

THE JAMAICA SLAVE REBELLION OF 1831

ON TUESDAY, THE 27TH OF DECEMBER, 1831, A FIRE ON KENSINGTON estate in St. James, one of the most important sugar growing parishes in Jamaica, marked the outbreak of a slave rebellion which swept the western parishes of the island. The rebellion was precipitated by circumstances which comparison with negro slave rebellions in the United States suggests were classic ingredients for revolt: political excitement stirred by rumours of emancipation, economic stress, a revolutionary philosophy circulating among the slaves and the presence of a group of whites whom the slaves could identify as their allies.¹ The Jamaican rebellion, however, was characterized by the fact that the missions were the source of the slaves' philosophy and the missionaries themselves were cast in the rôle of the slaves' allies. Further, a network of independent religious meetings which had developed round the mission churches served the slaves as a ready made political organization and thus supplied an element for which there is no parallel in American slave revolts.

Violent protest against slavery in the form of riot or rebellion had been endemic in eighteenth-century Jamaica; the outbreaks occurred on average every five years, and two such efforts, the Maroon wars of 1738 and 1795, secured freedom for small communities of ex-slaves in the mountain districts. The abolition of the slave trade in 1808 and the stabilization of areas of settlement produced more settled conditions; the Negro villages were no longer dominated by immigrant Africans and a creole slave society emerged. It was not until the 1820s, under the influence of the anti-slavery agitation in England, that further disturbances took place. The most important was in Demerara in 1823; in Jamaica itself slave conspiracies were discovered in 1823 and 1824.

The comparative quiescence of the slaves made no substantial difference to the administration of the slave system. The white ruling class, a dwindling minority of some 30,000 in a slave population ten times greater, disciplined and degraded their slaves in the traditional manner. The exclusion of slaves as witnesses in the courts, for example, underlined the assumption that they were

¹ H. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (Columbia U.P., 1944), chaps. iv and v. Aptheker also specifies an increase in the slave population, a point irrelevant to Jamaica where the slaves formed an overwhelming majority of the population.

creatures of inferior intelligence. Family life was discouraged to demonstrate the intrinsically animal nature of the Negro. The whip as an instrument of punishment and a badge of authority symbolized the whole tenor of slavery, and cases of excessively brutal punishments came to the attention of the imperial government as long as the system lasted. The imperial government's programme for the reform of slavery, suggested in 1823, touched on all these features of the system and won no effective support in the island.²

In such a society christian missions to the slaves were inevitably regarded as a dangerous innovation and the missionaries themselves as agents of Wilberforce. Missions were only established in the island through the good offices of individual whites, and expanded under the indirect auspices of the imperial government which promoted the activity of the established Anglican church among the slaves as part of the amelioration programme. The missionaries, mindful of their position, geared their teaching to promote obedience, but this did not prevent the slaves from seeing in the doctrine of spiritual equality sanctions for political discontent. It is significant, therefore, that the rebellion took place in the western parishes³ where the missions were most numerous and independent religious meetings proliferated. The Baptists were particularly influential in St. James where Thomas Burchell, a popular and enterprising missionary, had been in charge of the Montego Bay station from its foundation in 1824 and had built up a number of flourishing out-stations. The Wesleyans were also represented at Montego Bay and Lucea and the Moravians were active in the parishes of Manchester, St. Elizabeth and Westmoreland. The missions played a rôle in the slave rebellion in some respects analogous to that of the Methodist churches in working-class movements in England. In England, also, areas of intense political activity coincided with areas of intense religious activity: for example, the Wesleyan church and the Chartist movement flourished simultaneously in the West Riding of Yorkshire.⁴ The ideal of christian obedience and rewards in heaven proved

² The proposals also included, the abolition of Sunday markets, the removal of obstacles to manumission, the regulation of sales for debt, the prohibition of sales separating members of the same family and the institution of savings banks. C[olonial] O[ffice] 854/1, Circ. despatch, 9 July 1823, pp. 160-4.

³ An independent conspiracy was formed among the head people on a small group of estates in Portland, and slaves from estates in St. Thomas in the East near Manchioneal planned to abscond to the bush where they built a hide-out village: C.O., 137/185, Courts Martial Portland, St. Thomas in the East.

⁴ E. J. Hobsbawm, "Methodism and the Threat of Revolution in Britain", *History Today*, Feb. 1957, pp. 120-1. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), discusses the connection in chapter xi.

unsatisfactory to chattel-slave and wage-slave alike. The missions therefore, unknown to the missionaries, provided both inspiration and — indirectly — organization for a rebellion which exceeded in scale and duration any American slave enterprise.

The current of political excitement which sparked off the rebellion derived from the campaign for the immediate abolition of slavery launched in the House of Commons in April 1831. It was obvious to the Colonial Office that this campaign was likely to create disturbances in the slave colonies and, in June 1831, the precaution was taken of supplying the West Indian governors with a royal proclamation to quiet signs of unrest. But the white population in Jamaica showed no such prescience. Intent only on expressing their unqualified opposition to abolition, they exacerbated the impact of the campaign by holding a series of public protest meetings throughout the island between July and November. Inflammatory speeches were made and duly published in the newspapers. Armed revolt was advocated and the possibility of securing assistance from the United States was openly discussed.⁵ Plans were made to set up a new governing body, independent of the crown, consisting of delegates from the parish meetings to meet concurrently with the Assembly in November 1831. This scheme had no immediate results,⁶ but the Assembly itself, meeting in November, marked its unrelenting opposition to any mitigation of the slave system by refusing, almost unanimously, to discuss a proposal to abolish flogging for women, a reform introduced in the Crown colonies in 1824. The governor, the Earl of Belmore, commented that the parish meetings seemed calculated "to disturb the minds of the slaves",⁷ but he made no effort to restrain them and the royal proclamation was not published until December by which time the rebellion had virtually begun.

