

The Morant Bay Rebellion: Its Novelists and Historians

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Introduction

The Morant Bay Rebellion broke out in Jamaica on October 11, 1865. On that day, several hundred black people marched into the town of Morant Bay, the capital of the predominately sugar-growing parish of St. Thomas in the east. They pillaged the police station of its weapons and then confronted the volunteer militia which had been called up to protect the meeting of the vestry, the political body which administered the parish. Fighting erupted between the militia and the crowd and, by the end of the day, the crowd had killed eighteen people and wounded thirty-one others. Seven members of the crowd died. In the days which followed, bands of people in different parts of the parish killed two planters and threatened the lives of many others. The disturbances spread across the parish of St. Thomas in the east, from its western border with St. David to its northern boundary with Portland.

The response of the Jamaican authorities was swift and brutal. Making use of the army, Jamaican forces, and the Maroons (formerly a community of runaway slaves who were now an irregular but effective army of the colony), the government vigorously put down the rebellion. In the process, nearly 500 people were killed and hundreds of others seriously wounded. The nature of the suppression led to demands in England for an official inquiry, and a royal commission subsequently took evidence in Jamaica on the disturbances for nearly three months. Its conclusions were critical of the governor, Edward John Eyre, and of the severe repression in the wake of the rebellion. As a result, the governor was dismissed. More importantly, the political constitution of the colony was transformed and its 200-year-old assembly abolished.

In the months which followed the outbreak and in the period since, there has been considerable debate about the origin and nature of the disturbances. The governor and nearly all the whites and browns in the colony believed that the island was faced with a rebellion. They saw it as part of an island-wide conspiracy to put blacks in power. This was not surprising in the light of the Haitian revolution at the end of the eighteenth century and the massive 1831 slave revolt in Jamaica. Equally important, Jamaican society was demographically skewed: the overwhelming propor-

tion of the population was black while whites and people of mixed race or coloureds formed a small segment of the population. For the whites and browns of Jamaica, the governor's actions in putting down the rebellion had saved the colony for Britain and preserved them from annihilation.

At the same time, there was a different perspective of the outbreak, especially in Britain. There, the humanitarian lobby perceived it as a spontaneous disturbance, a riot which did not warrant the repression which followed in its wake. John Stuart Mill and others formed the Jamaica Committee, hoping to bring the governor to trial in England and thereby establish the limits of imperial authority.¹

This paper seeks to address the subsequent treatment of the rebellion. The debate about whether it was a riot or a rebellion has continued among historians and scholars. Moreover, novelists such as V.S. Reid, have incorporated the events at Morant Bay in their work, sometimes making use of the rebellion for their own ends. The paper will therefore begin with the fictional treatment of Morant Bay in V.S. Reid's *New Day* and then discuss the views of the historians of Morant Bay.

V.S. Reid and the Morant Bay Rebellion

In *New Day*, V.S. Reid uses the fictional history of the Campbell family, a mixed race family living in St. Thomas in the east, to deal with the history of Jamaica in the period from 1865 to 1944. The narrator of the novel is Johnny Campbell, who was eight years old at the time of the Morant Bay Rebellion, and was still alive in 1944. This was the year of Jamaica's new constitution which granted universal adult suffrage and pointed the way toward self-government. For Reid, the inauguration of the new constitution was the "new day" of the novel.

Reid's portrayal of the Morant Bay Rebellion is very graphic. Taking his cue from the events at Morant Bay on 11 October 1865, Reid has the people of Stony Gut, a small village in the Blue Mountains above Morant Bay, march into town and attack the vestry. The court house is burned down, and many of its occupants are slaughtered by the crowd. In the battle between the crowd and the militia, seven members of the crowd are killed and many others are wounded. The leader of the rebellion, Paul Bogle, is seen leading his forces against the militia and the members of the vestry.

Yet Reid's Bogle is very different from the historical Bogle. In *New Day*, Bogle is seeking secession from the British Empire; he wants "total

¹Heuman, 'The Killing Time'.

freedom".² The narrator's brother, Davie, who is nineteen years old in 1865, supports Bogle against the wishes of his father, Pa Campbell, a morally upright headman. Pa Campbell worked on the estate of George William Gordon, a brown politician who was hanged for his alleged involvement in the rebellion. When Pa Campbell criticizes Bogle for his "wickedness", Davie responds:

Wickedness? Wickedness? You call it so? Wickedness to want even rice and flour and osnaburg while buckra Englishman eats bacon and wears Shantung silk? Why do they no' make us govern ourselves and see if we would no' eat bacon too? Why they will no' give us the vote to all o' us and make us choose our own Council?³

