there. The earliest reference I have found to Mermaid Pool is from 2009 and appeared in a Trinidadian naturalists' newsletter (Young, 2009).

**WIM<sub>11</sub> - Mermaid's Pool (Antigua).** Antigua and Barbuda is a Commonwealth state in the Leeward Islands. Paul David Mather, in the Facebook Group, 'Exploring Caribbean History' informed me on 12th February 2021 that there is "a natural salt water rock pool near English Harbour, Antigua known as Mermaid's Pool" that is "along the Carpenters Trail in Nelson's Dockyard National Park, 10-15 minutes' walk from Galleon Beach/Freemans Bay." Another correspondent claimed that it was called Mermaid Garden.

**WIM<sub>12</sub> - Mermaid's Pool (Dominica).** The island of Dominica lies between Guadeloupe and Martinique. The Mermaid's Pool stands on the Rosalie River "a deep, calm depression... called Mermaid's Pool" (Staff Writer, 2012: online). The pool is close to a tourist getaway, The Mermaid's Secret founded in 2009. It is unclear whether Mermaid's Pool predated the Mermaid's Secret or was named because of it.

**WIM<sub>13</sub> - Mermaid's Pool (New Providence).** New Providence is in the Bahamas, just to the east of Florida. The Mermaid's Pool is a two-hundred-foot-deep blue hole in Great Nassau which stands where Robinson Road meets Marathon Road. It is the earliest attested of the West Indies mermaid names. It was described thus in 1880: "[i]n the south part of the island, about a mile from shore, near an extensive cocoanut plantation, is a natural reservoir of fresh water" (Ives, 1880: 46, quoting from a newspaper from "a year or two since"; for a digest, see Stark, 1891: 120).

**WIM<sub>14</sub> - Mermaid Reef (Great Abaco).** Great Abaco is another Bahamian island: it is in the north-east of the archipelago. Mermaid Reef is to be found on the edge of Marsh Harbour and is a favourite with tourists who dive there: it has coral in a part of the sea where this is rare. The oldest reference to Mermaid Reef I have turned up dates to 1997 when the Mermaid Reef Hotel Resort was "approved in principle" by local planning authorities (Unattributed, 1997: online). There is no information as to whether the name predates the resort or whether it had been dreamt up as part of a resort project.

## False Positives

Finding supernatural place names is, as noted above, difficult at the best of times. But with mermaid names there are some additional problems. There are, in the world today, many non-supernatural mermaid toponyms. There are, for instance, Mermaid Pubs: the Charter of Barbados was famously signed at the Mermaid Tavern in Oistins, in 1652 (Campbell, 1974: 7). There are places named for the surveying efforts of the ship *HMC Mermaid* (Fleury and Hayward, 2021: 241-243). To these problems must then be added the difficulties of place name research, more generally, in the West Indies.

Just one of the fourteen mermaid place names could be dated back before 1900: and only three of the sources could be dated back before the Second World War; while seven of the names appeared *only* in 21st-century sources (at least I could find none that were older). Names also appeared in sources that would not typically be used in place name studies. For instance,

three of the mermaid toponyms (WIM<sub>10</sub>, WIM<sub>12</sub> and WIM<sub>14</sub>) are connected with tourism; an issue we will look at below. Three of the names appear only in scientific papers: one in a geological survey (Bermuda, WIM<sub>05</sub>); one in an ornithological study (Rum Cay, WIM<sub>08</sub>); and one in a study related to shrimps (San Salvador, WIM<sub>09</sub>). Then there are an unusual number of references to blogs and Facebook comments. Many of the names are mentioned only in one source.

Given the weak nature of our sources, can we be sure that all our mermaid toponyms are used locally? The answer is 'no'. Let's start with the most dramatic example. In a 2015 scientific paper on anchialine shrimps on San Salvador Island (Ditter, Goebel and Erdman, 2015: 2), a map included the name 'Mermaid Pond' and 'Merman Pond' on that island (WIM<sub>09</sub>) (ibid: Figure 2). The present author was excited to discover these two toponyms on San Salvador because they fit into a wider pattern of inland Bahaman mermaid sites. However, the names were not traditional, they had been invented by the scientists carrying out the survey.<sup>6</sup> It is a cautionary tale of the danger of gathering together names that are often only recorded in one place. Is it possible that Mermaid Pond on Rum Cay (WIM<sub>08</sub>) was similarly invented for the purpose of a scientific survey (Buden, 1990: 453)?

Another problem is the use of 'mermaid' in tourist names. Sometimes developers opportunistically give mermaid names to make this bay or that beach more attractive to tourists (see, for example, Fleury and Hayward, 2021: 243-245). Mermaid Reef on Great Abaco (WIM<sub>14</sub>) is first associated with a tourist development in the 1990s: it is a marine site, without any reported folklore. I know of no other Mermaid Reef in the region. A natural assumption would be that it began as a concocted, tourist-friendly name. We should also, I think, be cautious about Mermaid Pool on Trinidad (WIM<sub>10</sub>, there are regular tourist excursions to this site);<sup>7</sup> and Mermaid's Pool on Dominica (WIM<sub>12</sub>, which is close to a tourist complex called The Mermaid's Secret). I suspect that research in local communities would show that these two names date back several decades, but at present I have no way of proving this. Of course, non-supernatural names can be interesting in folklore terms. They, with time, sometimes take on supernatural associations. But it is useful for a folklorist interested in using place names to find a simple way to separate the mundane chaff from the supernatural grain. In what follows, I will suggest an approach for identifying telltale folklore markers for mermaid place names. Some of these markers depend on archive material: while some depend on the name itself and the position of the site.