The slaves were therefore exposed to the full effect of these events. Comparatively few were able to understand the precise nature of events in England and the colonists' response, but the gist of the political situation was translated into easily remembered and amended anecdote, circulated endlessly among the population. A well-known St. James magistrate and attorney, James Grignon, was said to have

⁵ Parl. Papers, House of Commons (hereafter referred to as P.P.) 1831-2, vol. xlvii, no. 285, *Despatches Relative to the Recent Rebellion*, pp. 263, 266-8: Petitions of Freeholders and others. W. L. Burn, *Emancipation and Apprenticeship* (London, 1937), p. 91.

⁶ Belmore was advised that such a meeting would only be unconstitutional if it had a seditious intention. Belmore avoided any direct action by letting it be known that if the Assembly corresponded with the delegates he would dissolve the House. C.O., 137/179, Belmore to Goderich, 17 Dec. 1831, no. 130.

⁷ P.P., 1831-2, vol. xlvii, no. 285, p. 263: Belmore to Goderich, 20 July 1831.

told his fellow whites: "The king is going to give black people free: but he hopes that all his friends will be of his mind and spill our blood first". It was rumoured that the whites in the House of Assembly were planning to keep the women and children in slavery, while they took out the men and shot them like pigeons. Reports of the intentions of the "high buckra" were confirmed by the conduct of their underlings. Baptist members told Knibb: "When busha [i.e. overseer] and book-keeper flog us they say we are going to be free and before it comes they will get it out of us".⁸ The missionaries reported in July from Kingston that "the expectation of the slaves has been raised to the very highest point with reference to freedom". The same month, at the other side of the island, Knibb wrote from Falmouth: "The slaves believe they are soon to be free, and are anxiously waiting till King William sends them their free paper".

Political awareness was sharpened by economic distress. A six-month drought early in the year, followed by heavy rains in May, affected the harvest of ground provisions in many areas. Smallpox and dysentery were rife.⁹ Hard times made the existing system less tolerable for the slaves and the prospect of emancipation the more desirable.

Political discontent found expression in religious groups which had developed side by side with the mission churches. The groups reflected primarily the slaves' religious interests, and mingled christianity with traditional African religious forms to produce a type of worship which satisfied their emotional needs more completely than did mission services. But, in a society where religious meetings were the only form of organized activity permitted, such meetings became the natural focal point for all the slaves' interests not served by estate organization. Freed from the supervision of the missionary and his emphasis on conformity and obedience, the slaves were also able to express their political interests and to use religion as a sanction for their hopes.

The same process has been observed in Africa, both among industrial workers in South Africa subjected to the political restrictions of apartheid and in the Congo under the Belgians. Throughout these areas separatist christian sects have proliferated under the leadership of Africans, which combine religious functions, cleansing

⁸ H. Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery* (London, 1853), pp. 112, 114; J. H. Hinton, *Memoir of William Knibb* (London, 1847), pp. 115, 113.

⁹ Methodist Missionary Society archives, letters from missionaries in Jamaica to the society in London (hereinafter referred to as M.M.S. letters), Pennock, Kingston, 11 July 1831; Edney, Grateful Hill, 22 Sept. 1831; Duncan, Kingston, 7 June, 1831.

from sin and protecting from witchcraft, with political aspirations, looking forward to the end of white domination.¹⁰ Even in nineteenth-century England, where church members could carry their concern for justice into a range of political associations, brotherhoods and unions, churches became political clubs. In Huddersfield the New Connection Methodists were known as the Tom Paine Methodists since they discussed Tom Paine at chapel meetings together with the works of their founder, Alexander Kilham; and in Halifax a group of Methodists purchased their own chapel and ran it as a Jacobin chapel. The Primitive Methodist sect identified their church so closely with the trade-union movement as to make it practically a labour religion, and the church supplied almost all the trade-union leaders for the agricultural labourers and the Durham and Northumberland miners throughout the century.¹¹

The religious groups among the slaves fell into three categories: groups consisting chiefly of mission members meeting on the estates and modelling themselves primarily on the mission churches; groups formed by mission converts, often church leaders, among slaves who did not attend mission churches; and, thirdly, groups run by leaders who were independent of the missions, or repudiated them outright, while associating themselves with christianity — these latter tending to call themselves Baptists, “native” or “spirit” Baptists.

Each mission had a satellite of such groups. Slaves and coloured people took up preaching and in some instances became known for the influence they exercised over the slaves on a particular estate. Political thinking developed to some extent along racist lines. But the slaves’ overwhelming political concern was not race but freedom, and with the anti-slavery campaign in England reaching new heights, political discontent overflowed from these groups into the mission churches. Hope of a better life in the world to come became hope of a better life in the world after abolition. In the last months of 1831 there was what the missionaries described as “a great outpouring of the Spirit” in the North Coast parishes. The chapels were crowded out with hearers, and membership figures rapidly expanded.¹²

¹⁰ B. Davidson, *The African Awakening* (London, 1955), pp. 156-61; M. Gluckman, “The Magic of Despair”, *The Listener*, Apr. 29, 1954, p. 725.