Yet the historical Bogle had no such ideas. He was not seeking independence from Britain; on the contrary, Bogle was very careful to underscore his loyalty to the Queen. When he and his supporters liberated the jail at Morant Bay, releasing the fifty-one prisoners who were there at the time, Bogle insisted that the prisoners "must get their own clothes, for he would not like to rebel against the Queen, and he would not strike as a rebel against the Queen, and so they wanted their own clothing". The prison officer had to break open the chest where the personal clothes of the prisoners were kept and hand them out.⁴

Reid chooses to describe Bogle in a very different light. For Reid, Bogle is seeking ideas more characteristic of Jamaica in the 1940s, when universal adult suffrage was on the agenda. As Nana Wilson-Tague suggests, whenever a historical novelist modifies history in this manner, "he inevitably implies a moral judgement and indicates an intention to produce something more satisfying to his sense of right than the real events of the past". Reid's Bogle is therefore too radical and is contrasted with the moderation of the narrator's father, Pa Campbell. In Reid's view, Bogle's actions lead to self-destruction, to the mindless violence at the Morant Bay court house.⁵

There are other images of Bogle and of his supporters in *New Day* which are equally problematical. For example, Reid presents Bogle as a wild man, unable to understand the advice of the more rational politician, George William Gordon. Johnny Campbell recalls his mother's view of Bogle:

²Reid, *New Day*, p. 13.

³Reid, *New Day*, p. 15.

⁴Heuman, *'The Killing Time'*, p. 13.

⁵Nana Wilson-Tague, *The Historical Imagination*, ch. 2.

'Member I remember that Mother even said: A good, for that Paul Bogle is a wild one and does not understand what Mr. Gordon means when he speaks with him.⁶

Reid's crowd from Stony Gut is also curious: it has blacks, browns and poor whites. Moreover, Reid chooses to contrast the poverty of the crowd with the wealth and lavish display of the vestrymen at Morant Bay.

Listen me. I ha' heard from Davie about these Vestry dinners. He says whenever there is Vestry meeting, Custos and the Vestrymen always sit down to big banquet. Many tales I have heard about whole hogs with pimento and fresh mint packing their insides in sweet scents. Heard o' great white yams brought all the way from Westmoreland parish and powdering as they reach your tongue; roasted yellow hearts o' breadfruit tasting like goats'-milk butter... But presently I see cook-women carrying platters from the kitchen to the banquet-room upstairs. Morant Bay hungry people see it too, and such a howl comes from their hungry bellies!⁷

Yet there is no historical evidence of white involvement in the crowd which marched from Morant Bay. Equally, while it is likely that there were significant differences between the wealth of some of the vestrymen and that of the crowd, there are no historical descriptions of the vestry dinners or of the hunger which affected the people of Morant Bay. Reid's images present stark contrasts to heighten the dramatic effect.

Moreover, Reid reinforces his image of Bogle by contrasting it with Johnny's brother, Davie, and by suggesting that the people from Stony Gut had mixed with the Morant Bay crowd and lost their way. Davie was opposed to the killing at Morant Bay and was very worried about the possible consequences of the violence:

I told Deacon [Bogle] we should no' kill but take them to the Gut, where they would be hostages if war comes. But is that what he does? No. Stoney Gut men get mixed with Morant Bay rabble and do as the rabble would do. Will this no' turn even our friends from we? Is what Mr. Gordon and the other will say now? Think say the Maroons will come to we when they hear we ha' mixed with the Morant Bay people? Think say those proud fighters will want to march side-and-side with riff-raff? Is what it that makes Deacon Bogle such a dam' fool?⁸

⁶Reid, *New Day*, p. 26.

⁷Reid, *New Day*, p. 105.

⁸Reid, *New Day*, p. 129.

Reid is opposed to the killing at Morant Bay. In rewriting history, he favoured the people proceeding by petitions to improve their situation rather than by resorting to violence.⁹ When Bogle kills the Custos of the parish, renamed Custos Aldenburgh in the novel, it is “a ritualistic, cleansing and liberating act, but also in another sense as a mindless and unrestrained act of violence”. For Wilson-Tagoe, “this double-edged view points to a personal distrust of spontaneity and mass consciousness on the part of Reid. . .”¹⁰

From Reid’s perspective, George William Gordon, the brown representative of St. Thomas in the east to the House of Assembly, becomes the figure of moderation in contrast to Paul Bogle. In *New Day*, Gordon responds to the threat of violence from the people of Stony Gut with an appeal for them to cease all violence. Since Gordon was ill, the people should wait until he could visit them personally.¹¹ Reid repeats this image of Gordon in a children’s novel, *Sixty-Five*, which he published eleven years after *New Day*. In *Sixty-Five*, the wise grandfather of the novel berates Bogle for the events at Morant Bay:

‘You are a poor foolish man,’ he said softly. ‘You don’t know what you have started. Better you had waited a while longer, and kept on with the meetings as Mr Gordon wanted you to do.’¹²

Yet this image of Gordon as a moderate contrasts sharply with the historical reality.