### Supernatural Markers for Mermaid Place Names

A number of the fourteen names will have their roots in local folklore; some will have other origins, particularly in attempts to attract tourists to a given site. Here I offer four markers that might help us to pick out folklore names: (i) local folklore; (ii) age; (iii) generic; and (iv)

---

<sup>6</sup> Dr Erdman kindly wrote on 13th February 2021, to explain that he and his team had coined the name Mermaid Pond: it "was named after the great abundance of *Acetabularia crenulata*, commonly called the Mermaids Wineglass." Dr Ditter then wrote on 14th February explaining that the "naming for Merman Pond followed the naming of Mermaid Pond, and was named Merman after Mermaid pond because of the belief that the two bodies of water are connected."

<sup>7</sup> The Mermaid Pool on Trinidad *may* have a connection with nearby Tobago. Trinidad author Gerard Besson writes that the Matura area on Trinidad's east coast "has a great many residents who came there in the late 19th and early 20th century from Tobago where there is a strong folk tradition of female water spirits' (p.c 11th February 2021; for the water spirits of Tobago see Meikle, 1958; see also Besson, 2012: 52).

inland vs. coastal sites. These markers can also, I would suggest, be usefully applied outside the West Indies.

**Local Folklore:** *Is there folklore about water spirits in the area?* I'll look at the relevant folklore in the next section. But for now it should be enough to note that already in the late 1870s there were legends about the mermaid of the Mermaid's Pool in the Bahamas (WIM<sub>13</sub> Ives, 1880: 47; see also Quimby, 1906: 251); from the 1990s there was folklore about the Mermaid Pond on Grand Bahama (WIMo<sub>7</sub>, Stubbs, 2018); while local tradition on Montserrat has it that a mermaid dwelt in a cave and bathed in a caldera on Chances Peak (WIMo<sub>4</sub>, Greenaway, 2011: 129-131). The presence of local folklore about mermaids is not, of course, proof that these toponyms were based on such traditions. After all, we might have a situation in which a mermaid name *inspired* local folklore. However, water-spirit folklore for a given locale is suggestive.

**Age:** *Does the name date back to before mermaids became commercially attractive?* As noted above, mermaid names have sometimes been given to places to make them more alluring to tourists. A 'Mermaid Beach' or a 'Mermaid Cove', say, would suggest attractive locales with sun, sand, and sea. These kinds of mermaid names seem not to have been given prior to the 20th century – probably because the erotic associations of mermaids risked scandal in the 1800s. Indeed, our first evidence of mermaids being used in tourist campaigns in Britain is Victorian (Young, 2021: 190). Of our fourteen West Indies names only the Mermaid's Pool in the Bahamas (WIM<sub>13</sub>) can be shown to date back to before the period of mermaid commercialisation (Ives, 1880: 46).

**Generic:** *Does the generic place name element have special associations in mermaid naming tradition in the United Kingdom?* Some generic words in place naming could be given very naturally by any English-speaker: I see a pool in a place with a mermaid tradition, I call it the 'Mermaid Pool'. However, some generics in our list are, rather, more unusual. There are thirty-nine saltwater mermaid place names from Britain: three of which use the generic term 'chair'; two in Scotland, one in Cornwall (OS Kirkudbright 54, 1854; Harfager, 1866; Daniell, 1854: 176). As such the Mermaid's Chairs (WIMo<sub>1</sub>, WIMo<sub>2</sub>) in the Virgin Islands fits snugly into a British supernatural naming tradition. The same could be said for Mermaid Hole on Montserrat (WIMo<sub>4</sub>), Mermaid Hole on Cat Island (WIMo<sub>3</sub>) and Mermaid's Hole on Bermuda (WIMo<sub>5</sub>). 'Hole' is a British generic name frequently associated with supernatural lairs: e.g. Fairy Hole or Hob Hole. I know of three British Mermaid Holes (Reaney, 1935: 599; Hitchins and Drew, 1824: II, 287-288; Geological Survey of Great Britain, 1915, 23).

**Inland vs. Coastal Sites:** *Is the name found on the coast or at an inland site?*<sup>8</sup> Mermaids were, in early modern and modern literature (by which I mean everything from poems to breathless I-saw-a-mermaid memorates) associated with the sea. If a mermaid place name was given for, let's say, ornamental or commercial reasons, then we might expect that place name to be found on the coast. But eight of the West Indies mermaid toponyms are to be found inland (Figure 1). This is very much in line with West Indies folklore where water-spirits were as likely to be found in rivers and lakes as in the ocean. I am particularly struck by the use of the word 'pond' that, at least in my English, suggests an inland site: think of the Mermaid Pool on Trinidad (WIM<sub>10</sub>); the Mermaid Pond on Grand Bahama (WIMo<sub>7</sub>); and the Mermaid's Pond on Rum Cay (WIMo<sub>8</sub>).