¹¹ E. P. Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-5; Hobsbawm, *art. cit.*, p. 118 and his *Primitive Rebels* (Manchester, 1959), p. 138.

¹² M.M.S. letters, Edney, Grateful Hill, 22 Sept. 1831, referring to Guys Hill; Wood, St. Ann’s Bay, 1 Oct. 1831. Revivals of this sort occurred periodically; in 1828 and 1826 the mission churches had benefited in a similar way. Such movements might reflect an outburst of purely religious enthusiasm, but there seems no doubt that the revival of 1831 represented political interests. M.M.S. letters, Ratcliffe, Bellemont, 10 Nov. 1826; Orton, Montego Bay, 13 July 1828.

After the rebellion it became clear that

many churches and congregations had been swelled by a host anticipating freedom, who, now that their hopes were disappointed, fell away. It was common for a backslider to answer an exhortation thus: "It is no use minister; what can church and prayers do for we again? . . .".¹³

Out of this political ferment emerged leaders who directed the widespread excitement and discontent into action, utilizing religious meetings and the authority of the missionaries to promote the cause of freedom. The most outstanding rebel leader was Sam Sharpe, a domestic slave who worked in Montego Bay and was a member of the Baptist church there. Sharpe was literate, intelligent and ambitious and, like many of his kind, he found an outlet and a stimulant for his ambition in a mission church. As a convert, he displayed a talent for eloquent and passionate preaching which won him a position as leader, entrusted with the spiritual care of a class of other converts. Sharpe, however, was not content to serve simply within the church; he built up an independent connection with the "native" Baptists among whom he figured as a "daddy" or "ruler". At the same time he found mission teaching on obedience unsatisfactory. From his own reading of the Bible he became convinced that the slaves were entitled to freedom.¹⁴ This conviction, combined with the development of the emancipation campaign in England, of which Sharpe kept himself well informed, led him to believe that the slaves must make a bid for freedom. In recruiting aides, Sharpe naturally turned to other Baptist slaves of whom George Taylor, another church leader, Johnson, George Guthrie, Thomas Dove and Robert Gardner all became leaders in the rebellion.¹⁵

Sharpe, according to the account he gave the Wesleyan missionary, Henry Bleby, who had several conversations with him when he was in jail, did not plan armed rebellion, but mass passive resistance. After the Christmas holidays when the cane harvest was due to begin, the slaves were to sit down and refuse to work until their masters acknowledged that they were free men and agreed to pay them wages. Sharpe expected that the whites would try to intimidate the strikers by shooting hostages as examples; but the slaves were not expected to fight back, simply to continue passive resistance.¹⁶

¹³ H. M. Waddell, *Twenty-nine years in the West Indies and Central Africa* (London, 1865), pp. 70-1.

¹⁴ Bleby, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁵ P.P., 1831-2, vol. xlvii, no. 561, *Report of the House of Assembly on the Slave Insurrection*, p. 214, confession of T. Dove; p. 211, confession of Ed. Morrice. Gardner belonged to Greenwich estate, on the borders of St. James and Westmoreland. In 1825 it had been reported to the Colonial Office that a negro preacher held sway over the slaves there.

¹⁶ Bleby, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

It became evident, however, that plans were also made for armed revolt. Several leaders in the rebellion, including Gardner and Dove, took military titles and led a slave regiment. They claimed that Sharpe himself had planned armed rebellion and timed it for Christmas so that, with the whites away in the towns, the slaves could easily collect arms from the estates.¹⁷ Possibly the intention was that the majority of the slaves should strike while some undertook military action to back up the passive resistance.

Whatever the case, plans for rebellion were promulgated at religious meetings among mission members and among the "native" Baptists. The usual practice was to hold a regular prayer meeting after which a selected few were asked to remain behind; Sharpe's aide then explained the plan and tried to persuade all present to swear on the Bible not to work after Christmas. Sharpe himself was a speaker who appeared to have "the feelings and passions of his hearers completely at his command"; when he spoke against slavery they were "wrought up almost to a state of madness".¹⁸ His language, a combination of religious imagery and political message, was no doubt the language of radical Methodists in England. As one wrote of the pre-Reform government:

Unequal laws and a partial administration plant a thorn in every breast and spread gloom in every countenance It may justly be said of such rulers, Their vine is the vine of Sodom and the fields of Gommorrah; their grapes are the grapes of gall

And the oaths sworn by the slaves were probably like the oaths of their English counterparts, based on the Bible: "Thus saith the Lord God: remove the Diadem and take off the Crown . . . exalt him that is low and abase him that is high . . .".¹⁹

The arguments used to encourage the slaves to take action included the notion, common to the Jamaican disturbances of December 1823 and June 1824, and the Demerara rebellion of 1823, and to several American slave disturbances, that freedom had already been granted and was being withheld by the slave owners.²⁰ Sharpe, though too well-informed to hold the belief himself, was said to have told his followers that the legislation had passed in March 1831. As a natural extension of this idea, it was also said that the king's

¹⁷ P.P., 1831-2, vol. xlvii, no. 561, p. 217, Confession of R. Gardner; p. 210, Confession of J. Davis.