Gordon was a radical, a Presbyterian turned Native Baptist and an advocate for the rights of the blacks in the House of Assembly. He was openly hostile to the leading figures in the parish of St. Thomas in the east: the Custos, Baron von Ketelhodt and the Anglican curate in Bath, Rev. Victor Herschell. Making use of the apocalyptic language of the Baptists, Gordon described the custos and Herschell as “a very wicked band, and the Lord will reward them all”. In the placard designed to round up support for a meeting in Morant Bay, Gordon went even further: he portrayed Ketelhodt as “an unscrupulous and oppressive foreigner”. As for Governor Eyre, he was “an evil-doer” and “the Lord will plenteously reward him”. Elsewhere, Gordon wrote that the governor “was a plague-spot on poor Jamaica”.¹³ This language was revealing. As Thomas Holt has concluded, it provided evidence that for Gordon as well as for Paul

⁹Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *The Historical Imagination*, ch. 2.

¹⁰Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *The Historical Imagination*, ch. 2.

¹¹Reid, *New Day*, p. 137.

¹²Reid, *Sixty-Five*, p. 71.

¹³Heuman, ‘*The Killing Time*’, p. 68.

Bogle, "religion shaped their world-view and gave a strong millennial undercurrent to their vision of political entitlement and social justice".¹⁴

But for V.S. Reid, Gordon's language and sense of entitlement were not important. Rather, it was critical to point out that Jamaica "could be served best not by mass violence and secession but by cautious agitation and argument". Instead of freedom, the violence at Morant Bay unleashes uncontrollable forces which are counterproductive.¹⁵

One of the casualties of these forces is Pa Campbell. Like so many of the people killed by British soldiers and the Maroons in the aftermath of the rebellion, Pa Campbell was innocent. In his case, he had reluctantly fled to the hills with his family to hide from the forces of repression. But he had emerged prematurely, while the soldiers were still looking for him. Although he had just learned that George William Gordon had been hanged, Campbell simply could not believe that it was not possible to discuss the situation, even with Governor Eyre. In any case, British soldiers would not shoot Christians:

My father said: 'I will go down. Mr. Gordon can no' die in vain. I will ask to see Governor Eyre. I am no' a Stoney Gut man. The English will no' make war on Christians.'¹⁶

A few minutes later, Campbell was dead, shot by the soldiers he believed would protect him.

Yet in spite of the terrible repression, Reid maintains that some good could come from the events at Morant Bay. Despite his overriding caution and belief in moderation, he also believes that representative government would return to Jamaica one day. At that point, it would be a government of the people rather than one in name only. When Davie Campbell appears before the Royal Commissioners investigating the rebellion, he suggests that the people who marched on the court house may not have died in vain:

How so? Representative government will come back to our island one day, one day. And mark me, Your Honours, there will be no buckras making the laws then, but the said poor like whom they have killed, and a Governor of the people will be sitting in St. Jago [the capital]. For we will ha' learnt that sympathy for the poor must come from the poor. Then who can say that time that St. Thomas people died in vain?¹⁷

In this manner, Reid is pointing the way toward 1944 and the new day of the new constitution. It is Davie's grandson, Garth, who leads

¹⁴Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, p. 293.

¹⁵Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *The Historical Imagination*, ch. 2.

¹⁶Reid, *New Day*, p. 153.

¹⁷Reid, *New Day*, p. 195.

the Jamaican people toward self-government. But, for Reid, Garth represents the educated middle class who should be responsible for raising the workers' awareness "instead of making it the climax of spontaneous self-expression". History, for Reid, moves "beyond the precise details of what happened to incorporate an imaginative exploration of what could be possible".¹⁸ From a different vantage point, historians of Morant Bay have not had the same possibilities as Reid, but they have differed on the events and significance of the rebellion.

The Historians and Morant Bay

Many historians have dealt with the Morant Bay Rebellion, although in most cases, they have done so as part of a larger work or as the culminating event in the post-emancipation period of Jamaican history. Two classic studies, Philip D. Curtin, *Two Jamaicas: The Role of Ideas in a Tropical Colony, 1830-1865* (1955) and Douglas Hall, *Free Jamaica, 1838-1865: An Economic History* (1959) fall into this latter category. Curtin regards Morant Bay as "another in the succession of riots since emancipation"; it was a demonstration which turned into a riot and then into a rebellion after the events at the court house on October 11.¹⁹ For Hall, the rebellion was a local riot which was not markedly different from the riots in Falmouth six years previously. Hall believes that it was the reaction of the governor and the nature of the suppression which distinguished Morant Bay.²⁰ Another study, Mavis Christine Campbell, *The Dynamics of Change in a Slave Society: A Sociopolitical History of the Free Coloreds of Jamaica, 1800-1865* (1976) adopts a similar perspective: she sees Morant Bay as "nothing but a local riot" and in modern terms, as "not unlike current 'marches' or 'sit-ins'".²¹ In my view, Curtin, Hall and Campbell underestimate the planning and organization of the rebellion; they also devote relatively little space to the outbreak itself.