---

<sup>8</sup> Note that the division between inland and coastal is more difficult in the West Indies than in many other parts of the world because of inland blue holes with salt water.



### Assessing Mermaid Place names

All fourteen West Indies mermaid place names can be usefully discussed in connection with supernatural place name traditions, which arrived directly or indirectly from the United Kingdom (Young, 2021). In some cases there has to be the suspicion that names were given as part of that naming tradition – see the evidence relating to Mermaid Hole on Montserrat (WIMo4), Mermaid Hole on Cat Island (WIMo3) and Mermaid's Pool on New Providence (WIM13). A naming tradition can, of course, be independent of a folklore tradition: *a British-style name does not necessarily mean a British-style legend*.



Figure 5 - The Mermaid's caldera on Chance's Peak (Montserrat), photograph by Ben Harris sometime in the 1960s. Thanks to Gracelyn Cassell for permission to reproduce it here.

The Bahamian names deserve special comment. Seven of the fourteen West Indies mermaid names are to be found in that relatively small archipelago. Six of these names are essentially the same landscape type: inland Bahamian 'pools' or 'ponds' (they go by these generics): one was, it will be remembered, a name recently created by scientists (San Salvador, WIMo9). Four of these pools have a folklore tradition, albeit they are only recorded in fragments: the deep pools on New Providence (WIM13), Grand Bahama (WIMo6, WIMo7) and Cat Island (WIMo3). We cannot say now, on the basis of these names, that sea-spirits were routinely called 'mermaids' in the Bahamas. But we can say, on the basis of this small sample, that inland water-spirits seem to have been.

If we accept that some of these fourteen names were based on a supernatural idea about a given locale, we can perhaps envisage three very general scenarios under which the names were given. First, a water-spirit tradition that pre-dated European settlement, and an attempt to render a pre-colonial indigenous tradition (Taino etc) into English by English-speaking settlers. Second, a similar attempt to mediate a water-spirit tradition of African creole-speakers by English-speakers. Third, the traditions of English-speaking inhabitants in the islands, be they Europeans, Africans or the descendants of both. It would be tempting to favour the third, simply because the names are so recent: but place names like this can survive orally for centuries. The inland Bahamian names suggest a common idea about inland water spirits in the archipelago dating back at least a hundred and forty years (Ives, 1880: 47).

## Young: Mermaid Toponyms in the West Indies

No.	Name	Folklore	Age	Generic	Inland	Score
WIMo1	Mermaid's Chair (St John)			x		1
WIMo2	Mermaid's Chair (St Thomas)			x		1
WIMo3	Mermaid Hole (Cat Island)	x		x	x	3
WIMo4	Mermaid Hole (Montserrat)	x		x	x	3
WIMo5	Mermaid's Hole (Bermuda)			x		1
WIMo6	Mermaid's Lair (Grand Bahama)	x			x	2
WIMo7	Mermaid Pond (Grand Bahama)	x			x	2
WIMo8	Mermaid Pond (Rum Cay)				x	1
WIMo9	Mermaid Pond (S. Salvador)				x	1
WIM10	Mermaid Pool (Trinidad)				1	1
WIM11	Mermaid's Pool (Antigua)					0
WIM12	Mermaid's Pool (Dominica)				x	1
WIM13	Mermaid's Pool (New Providence)	x	x		x	3
WIM14	Mermaid Reef (Great Abaco)					0

Figure 6 - Assessing West Indies Mermaid Toponyms

Nine of the fourteen mermaid toponyms have no recorded folklore. With Mermaid Reef (WIM14), I have suggested that we have a confected name. The same *may* be true of the Mermaid's Pool on Dominica (WIM12), though I suspect not. With Mermaid's Chair (WIMo2) there is uncertainty about whether we have a beach, a rock or an entire cay. This uncertainty might point to a lack of knowledge about the name in the area. In the case of Mermaid Pond on Rum Cay (WIMo8) we have an extremely obscure location: it is hardly surprising that no folklore has been recorded. For the Mermaid's Pool on New Providence (WIM13), the Mermaid Pond on Grand Bahama (WIMo7), Mermaid Hole on Cat Island (WIMo3), Mermaid's Lair Cave on Grand Bahama (WIMo6) and the Mermaid's Hole on Montserrat (WIMo4) there are, instead, local mermaid traditions. Let us start with the Mermaid's Pool on New Providence.