¹⁸ Bleby, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-2, 115, quoting R. Gardner.

¹⁹ Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 393 quoting a minister of the Independent Methodists; p. 392, the oath taken in a Lancashire conspiracy, 1801.

²⁰ This belief was also current during slave disturbances in Virginia, 1830, North Carolina 1825, Alabama 1840. For a full discussion see H. Aptheker, *op. cit.*

troops would not fight the slaves since they were only claiming their rights, or even, that the king's troops would fight with the slaves. During the rebellion some of the slaves believed that the "black sand", or gunpowder, landed from a naval ship at Savannah-la-Mar, was for their use.²¹

The main body of arguments, however, related to religion, and Christianity came to provide a positive justification for action. Sharpe and his aides proclaimed the natural equality of men and, on the authority of the Bible, denied the right of the white man to hold the black in bondage. The text, "No man can serve two masters", persistently quoted by Sharpe, became a slogan among the slaves. To protest against slavery was a matter of "assisting their brethren in the work of the Lord . . . this was not the work of man alone, but they had assistance from God".²² The authority of the missionaries themselves was used to sanction the protest: it was widely believed that the missionaries favoured freedom for the slaves. Sharpe's pastor, Burchell, of the Montego Bay Baptist mission, who had left for England in May 1831, was made in his absence into a political leader. Messages attributed to him circulated among the slaves: that he would be a pillar of iron to them, but they must shed no blood, for life was sweet, easy to take away, but very hard to give. Slaves who were unconvinced that freedom was already legally theirs, adopted the pleasing and plausible expectation that Burchell, who was due to return at Christmas 1831, would bring the free paper with him.²³

Preparations for the Christmas rebellion probably started about August 1831, in the interval between the arduous work of cane holing and the cane harvest, and were a parallel development to the white population's parish meetings. Given the network of religious meetings and a ready-made following among the slaves, Sharpe and his aides were able during that time, to spread their influence through St. James, parts of Hanover and Trelawny and into Westmoreland, St. Elizabeth and Manchester, an area of six hundred square miles.

It was not until the missionaries met their congregations for the Christmas services that they learnt of the plans for rebellion and of the political rôle with which they had been endowed. Naturally, the missionaries made every effort to keep their converts from any form of violence or disobedience, and demonstrated by their arguments

²¹ P.P., 1831-2, vol. xlvii, no. 561, p. 215, Confession of T. Dove; no. 285, p. 286, Deposition of W. Anand.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 218, Confession of R. Gardner; no. 285, p. 295, Deposition of W. Anand. Bleby, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

²³ *Ibid.*, no. 285, p. 286, Deposition of W. Anand; no. 561, p. 188, Evidence of H. R. Wallace. Bleby, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.

that the slaves must not look to them for support. The Presbyterian missionary, George Blyth, who had just returned to the island from a visit to England, strove to assure his congregation that he was in possession of the latest news. He argued the case against rebellion on grounds of principle and policy, describing

the bloodshed, anarchy and injury to religion which would be the consequence of insurrection . . . I also described to them the great improbability of the slaves obtaining their liberty by such means on account of the want of unanimity, arms, etc. . . .

On the 27th of December, at the opening of a new Baptist chapel at Salters Hill, St. James, Knibb used the occasion to warn the people:

I learn that some wicked persons have persuaded you that the King has made you free. Hear me, I love your souls. — I would not tell you a lie for the world. What you have been told is false — false as Hell can make it. I entreat you not to believe it, but go to your work as usual. If you have any love to Jesus Christ, to religion, to your ministers, to those kind friends in England who have given money to help you build this chapel, be not led away by wicked men.

A Wesleyan meeting at Ramble on the 26th of December was conducted in the same tone: the day-long services admonished the people that religion meant love to God and men.²⁴

The slaves' reaction to such advice, however, reflected their profound disappointment. When it became clear that the missionaries were solely concerned with law and order, they became sullen, and some openly angry. At Hampden, Blyth's congregation was "not only disappointed but offended" with him. At Salters Hill the Baptist congregation was:

perfectly furious and would not listen to . . . dissuasions from engaging in such a perilous enterprise They accused their ministers of deserting them, and threatened to take revenge upon them.²⁵

From the outset of the rebellion it was clear that the preparations Sharpe and the other conspirators had made were inadequate for success. In the first place, the rebellion proper was presaged by a number of false alarms which served to put the white population and the government on guard. A week before Christmas there was a labour dispute on Salt Spring estate near Montego Bay: the St. James magistrates sent for troops from Falmouth as a precaution, and the governor, Belmore, on the 22nd of December sent warships to Montego Bay and Black River and belatedly issued the proclamation

²⁴ *Scottish Missionary Society and Philanthropic Register* (hereinafter referred to as *S.M.S.*), March 1832, p. 98, Blyth, Falmouth, 2 Jan. 1832; Baptist Missionaries, *A narrative of recent events connected with the Baptist Mission in this island* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1833) (hereinafter referred to as *Narrative Account*), p. 29; M.M.S. letters, Murray, Montego Bay, 10 Mar. 1832.