Several other studies have discussed the rebellion, but only as part of a larger work. Geoffrey Dutton, *The Hero as Murderer: The Life of Edward John Eyre, Australian Explorer and Governor of Jamaica, 1815-1901* (1967) is a biography of Eyre and an attempt to rehabilitate the governor. Although containing some useful information, it presents a biased and dated view of Paul Bogle and George William Gordon. In my earlier book, *Between Black and White: Race, Politics, and the Free Col-*

¹⁸Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *The Historical Imagination*, ch. 2.

¹⁹Curtin, *Two Jamaicas*, pp. 195, 178.

²⁰Hall, *Free Jamaica*, pp. 249-50.

²¹Campbell, *The Dynamics of Change*, p. 337.

oreds in Jamaica, 1792-1865 (1981), I consider Morant Bay principally in light of the response of the free coloureds to the outbreak. Bernard Semmel, *The Governor Eyre Controversy* (1962) is a very useful work but deals mainly with the aftermath of the rebellion in England. Two other books, Monica Schuler, *"Alas, Alas, Kongo": A Social History of Indentured African Immigration into Jamaica, 1841-1865* (1980) and Robert J. Stewart, *Religion and Society in Post-Emancipation Jamaica* (1992) are excellent studies of the period. However, Schuler concentrates on African participation in the rebellion and Stewart on the religious background to the outbreak.

Other works deal more fully with the rebellion itself. William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865* (1976) maintains that the uprising was a local action "rooted in grievances which were common to blacks throughout the island". For Green, Morant Bay might have led to other outbreaks elsewhere in the island had it been more sustained; moreover, he believes that the implications of the rebellion were "broad and dangerous".²² Don Robotham, *"The Notorious Riot": The Socio-Economic and Political Bases of Paul Bogle's Revolt* (1981), is an important analysis of the rebellion. He rightly points to the premeditation and planning involved in the outbreak. Yet Robotham concentrates on the background to the rebellion rather than on the outbreak itself.

Two recent studies examine Morant Bay as part of the history of protest in Jamaica beginning with the slave rebellion in 1831 and ending with the labour disturbances of the 1930s. Abigail Bakan, *Ideology and Class Conflict in Jamaica: The Politics of Rebellion* (1990) is a work of synthesis; she does not intend to provide a detailed historical account of the rebellion. Instead, her aim "is to identify a general and recurrent pattern of ideological resistance among the direct producers over a broad historical period of development". However, Bakan does emphasize the importance of land in understanding the rebellion.²³ Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (1992) is the best treatment of the rebellion in literature. He concludes that Morant Bay was a rebellion and sees areas of unity between sugar workers and peasants in the outbreak. For Holt, the native Baptists were crucial in providing a vehicle for "cultural resistance" and for bringing together a religious world view and a heightened political consciousness. But although impressive, Holt devotes only a chapter to Morant Bay in a larger study of Jamaica from 1832 to 1938.²⁴

²²Green, *The Sugar Colonies*, p. 390.

²³Bakan, *Ideology and Class Conflict*, pp. 11, 87.

²⁴Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, pp. 291, 300-301.

While I agree with Holt and also with Robotham's view of the rebellion, my book on the rebellion, *'The Killing Time'*, is different in that it focuses entirely on the uprising. *'The Killing Time'* seeks to provide more detail on the outbreak and spread of the rebellion as well as on the background to it, the reasons for its occurrence in St. Thomas in the east, and the nature of the military and political suppression.

Although following a different pattern, the historiography on Morant Bay has unwittingly taken on some of the perspectives highlighted by Reid's *New Day*. The most recent scholars on Morant Bay have seen the events as a rebellion and as potentially dangerous. In this view, the rebellion was not intent on creating an independent Jamaica or even overturning the whole plantation structure. Instead, it was a local rebellion which sought to replace the parish authorities and possibly the wider colonial administration. Although Reid does have Bogle argue for secession, his Morant Bay is a vision of an uprising "which sought to redefine the ex-slave's position within the system" and to secure a place for the freedmen within the existing structure.²⁵ Reid criticized Bogle's methods and the violence at Morant Bay, but, like the historians, he too was interested in the meaning of freedom for the people of Jamaica.

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²⁵Nana Wilson-Tagoe, *The Historical Imagination*, ch. 2.

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