### Mermaid Folklore: New Providence

In the late 1870s a Bahamas newspaper ran a story about the Mermaid's Pool on New Providence (WIM13). That newspaper does not seem to have survived. However, the tale was summarised, in a slapdash fashion, in Ives' *The Isles of Summer*. The author of the newspaper article, according to Ives:

*gives the substance of a wild, romantic legend concerning this 'Mermaid's Pool', in which a dusky island princess and a foreign shipwrecked prince act prominent parts. Strange noises are heard there at night, and in the form of a mermaid the princess at times emerges from the dark pool in the dim moonlight, seizes any unfortunate damsel who happens to be in the vicinity, and carries her a prisoner to her watery home in the rock. (1880: 47).*

In 1886 one visitor reported a “thrilling legend” about the Mermaid’s Pool but no details (Bethel, 1886: 1). There were, then, still traditions about the pool in the early 1900s. Indeed, one visitor to the island stated that locals ‘claim that strange, half-human creatures may be seen in the depths when the sun shines directly into the water’ (Quimby, 1906: 251). The last vaguely supernatural reference came in 1920 when we read in a newspaper report that the Pool is, “said to be connected with the sea in some mysterious manner” (Unattributed, 1920). In the 1920s the pool was a tourist favourite and appears frequently in the Nassau press: “a sheet of still water, bordered by over-hanging maidenhair ferns and many-coloured lichens” (Unattributed, 1920: 1). In 1921 it was even remembered at the end of a poem praising Nassau: ‘And in fancy I’ll sit by the Mermaid’s Pool/ On this island far out in the sea/ And heavy of heart far from loved ones apart/ Dreams of Nassau will come to me’ (Kennedy, 1921: 2).

Thereafter, the pool faded from public view. By 1970 Cohens and Robins described it as: ‘a little-known limestone sink’ (1970: 133): an extraordinary fall from grace. They also noted the changing environment roundabouts: “the area of Mermaid’s Pool is in a large tract of land already largely cleared for housing development: the future of the Pool and its water quality is uncertain” (ibid: 143). A recent diver had serious problems finding it on a map and he had heard discouraging reports about sewage being dumped in the pool in the 1980s (Jump-sail-dive, 2014: online). The pool stands now in a heavily built-up zone. An online correspondent reported: “the pool was used as a garbage site. It was being cleared out the last I heard. Mermaids no longer visit though” (Ca Newry, p.c. 12th February 2021 on Exploring Caribbean History Facebook page).

### Mermaid Folklore: Grand Bahama

The Mermaid Pond on Grand Bahama (WIM07) has (apparently) a much shorter history, but one concerning a similarly dangerous mermaid to that found on New Providence. The Grand Bahama mermaid preyed not on ‘damsels’ but on children.

*The mermaid was first spotted in the Bahamas in the early 1990s in Freeport, Lewis Yard on Hunter’s Road... According to many residents of this community, the mermaid was spotted by young school kids who happen to be playing around the pond and came into contact with the mermaid that was at the pond. Word of this mermaid living in the pond began to spread around the community and soon many elders were able to vouch that it is in fact true that the mermaid exists. The mermaid was described as one with blue eyes, blonde hair and a forest green tail. It is indicated that the mermaid in fact loved children and because of this the mermaid would have conversations with them. One child had indicated that the mermaid had told her that there were underground caverns under the pond that she would explore whenever she had the chance. Those who had seen the mermaid was fortunate while others, of course, weren’t. Stories were told of how a young boy had such an urge to see this mermaid that he would do whatever it took, even if that means going against his mother’s words. Elders and parents knew that this mermaid loved children but they didn’t know what the mermaid was capable of, so they told their children and grandchildren to stay away from the pond. One night the young boy snuck out of his bed and went to the pond. He had heard a voice saying, ‘Mantaray, mantaray, I don’t eat fish’. The following morning the only thing that was found of the boy was his clothing and it was found near the pond. It was never mentioned as to whether the mermaid did*

*actually pull the young boy or any children into this hole and drowned them or did they accidentally fall in by themselves.* (Stubbs, 2018: online).

This is reminiscent of supernatural flaps elsewhere in the world that begin with children and that deserve a longer study (for an Icelandic lake bogey that started with children but began to be seen by adults, Jakobsson, 2017: 99). The traditions for Mermaid Hole on Cat Island (WIMo3) and Mermaid's Lair Cave on Grand Bahama (WIMo6) are very slight and we would need local respondents to flesh them out. However, both seem to involve similar child-scarer mermaids (for other international examples, Widdowson, 1977: 149-150, Canada; Kreutz, 2014: 106; Australia). Another important element in this account is the description of the mermaid who had, according to Stubbs (2018): "blue eyes, blonde hair and a forest green tail". There are a number of cases from the West Indies where mermaids are given a European look. For instance, on Tobago, a fairymaid (inland mermaid) was described as being "a white woman with long blonde hair sitting on a rock and combing her hair" (Meikle, 1958: 107) and on Grenada, a mermaid had "blond" hair (Beck, 1975: 236). Returning to the Bahamas, scientist Dr Robert Ditter, in his field work on San Salvador in the 2010s recalls being called 'Mermaid King' by local children: "I was later told that it is because I am Caucasian with blue eyes" (p.c 14th February, 2021). Accounts are by no means uniform in this respect: for instance, also in the Bahamas, the New Providence Mermaid was apparently "dusky", whatever that means (Ives, 1880, 47). But the frequency, at least in the English-speaking islands, of European-looking mermaids, who are often described as combing long hair, is striking. There is evidently a mixing of African, European and perhaps Indian traditions (Beck, 1975: 237).<sup>9</sup> As Leach put it, while describing the sea mammy in Jamaica: "[s]he is the mermaid of English folklore who has been duppized"<sup>10</sup> (1962: 209). The blend of different traditions will have varied from place to place producing quite different undine traditions. Any ambitious survey of West Indies sea spirits would have to take in these local 'brands' of mermaid.