²⁵ *S.M.S.*, Mar. 1832, pp. 98, 101, Blyth, Falmouth, 2 Jan. 1832.

received from England the previous June. On the 23rd of December in Trelawny, the trash house was fired on one estate, and on two others the slaves went on strike. Receiving this news on the 28th of December, the governor in council decided to send troops to Montego Bay. These troops were ready to embark when news of the rebellion reached Spanish Town and martial law was immediately declared.²⁶

The firing of the trash house on Kensington estate, St. James on the evening of the 27th of December, 1831, which served as a signal for the rebellion, was symptomatic of confusion among the slaves. The destruction of property formed no part of Sharpe's original plan and may have been started accidentally; on the other hand, the owner of Kensington estate was warned by a neighbour on the morning of the 27th of December that the slaves planned to burn the estate that evening. It was said that the properties to be fired were numbered and Kensington was first because, set on a hill, it served as a beacon.²⁷ In the event, the rebellion comprised all forms of protest action: armed rebellion, withdrawal of labour, destruction of property, while amid the confusion some slaves simply stuck to estate routine.

The rebels' military core was the Black Regiment, about one hundred and fifty strong with fifty guns among them.²⁸ The Black Regiment, under the command of Colonel Johnson of Retrieve estate, fought a successful action on the 28th of December 1831 against the Western Interior militia, which had retreated from its barracks in the interior to Old Montpelier estate, near Montego Bay. From there, the Black Regiment forced a further retreat to Montego Bay and put the country between Montego Bay, Lucea and Savannah-la-Mar in rebel hands. The Black Regiment then carried rebellion into the hills, invading estates and inviting recruits, burning properties on the border of St. James and setting off a trail of fires through the Great River Valley in Westmoreland and St. Elizabeth. Its commanders, "Colonels" Dove and Gardner, set up headquarters at Greenwich, Gardner's estate on the border of Hanover and Westmoreland, and from there a sketchy organization held sway over the surrounding estates. The slaves were organized into companies, each responsible for guarding its estate boundaries and holding allegiance to Gardner and Dove at Greenwich. This sort of activity was carried on by a number of rebel leaders, also Baptist members, notably Captain Dehany operating in the Salters Hill area, and Captain Tharp in the

²⁶ P.P., 1831-2, vol. xlvii, no. 285, pp. 272-3, Belmore to Goderich, 6 Jan. 1832.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 561, p. 200, Evidence of J. H. Morris. Bleby, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

²⁸ C.O., 137/185, Courts Martial, St. James, vol. i, f. 42, Evidence of Angus McNeil. Bleby, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

interior.²⁹ Their work was supplemented by the activity of self-appointed leaders, who took the opportunity to roam the country collecting recruits, looting and destroying and intimidating other slaves, enjoying a little brief authority.

There appears, however, to have been no co-operation among these various groups. They were short of arms, no special arrangements having been made to secure guns or ammunition.³⁰ Moreover, the slaves had no experience of military operations and in their contacts with the soldiers showed no skill in guerilla warfare. The scene of a typical skirmish between the rebels and their trained opponents was described by the Wesleyan missionary, Bleby:

The insurgent slaves, with little judgment had posted themselves on the side of a hill commanding the narrow mountain road; and when the soldiers came in sight, they discharged upon them a volley of musketry and stones . . . They then ran and attempted to gain the brow of the hill, but in so doing exposed themselves fully to the unerring aim of the military . . . Sixteen bodies, dragged into the road, were putrefying in the sun when we passed by . . . carrion crows were feeding upon them.³¹

The main rebel forces were rapidly disposed of. By the first week in January, armed rebellion was virtually at an end.

Strike action was effectively organized in some areas. In Trelawny, for example, the slaves on Carlton estate, "sat down" firmly after Christmas. The Presbyterian missionary, Rev. Waddell, went to the estate to persuade them they were not yet free, but they accused him of being paid by the magistrates to deceive them. The strikers were equally firm in dealing with a gang of rebels who invaded the estate; they did not allow them to burn the property or plunder the stores, arguing that if they were to be free they would want rum and sugar for themselves.³²

Successful strike action, however, demanded the co-operation of large numbers of estates, and it proved impossible to organize widespread passive resistance with the help of a few aides and a proliferation of meetings where the converted kissed the Bible and swore allegiance. A strong nucleus of strike leaders, working with the

²⁹ C.O., 137/185, Courts Martial, St. James, vol. i, f. 20, Evidence of Philip; vol. ii, ff. 46-7, trial of Tharp; vol. iii, ff. 37-40, trial of Dehany. Baptist Missionary Society Archives, Brief on behalf of Francis Gardner, pp. 5-6.

³⁰ Caches of guns and ammunition were found in negro huts on Ginger Hill estate, St. Elizabeth, and at Catadupa estate, between Lucea and Montego Bay: P.P., 1831-2, vol. xlvii, no. 285, p. 284; Major-Gen. D. Robertson to Belmore, 1 Jan. 1832; Belmore to Goderich, 16 Jan. 1832. One of the rebel leaders claimed that a white man on Lethe estate had taught some of them to make cartridges: *ibid.*, no. 561, p. 218, Confession of R. Gardner.

³¹ Bleby, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³² Waddell, *op. cit.*, p. 56-7.

headman, or one of the drivers on each plantation, with weeks of careful instruction for all the slaves on the precise form the strike was to take, would have been necessary for there to be any hope of success. In the circumstances the authorities, instead of being confronted by thousands of slaves over a wide area refusing to work, had to deal only with isolated groups; and pacification consisted of forcing the slaves to choose between martyrdom and submission. On Georgia estate, Trelawny, where the slaves put up a determined and well disciplined opposition, the negro village was subjected to a daybreak attack by the militia using a fieldpiece; when they still refused to move, they were dragged out, one by one, and one man was shot as an example.³³ Sharpe had warned his followers that the whites would try to intimidate them by shooting hostages; but only the consciousness of being part of a solid strike resistance, involving hundreds of estates, could have given the slaves the confidence to accept the necessity for such martyrs. In the circumstances they were intimidated and returned to work.

Most of the estates involved in the rebellion were neither part of the rebels' rudimentary military organization, nor organized for passive resistance. Their rebellion consisted chiefly in the destruction of white property, and a brief heady disregard for routine combined with assertions of freedom. Some indulged in isolated acts of defiance: one woman put down her washing at the water tank to toss a fire stick into the trash house as the militia passed the estate. Many, caught up in the excitement, took the opportunity to kill and cook the estate hogs, or hamstring the estate cows. The head driver of one estate allowed a party of rebels to burn the great house and celebrated his new-found independence by galloping round the property on his owner's horse wearing his owner's hat.³⁴ In some cases, faction developed between the law-abiding slaves and those who claimed their freedom. Judging by the testimonies of witnesses at the Courts Martial, this split often occurred along class lines: where the head driver and the skilled workers were for the rebellion, the field slaves stood by "buckra", and vice-versa. On Burnt Ground penn, St. James, for example, the head driver tried to prevent the buildings being burnt, but an obstreperous field slave, one Henry James, who had recently served a three month workhouse sentence, prevailed on the slaves to fire them. At Moor Park, however, the slaves who

³³ C.O., 137/185, Courts Martial, Trelawny, ff. 12-15, trial of Edmund Grant.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Courts Martial, St. James, vol. iii, f. 51, trial of Jinny; vol. i, f. 6, trial of James Guy; vol. ii, ff. 20-1, trial of Thomas Linton; vol. i, ff. 17-18, trial of Alick Gordon.

wanted to protect the master's property from the rebels were prevented from doing so by the head driver.³⁵

On estates where the rebel cause had no representative, confusion reigned. The slaves were intimidated by the fires and by the appearance of rebel bands wanting to loot and burn the property. Some left their homes and went into hiding in the woods. Others kept their nerve and organized guards to keep out the rioters; and in some cases, as on the estates observed by a missionary in Hanover, they carried on with the cane harvest, "making sugar and rum as good as they usually do without any white supervision".³⁶

The failure of the rebellion left the slaves exposed to white vengeance. The military authorities, represented by Sir Willoughby Cotton, the commander-in-chief, were concerned simply to restore order and combined retribution against slaves caught in rebellious acts with free pardon for all who returned to work on the estates. A proclamation to this effect was issued by Cotton on his arrival in Montego Bay, and a hundred of the rebel prisoners were released to circulate it on the estates.³⁷ But for the overseers and attorneys-turned-militiamen, pacification involved not only restoring order, but vengeance for their losses and humiliation. After the defeat at Old Montpelier, the militia had been pinned in Montego Bay until the military arrived — watching estates go up in flames, anxiously patrolling the streets for fear of rebel incursion, their women and children stowed away for safety on ships in the harbour. Pacification took place amid the charred and blackened ruins of a countryside which a few days before had been ripe for harvest. It was estimated that the damage in St. James alone amounted to six hundred thousand pounds.³⁸ The militia were bent on vengeance and among them

³⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. ii, ff. 35-6, trial of Henry James; vol. i, ff. 17-18.

³⁶ *S.M.S.*, March 1832, pp. 198-9, Watson, Lucea, 7 Feb. 1832.

³⁷ *P.P.*, 1831-2, vol. xlvii, no. 285, p. 288, proclamation 2 Jan. 1832: "Negroes, You have taken up arms against your masters Some wicked persons have told you the King has made you free In the name of the King I come amongst you to tell you that you are misled All who are found with the rebels will be put to death without mercy. You cannot resist the King's troop All who yield themselves up provided they are not principals and chiefs in the burnings that have been committed will receive His Majesty's gracious pardon, all who hold out will meet with certain death".

³⁸ *P.P.*, 1831-2, vol. xlvii, no. 561. Sum total of losses in the rebellion in Jamaican currency:

St. James:	£606,250
Hanover:	£425,818
Westmoreland:	£47,092
St. Elizabeth:	£22,146
Trelawny:	£4,960
Machester:	£46,270
Portland:	£772
St. Thomas in the East:	£1,280

were individuals whose political rancour approached insanity. They raided and burnt negro villages on rebel estates, driving neighbouring slaves to take refuge in the woods for fear it was their turn next.³⁹ Suspected ring-leaders and known troublemakers were shot out of hand, despite the proclamation. In one case all the slaves on an estate in Trelawny had been pardoned by Cotton in person when, an hour later, a militia detachment under the command of the estate's attorney, John Gunn, arrived. The slaves were again called out and the attorney-turned-lieutenant ordered the second driver of the gang to be shot. On this occasion the attorney was court-martialled, and acquitted; the court martial was unique, such executions not unusual. The Wesleyan missionary, Bleby, watched the militia arrive at an estate where the slaves, in accordance with the proclamation, were at work. Two men, a boy and a woman, were taken from their work and sent for trial in Montego Bay where the men were condemned and shot.⁴⁰ Cases such as this cast grave doubt on the official figure for slaves killed in the rebellion: 207, compared with 14 whites. As a Presbyterian missionary commented, "In the rage for making examples [the colony] lost many able hands it could ill spare".⁴¹