### Mermaid Folklore: Montserrat

Finally, there is the Mermaid Hole on Montserrat (WIMo4): the lair of a mermaid who goes to the caldera on Chances Peak to bathe.<sup>11</sup> In 1967 John Messenger, in his survey of Montserrat folk-life, reported that "the Chance Pond mermaid" was a "white-skinned maiden":

*She has as a companion a 'diamond snake', and she sits from time to time on a rock beside the pool combing her long hair. If a person can seize her comb and run down the slope and wash it in the sea before being caught by the pursuing serpent, the mermaid's buried treasure becomes his. Every Easter at midnight a pilgrimage which attracts hundreds of islanders climbs the mountain by torchlight to arrive before dawn and surprise the mermaid. While discussing [the mermaid] I was told that she also had been sighted at a nearby spring in 1964 and at the seashore below only two days before my visit. It was Chance's Mountain that an Antigua-bound Pan American jetliner crashed into in 1965 killing 30*

---

<sup>9</sup> Besson's view on this for Tobago is fascinating: he suggests that locals may have been influenced by "world maps on the walls of the Great Houses that depicted the antics of a crowned Neptune with an Oceanus trident in hand surrounded by a court of denizens of the deep" (2012: 52). That would perhaps serve as an explanation for some European features in West Indies mermaids.

<sup>10</sup> A *duppy*, in Carribean English, is a malevolent spirit.

<sup>11</sup> Clarice Barnes, who will hopefully soon publish a proper study of the Montserrat mermaid, points out to me that there was also a caldera mermaid on Grenada (see Beck, 1975: 237).

*persons aboard, and it may be that a future legend will attribute the accident to the power of the mermaid-turned-Lorelei. (1967: 22-23).*<sup>12</sup>

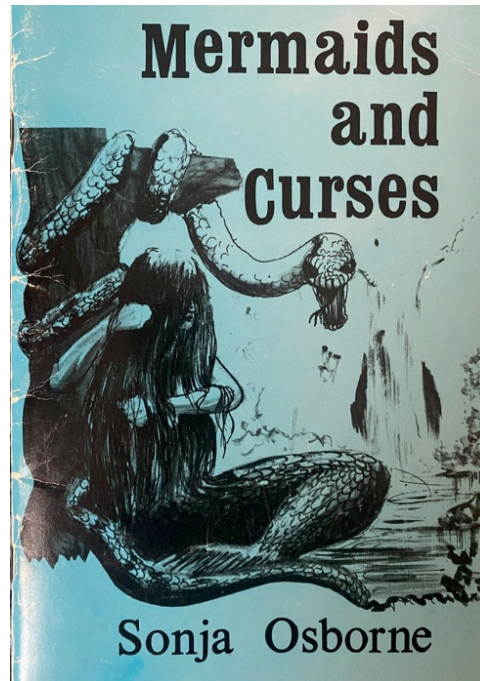


Figure 7 - the front cover of Osborne (1984); thanks to Sonja Osborne for permission to reproduce. This children's book introduced many young Montserratians to the mermaid thirty plus years ago.

This Easter 'pilgrimage' may have been referred to (albeit indirectly) by British author Malcolm Lowry as far back as 1933 in his novel *Ultramarine*. There, a character claimed that Montserratians "go and throw pennies in the pond up there [on Chances Peak] on Easter morning" (2000: 175). The 'pilgrimage' to a mermaid on Easter morn recalls the legend of the mermaid of Rostherne Mere in Cheshire (England):

*an old inhabitant of those parts related how that in years long past... on Easter morn, just as the rising sun darted his first ray on the heavens above, there gracefully emerged from the placid waters a sylph-like mermaid, endowed with the power to grant the articulated wish of that youth whose eyes first met hers. (H, 1856: 4; see also, Unattributed, 1871 for a report of pilgrimage to the site).*

Similar beliefs were held at nearby Hayfield (Hope, 1893: 53; for the wider context of north-western English freshwater mermaids Simpson, 1976: 25-26).

---

<sup>12</sup> See also Fergus (2005: 15).

Messenger favoured, instead, an Irish explanation for this tradition (1967: 22-23; see also Akenson, 1997: 179 who calls the evidence “compelling”); there have been many claims that Montserrat culture was defined by Irish settlers (for a more balanced view Fergus, 1981). My own correspondence with Montserrat writers Clarice Barnes and Sharmen Greenaway makes me wonder whether Messenger was not writing under a general misapprehension. There seems to have been no ‘pilgrimage’ (in any conventional sense) and there is no clue that any Easter activities were connected to the mermaid: a male-only jaunt was organised at Easter and involved a good deal of drinking. Of course, this could be a generational issue: perhaps in an earlier period there was a ritual connected with a mermaid. Hopefully research by Montserratians will bring more light to traditions connected with the Chances Peak Mermaid.