The Courts Martial hastily constituted of militia men on the warrant of the commander-in-chief⁴² were equally ruthless. At Montego Bay, ninety-nine slaves were tried of whom eighty-one were executed; at the Slave Courts, instituted when martial law was lifted, eighty-one were tried of whom thirty-nine were executed; in all 626 slaves were tried of whom 312 were executed.⁴³ The trials at Montego Bay, where the greatest number of slaves were tried, followed a regular pattern: it was established that the slaves on a particular estate were rebellious, the prisoner was proved to belong to this estate and a witness found to claim the prisoner had been seen to commit an offence which could be considered a rebellious act, or even to have heard him claim to have committed one. Witnesses were, from time to time, condemned by interested attorneys and owners as "great rascals", "liars", "notorious runaways", and the trial records suggest they often had private grievances to pay off, or were turning witness

³⁹ Waddell, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁴⁰ C.O., 137/185, Courts Martial, Trelawny, ff. 131-6, trial of Lieut. John Gunn. Bleby, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-54, 17.

⁴¹ Waddell, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁴² The Courts Martial at Montego Bay were ordered by Col. George McF. Lawson of the St. James Regiment of Foot Militia on Sir Willoughby Cotton's warrant. It is not clear exactly by what authority they sat. C.O., 137/185, Abstract of the Courts Martial at Montego Bay, p. 1.

⁴³ C.O. 137/185, Parish Returns. See table, p. 122 below.

Parish	Total tried	Total executed
Hanover Courts Martial	58	27
Hanover Civil Courts	82	60
Trelawny Courts Martial	70	24
St. James Courts Martial	99	81
St. James Civil Courts	81	39
Westmoreland Courts Martial	26	12
Westmoreland Civil Courts	52	20
St. Elizabeth Courts Martial	73	14
Portland Courts Martial	23	7
Portland Civil Courts	5	5
St. Thomas in the Vale Courts Martial	9	—
Manchester Courts Martial	15	13
Manchester Civil Courts	16	7
St. Thomas in the East Courts Martial	12	1
St. Thomas in the East Civil Courts	5	2
TOTALS	626	312

to keep themselves out of the dock. Prisoners were condemned for trivial offences; one man, arrested while cooking one of the estate hogs, was executed for this; another, accused of ham-stringing a cow and having said he had snapped a gun five times, was hanged. The courts made no attempt to assess the degree of guilt, or even to distinguish between prisoners who had taken some sort of leading rôle in estate disturbances and those merely caught up in events. Cases were personally known to the missionaries where slaves had acted under provocation, or were condemned apparently to settle private grievances. The Presbyterian missionary, Blyth, felt justified in exerting himself on behalf of a Presbyterian candidate for membership who had complained bitterly to him before the rebellion of the harsh conduct of the overseer; he was found guilty of helping to cut a bridge and breaking into the estate stores, and executed. The Wesleyan missionary, Murray, saw a slave who was a leader in the Wesleyan church executed — condemned, Murray believed, because his religious convictions made him “obnoxious to those over him”.⁴⁴

The executions bore final witness to white vengeance. In Montego Bay

The gibbet erected in the public square in the centre of the town was seldom without occupants, during the day, for many weeks. Generally four, seldom less than three, were hung at once. The bodies remained stiffening in the breeze, till the court martial had provided another batch of victims . . . [The executioner] would ascend a ladder . . . and with his knife sever the

⁴⁴ C.O., 137/185, Courts Martial, St. James, vol. i, f. 6, trial of James Guy; vol. ii, ff. 20-1, trial of Thomas Linton. S.M.S. April 1832, p. 149, Blyth, 10 Jan. 1832. M.M.S. letters, Murray, Montego Bay, 28 May 1832.

ropes by which the poor creatures were suspended and let them fall to the ground. Other victims would then be . . . suspended in their place and cut down in their turn . . . the whole heap of bodies remaining just as they fell until the workhouse negroes came in the evening with carts, and took them away, to cast them into a pit dug for the purpose, a little distance out of town.

At Lucea, the condemned men were put into an ox-cart, their arms pinioned, a rope round their neck and a white cap on their heads.

In this way they were carried up under a strong guard into the midst of the burned properties, distances of twelve to thirty miles and the sentence was carried into effect on the estates as they successively arrived at them. On each of the melancholy occasions, the unfortunate men met their death, with a fortitude and cool deliberation that astonished all who beheld them.⁴⁵

The rebellion, though unsuccessful, demonstrated some degree of political maturity among the slaves. They had created a protest movement, partly inspired by christianity and organized through religious meetings, in which religion had been subordinated to political aims. A predominantly religious protest would have produced a millenarian movement in which the leaders regarded themselves as prophets announcing the will of God and their followers expected a new world to be established "by divine revelation". The Nat Turner rebellion of 1831 in Virginia was tinged with millenarianism: Turner saw himself as a prophet "ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty", and raised rebellion in response to signs from heaven, first divulging his intention to other slaves after an eclipse of the sun in February 1831. The original date for the outbreak, the 4th of July, was chosen for political reasons, but when Turner fell sick on that day the conspirators waited for another sign from heaven and found it manifested on the 13th of August, 1831, in the greenish blue colour of the sun. Turner's rebellion started as a crusade, the prophet leading six disciples,⁴⁶ which apparently aimed to carry vengeance, sanctioned by heaven, against the white population; a vengeance that Turner inaugurated by first killing his master's family. In the Jamaican protest movement, the most important leader, Sam Sharpe, made extensive use of the Bible, but he seems to have regarded himself more as a political leader than as a prophet. The movement he organized did not aim to establish a new world, but to make specific and limited changes in Jamaican society: the slaves were to establish their right to sell their labour for wages.