### Conclusion: Mermaids, Mermaids Everywhere

In this short article I have brought together fourteen different West Indies mermaid place names: one in Bermuda, seven in the Bahamas and six spread across the Leeward Islands. My aim has been to assess the likely folklore interest of these sites, where there is little in the way of archive or historical material and where folklore collection has been slight. To this end I suggested four useful folklore markers: the presence of folklore traditions; age; the generic; and inland v coastal sites. None of these markers are decisive, but the accumulation of points speaks, I suggested, to the likely folklore origins of the name and West Indies water-spirit traditions. I argued that the Bahamas especially seem to have had a tradition of inland mermaid pools and ponds. I then went onto look at the folklore of three of the eleven sites: Mermaid Pond on Grand Bahama; Mermaid’s Pool on New Providence; and Mermaid Hole on Montserrat.

Can a similar methodology be applied to mermaid place names elsewhere in the world? I have noted down, in my research, some names that might be worth investigating with the same markers I have employed here. We have, once more, promising sites (in terms of names and positioning) and little by way of documentation. Some African examples. We know, for instance, that there was a Guano or Mermaid Bay and a Guano or Mermaid Island off the Namibian coast (Bartlett, 1873-1877: III, 155; see also Unattributed, 1833 – the same Mermaid Island?) There was another Mermaid Island on St Paul’s River in Liberia, “resorted to by European traders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Johnston, 1906: I, 95). There is an inland Mermaid’s Pool in Zimbabwe, a favourite tourist destination that dates back at least to the 1930s (Unattributed, 1933). There is, also, a Mermaid Pool at Simonstown on the Cape (Leistner and Morris, 1976: 296). White (1909: 201) writes of a Mermaid Tree at a monastery at Khomthing Lhakhang in Bhutan. There was a Mermaid Bay on Garove in the Papua New Guinean Vitu Islands in the Bismarck Sea, today known as Johann Albrecht Harbor (Jacobs, 1844: 91-92; for the expedition Fairhead, 2015: 160-272). In Australia there are the Mermaid Pools on “a remote waterhole on the Bargo River... accessible by walking trails” (Fleury and Hayward, 2021: 240; and there is a Mermaid Pool, a 19th Century name, in the Blue Mountains in the same country (ibid: 240-241). Then, much closer to the West Indies we have Mermaid’s Pool in upstate New York (*Guide Book*, 1901: 20; Watkins Glen, Schuyler Co) and a Mermaid’s Cave on South Bass Bay in Ohio (Thorndale, 1898: 98). All of these would be interesting candidates for study. Many will have been attempts to represent settler lore in a new land or the native lore of a very old land.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akenson, D.H (1997) *If the Irish ran the world: Montserrat, 1630-1730*, London: McGill-Queen's University Press
- Ashington Bullen, Rev. R (1911) 'Some notes on the geology of the Bermuda Islands', *The Geological Magazine* v8: 433-442
- Bartlett, J (1873-1877) *The west coast of Africa*, Washington: Government Print Office (3 volumes)
- Beck, J.C (1975) 'The West Indian supernatural world: belief integration in a pluralistic society', *The Journal of American Folklore* v88: 235-244
- Besson, G.A (2012) 'Mermaids, imps and goddesses: the folklore of Trinidad and Tobago', *Trinidad and Tobago: 50 Years of Independence*, London: First Magazine Ltd: 52-56
- Bethel, T.W (1886) 'Our letter from the Bahama Islands: Number IV', *Nassau Guardian* 20th February: 1
- BIS (2009) 'Five heritage sites unveiled in Grand Bahama Island', *Bahamas Weekly* 28th June: [http://www.thebahamasweekly.com/publish/ministry\\_of\\_tourism\\_updates/Five\\_Heritage\\_Sites\\_for\\_Grand\\_Bahama\\_Island\\_printer.shtml](http://www.thebahamasweekly.com/publish/ministry_of_tourism_updates/Five_Heritage_Sites_for_Grand_Bahama_Island_printer.shtml) - accessed 1st May 2021
- Braham, P (2018) 'Song of the sirenas: mermaids in Latin America and the Caribbean', in Hayward, P (ed) *Scaled for Success: The Internationalisation of the Mermaid*, Bloomsfield: Indiana University Press/John Libbey & Co: 149-170
- Buden, D.W (1990) 'The birds of Rum Cay, Bahama Islands', *Wilson Bulletin* v102: 451-468
- Campbell, P. F. (1974) *An outline of Barbados history*, Bridgetown: n.d
- Campos Reyes, D.W (2003-2004) 'The origin and survival of the Taíno language', *Issues in Caribbean Amerindian Studies* v5 n2: <https://indigenouscaribbean.files.wordpress.com/2008/05/davidcampos.pdf> - accessed May 2nd 2021
- Cerri, L and McLaren, T (2012) 'The nature of adventure', *Tampa Bay Times* 21st May: [www.tampabay.com/archive/2012/05/20/the-nature-of-adventure/](http://www.tampabay.com/archive/2012/05/20/the-nature-of-adventure/) - accessed February 26th 2021
- Cochran, H (1937) *These are the Virgin islands*, New York: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Cohen, D.M and Robins, R.C (1970) 'A new ophidioid fish (genus Lucifuga) from a limestone sink, New Providence Island, Bahamas', *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington* v83: 133-144
- Daniell, J (1854) *A geography of Cornwall*, London, Longmans and Co.

## Young: Mermaid Toponyms in the West Indies

Dilnot, C (2012) 'Chances Peak, Montserrat', *Gutted Arcades of the Past* 18th September <http://guttedarcs.blogspot.com/2012/09/chances-peak-montserrat.html> - accessed 20th February 2021

Ditter, R.E, Goebel, A.M and Erdman, R.B (2015, 'First Record of the anchialine shrimp *Parhippolyte sterreri* (Decapoda, Barbouriidae) from San Salvador Island, Bahamas, with observations on *Barbouria cubensis*', *Marine Biodiversity Records* v8: 1-4

Exploring Caribbean History (n.d) Facebook page:  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/269202760462518/> - accessed May 3rd 2021

Fairhead, J (2015) *The Captain and 'the cannibal': an epic story of exploration, kidnapping, and the Broadway stage*, New Haven: Yale University Press

Fergus, H.A (1981) 'Montserrat 'colony of Ireland': The myth and the reality', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* v70: 325-340

Fergus, H.A (2005) *Montserrat And Montserratians*, NP: KiMagic

Fleury, C and Hayward, P (2021) 'Shipped ashore: The origins and deployment of mermaid place names in Australia and related visual representations', *Shima* (2021): 239-255

Greenaway, S (2011) *Montserrat in England: dynamics of culture*, Bloomington: iUniverse

*Guide book of the Watkins Glen* (1901) n.p: W.E. Robinson

H (1856) 'A day's ramble in Cheshire', *The Ashton Weekly* 5th April: 4

Harfager, H (1866) 'A whale-chase in Orkney', *Orkney Herald* 24th July: 4

Hill, D.R. (2007) *Caribbean folklore: a handbook*, Oxford: Harcourt Education

Hitchins, F and Drew, S (1824) *The history of Cornwall*, Helston: William Penaluna (3 volumes)

Hope, R.C (1893) *The legendary lore of the holy wells of England*, London: Elliot Stock

Ives, C (1880) *The Isles of summer; or, Nassau and the Bahamas*, New Haven: self-published

Jacobs, T (1844) *Scenes, incidents, and adventures in the Pacific Ocean*, New York: Harper

Jakobsson, Å (2017) *The troll inside you: paranormal activity in the Medieval North*, Goleta: Punctum Books

Johnston, H.H (1906) *Liberia*, New York: Dodd, Mead & company (two volumes)

Jump-sail-dive (2014) 'The Mermaid's Pool': [www.jumpsaildive.com/2014/07/01/the-mermaids-pool/](http://www.jumpsaildive.com/2014/07/01/the-mermaids-pool/) - accessed 20th February 2021

Kennedy, C. E (1921) 'Beautiful Nassau', *The Nassau Guardian* 3rd March: 2

- Kreutz, A (2014) *Children and the environment in an Australian indigenous community: a psychological approach*, London: Routledge
- Leach, M (1961) 'Jamaican duppy lore', *Journal of American Folklore* v74: 207-215
- Leistner O.A and Morris, J.W (1976) 'Southern African place names', *Annals of the Cape provincial Museums - Natural History* v12: 1-565
- Lowry, M (2000 [1933]) *Ultramarine*, London: Penguin
- Meikle, H.B (1958) 'Mermaids and fairmaids or water gods and goddesses of Tobago', *Caribbean Quarterly* v5: 103-108
- Messenger, J.C (1967) 'The influence of the Irish In Montserrat', *Caribbean Quarterly* v13: 3-26
- Montserrat Culture Modern and Traditional (n.d) Facebook page: <https://m.facebook.com/groups/250005972049181> - accessed May 3rd 2021
- Osborne, S (1984) *Mermaids and curses*, n.p: UNESCO
- Quimby, H (1906) 'Curious scenes that attract visitors to the Bahamas', *Leslie's illustrated Weekly Newspaper* v106, 251, 257
- Reaney, P.H (1935) *The place-names of Essex*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Rouse, I (1992) *The Tainos: rise and decline of the people who greeted Columbus*, New Haven: Yale University Press
- Showcaves.com (2020) 'Mermaid's Lair Cave': [www.showcaves.com/english/bs/caves/MermaidsLair.html](http://www.showcaves.com/english/bs/caves/MermaidsLair.html) - accessed March 20h 2021
- Simpson, J (1976) *The folklore of the Welsh Border* London: Batsford
- Sparkes, H (2021) "The waters were made for her": River mumma beliefs in 19th and 20th century Jamaican ethnographic accounts, *Shima* v15 n2: 24-34
- Staff Writer (2012) 'Nature makes Dominica a Caribbean island of adventure', *Tampa Bay Times* May 19th: <https://www.tampabay.com/features/travel/nature-makes-dominica-a-caribbean-island-of-adventure/1230653/> - accessed May 3rd 2021
- Stark, J (1891) *Stark's history and guide to the Bahama Islands*, Boston: Stark
- Stommel, H (2017) *Lost islands: the story of islands that have vanished from nautical charts*, Mineola: Dover
- Stubbs, G (2018) 'Untold secrets of the Mermaid Pond and The Owl's Hole', *Grand Bahama* 13th November: [www.culturalmemorybahamas.com/untold-secrets-of-the-mermaid-pond-and-the-owls-hole/](http://www.culturalmemorybahamas.com/untold-secrets-of-the-mermaid-pond-and-the-owls-hole/) - accessed 9th February 2021
- Geological Survey of Great Britain (1915) *Summary of progress of the Geological Survey of Great Britain for 1915*, London: Stationary Office