The slaves' activities in the rebellion were geared to the achievement

⁴⁵ Bleby, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-7; Waddell, *op. cit.*, p. 66, quoting letter from Watson, Lucea, 8 May 1832.

⁴⁶ Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 58-9. Aptheker, *op. cit.*, pp. 296-8.

of this political end. Though they indulged in widespread destruction of property, there was no hint of a crusade against the whites in their activity. Their attempts at strike action were intended to win freedom with a minimum of disorder and bloodshed. Even the armed rebels fought only those whites who attacked them; whites who offered no opposition met with no harm. The overseer of Ginger Hill estate, for example, in the centre of the St. Elizabeth rebellion area, was held prisoner under threat of death, but the slaves were content to make him sign a declaration divesting himself of authority on the estate.⁴⁷ There were only two crimes of violence against white people throughout the rebellion.⁴⁸ The fact that the slaves formed an overwhelming majority of the population, of course, contributed to their confidence in dealing with the white people. Moreover, the temptation they were exposed to was limited, in that the majority of the whites took refuge in the towns when the fires started. Their restraint was, however, remarked on by contemporaries. A Presbyterian missionary wrote:

Had the masters when they got the upper hand been as forbearing, as tender of their slaves' lives as their slaves had been of theirs it would have been to their lasting honour, and to the permanent advantage of the colony.⁴⁹

It seems fair to conclude that such conduct was not entirely circumstantial, but reflected the nature of the movement.

The only millenarian element in the Jamaican rebellion was the tendency of the slaves to turn the Baptist missionary, Burchell, into a Messianic figure whose arrival was expected to herald freedom. But even so, the figure was equipped with a political document: Burchell was expected to bring the act of parliament announcing emancipation.

The rebellion contributed indirectly to the abolition of slavery. The whites blamed the missionaries for the rebellion and in the aftermath of the revolt chapels were destroyed, missionaries tried for direct complicity with the rebels and preaching brought to an end. The Baptist and Wesleyan missionaries, on whom enmity chiefly focused, concluded that their work could only continue in the island if slavery was abolished — and delegates were sent to England to explain the situation. The delegates were immediately caught up in the emancipation campaign and proved invaluable propagandists. Thomas Fowell Buxton, who led the final stages of the campaign,

⁴⁷ P.P., 1831-2, vol. xlvii, no. 285, p. 286, deposition of W. Anand.

⁴⁸ Bleby, *op. cit.*, p. 43. C.O., 137/183, Mulgrave to Goderich, 14 Dec. 1832, no. 45, enclosing Return of persons killed: total of white casualties, 14.

⁴⁹ Waddell, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

attributed their presence in England to "the over-ruling hand of Providence, which had turned the intolerance of the [slave] system to its own destruction";⁵⁰ but credit was more directly due to the rebel slaves. Further, the missionaries' testimony against the slave system was vitally influenced by their experiences in the rebellion. As public speakers and as witnesses before the Parliamentary committees on slavery, they not only expressed their confidence in the Negro population and supported its claim to freedom, but also threatened that delay could only promote further rebellion.⁵¹ The precise impact of this threat on government circles and on public opinion has yet to be established; but certainly it convinced no less a person than the parliamentary Under Secretary to the Colonial Office, Lord Howick, of the need for immediate action. His plan for emancipation, considered by the Cabinet in January 1833 provided for complete abolition of slavery from 1 January 1835.⁵² The slaves had demonstrated to some at least of those in authority that it could prove more dangerous and expensive to maintain the old system than to abolish it.

The 1831 revolt was the last substantial rebellion in Jamaican history. Emancipation was celebrated with religious services and holiday festivities; the hardships of apprenticeship provoked no protest and the final transition to wage labour in 1838 took place without incident. In 1865, in a period of acute depression, a riot in one of the parishes became known as a rebellion, but the label reflected the scale of the government's reprisals and the potential for violence in the desperate condition of the people rather than the size of the popular movement. Discontent in the twentieth century has, so far, been manifested in the "back to Africa movement" started by Marcus Garvey, or been channelled into trade unionism and party politics. Constitutional politics have achieved political independence for the island; it remains to be seen whether these means can also achieve the economic and social reconstruction which are as necessary for the mass of the people now as in 1831.

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⁵⁰ T. F. Buxton, *Memoirs*, ed. Chas. Buxton (London, 1849), pp. 305-6.

⁵¹ The House of Lords select committee on the laws and usages of the West Indian colonies in relation to the slave population and the House of Commons select committee on the extinction of slavery throughout the British dominions, met from May to August 1832. P.P., 1831-2, vol. cccvi, pp. 430-1, 636-8, 668; vol. xx, pp. 75, 117, 112.

⁵² D. J. Murray, *The West Indies and the Development of Colonial Government, 1801-34* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 194-5.