## Young: Mermaid Toponyms in the West Indies

Szeles, U (2011) 'Sea secret rising: the Lwa Lasirenn in Haitian vodou', *Journal of Haitian Studies* v17: 193-210

The Out Islands (2017) 'Explore folklore at this off-road blue hole in South Cat Island': <https://www.myoutislands.com/blog/boi-news/explore-folklore-at-this-off-road-blue-hole-in-south-cat-island> - accessed May 4th 2021

Thorndale, T (1898) *Sketches and stories of the Lake Erie islands* Sandusky, Ohio: I.F. Mack

Travel Talk Online (2020) 'The Mermaid's Chair, Hawknest Bay? Worth a stop?': <https://www.traveltalkonline.com/ubbthreads.php/ubb/printthread/Board/8/main/31801/type/thread.html> - accessed 16 May 2021

Unattributed (1833) 'Friday, Sept 27,' *Bell's Weekly Messenger* 30th September: 7

Unattributed (1871) 'Liverpool naturalists' excursion,' *Liverpool Mercury* 4th September: 6

Unattributed (1920) 'Development Board competition', *The Nassau Guardian* 25th September: 1

Unattributed (1933) 'Deaths', *The Scotsman* 16th December: 22

Unattributed (1997) 'Town planning', *The Abaconian* September 16th: www link now inoperative

Wade, M (2016) 'Getting to Mermaid's Chair on St Thomas': [www.thatmattwade.medium.com/getting-to-mermaids-chair-on-st-thomas-8e95b09b5b05](http://www.thatmattwade.medium.com/getting-to-mermaids-chair-on-st-thomas-8e95b09b5b05) - accessed February 20th 2021

White, J.C (1909) *Sikhim & Bhutan: twenty-one years on the north-east frontier, 1887-1908*, New York: Longmans, Green

Widdowson, J (1977) *If you don't be good: verbal social control in Newfoundland*, St John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research

Young, J. L (2009) 'Mermaid Pool', *The Field Naturalist: Quarterly Bulletin of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club* v2: 7

Young, S (2021) 'Mermaids, mere-Maids and no maids: mermaid place names and mermaid folklore in Britain', *Shima* v15 n2: 176-201

## Appendix – Mermaid place names in the West Indies (and ID numbers used in article)

ID	Location name	Island	Coordinates
WIMo1	Mermaid's Chair	St John	18° 21' 12" N – 64° 46' 37" W [approx]
WIMo2	Mermaid's Chair	St Thomas	18° 21' 10" N – 65° 02' 24.2" W
WIMo3	Mermaid Hole	Cat Island	24° 11' 05" N – 75° 21' 35" W
WIMo4	Mermaid Hole	Montserrat	16° 42' 24" N – 62° 11' 47" W [approx]

# **Young: Mermaid Toponyms in the West Indies**

WIMo5	Mermaid's Hole	Bermuda	Location uncertain
WIMo6	Mermaid's Lair Cave	Grand Bahama	26° 36' 24" N – 78° 27' 35" W [approx]
WIMo7	Mermaid Pond	Grand Bahama	26° 30' 15" N – 78° 44' 36" W
WIMo8	Mermaid Pond	Rum Cay	23° 41' 24" N – 74° 48' 18" W
WIMo9	Mermaid Pond	San Salvador	23° 58' 30.5" – N 74° 30' 261" W
WIM10	Mermaid Pool	Trinidad	10° 40' 36" N – 61° 03' 45" W
WIM11	Mermaid's Pool	Antigua	16° 59' 55" N – 61° 45' 19" W
WIM12	Mermaid's Pool	Dominica	15° 22' 27" N – 61° 16' 26" W
WIM13	Mermaid's Pool	New Providence	25° 02' 54" N – 77° 19' 41" W
WIM14	Mermaid Reef	Great Abaco	26° 33' 13" N – 77° 03' 10" W