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1865: PROLOGUE TO THE MORANT BAY REBELLION IN JAMAICA

1865 was a crucial year for Jamaica. In October, the Morant Bay Rebellion transformed the colony's political structure as well as that of most of the British Caribbean. Led by a native Baptist deacon, Paul Bogle, the rebellion engulfed the parish of St. Thomas in the East. The subsequent repression by British forces and by the Jamaican Maroons resulted in the deaths of nearly 500 blacks. Yet although the rebellion itself has received considerable attention, there has been relatively little discussion about the nine months which preceded the outbreak (Craton 1988; Curtin 1955; Green 1976; Hall 1959; Heuman 1981; Robotham 1981). This is surprising in light of the highly politicized state of the island during most of 1865. This paper therefore seeks to discuss these developments; it focuses especially on island politics and on the widescale public meetings which took place throughout the island during the year.¹

I

The year opened to a spate of gloomy reports about the economic condition of the island. Indeed, even before 1864 had ended, *The Falmouth Post*, a leading paper in the northern part of the colony, commented on the "signs of growing poverty in the midst of us. There is hardly a counting-house in the country whether on Estates or in our Stores from which evidence of the magnitude of the fact may not be drawn. The lamentation over the material decadence of the country is almost universal."²

The main cause of this distress was the state of the sugar market. The price of sugar had dropped, in some cases below the cost of production. A planter

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paper, *The Colonial Standard*, reported on "the cry of alarm and distress that has burst forth from all classes in the country".³ The American Civil War added to Jamaica's economic problems; it resulted in a dramatic increase in the cost of food and clothing. At a time when estates were reducing the amount of sugar under cultivation as well as their wage bill, prices for imports were increasing dramatically. Work on the estates was harder to find, and when it was available, wages rates had frequently declined (Heuman 1981: 171).⁴

To add to these difficulties, Jamaica was also suffering from a severe drought. In some parishes, it was the worst drought anyone could remember. A prediction from one of the major sugar-producing parishes, Trelawny, forecast the loss of several sugar estates, if conditions persisted. The report concluded "that if there be not a speedy change for the better, the manufacture of Sugar and Rum in Jamaica will, ere long, be numbered amongst the things that were".⁵ Neighbouring Hanover was suffering a similar fate: a correspondent there noted that "our prospects are very bad: not a drop of rain: crops are short, and plants for next year are suffering materially. Poor Jamaica! What is to be done with bad seasons, bad returns, and bad prices?"⁶

Even for a press given to hyperbole, these remarks were evidence of the seriousness of the situation. But the drought was not just hurting the large estates; the peasantry who depended on ground provisions were badly affected as well. There was a universal dearth of ground provisions, which forced up the price of food. Some commentators blamed the peasantry for becoming involved in the religious revival of the early 1860s and ignoring their agricultural plots. Whatever the cause, there was little doubt about the dramatic consequences for the mass of the population.⁷

For the people, one solution was to steal the food which was available. It was certainly clear that the theft of ground provisions had become commonplace. In his opening speech to the Legislature in 1864, Governor Edward Eyre observed that "the great increase and almost universal prevalence throughout the country of larceny of provisions or of domestic animals, calls for the most prompt and stringent measures to repress an evil which frustrates the toil of the industrious, and paralyses all efforts at improvement or comfort".⁸ In some ways, Eyre's strictures were unnecessary. The number of prisoners in the island's penitentiaries had jumped from 283 inmates in 1861 to 629 by 1864. A year later, the figure was 710 prisoners; more significantly, 617 of them were committed for larceny.⁹

These developments in Jamaica were not unknown to officials in Britain. But they were highlighted by a letter in January, 1865 from Edward Underhill, the secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. In it, Underhill described the increasing distress of the black population in Jamaica. For Underhill, there was no doubt about "the extreme poverty of the people" which was evidenced "by the ragged and even naked

condition of vast numbers of them".¹⁰ He noted the increase in crime, and especially of larceny. The immediate cause of these problems was the drought, but there were longer-term explanations as well. Underhill believed that there was a lack of employment in Jamaica. Since there was less work on the estates and since the drought had caused a general failure of the provision grounds, the people either had to "steal or starve. And this is their present condition."

For Underhill, the Jamaican Legislature was partly responsible for the state of the colony. Although he did not elaborate on the island's legislation, Underhill criticized the high levels of taxation (especially on the mass of the population), the abortive immigration schemes, and the Assembly's denial of political rights to the ex-slaves. Worst of all, British capitalists had ceased investing in Jamaica; unless this changed and "employment can be given to its starving people, I see no other result than the entire failure of the island".

To avoid this catastrophe, Underhill made several suggestions. He called for an inquiry into the island's legislation, its taxation, and its general economic condition to find out where things had gone wrong. In addition, Underhill advised that the peasantry produce more exportable commodities and especially minor products such as coffee and tobacco rather than sugar. But it was not his recommendations for saving Jamaica which aroused so much interest; rather it was Underhill's description of the state of the island and its people which generated such feeling.

The Colonial Office forwarded Underhill's letter to Governor Eyre, who circulated it to the Custodes and heads of religious denominations all over the colony. Eyre asked his informants for their views about the general accuracy of Underhill's allegations and about the causes of the current crisis, although he believed that Underhill had exaggerated the case (Underhill 1895: 13).¹¹

Much of the response to Underhill's letter reinforced the picture of a colony in decline. One of the most thoughtful replies came from Richard Hill, a stipendiary magistrate appointed during the apprenticeship period and the senior resident magistrate in St. Catherine. In thirty years as a stipendiary magistrate, Hill had never seen Jamaica "sunk so low, in the wretchedness of 'difficulty of living' as at present". There was little doubt that the American Civil War had significantly worsened the economic plight of the colony. In addition, the severe drought of the past two years as well as a series of epidemic diseases, including small pox and typhoid fever, had made matters much worse.

For Hill, a further problem was the increasing population in the post-emancipation period. When coupled with a fifty percent decline in the number of plantations in Jamaica after 1834, this meant a serious shortage of work for the ex-slave population. Hill calculated that "a great proportion of the community... now have no profitable occupation... They are from necessity idle, because they cannot get employment, and they are drifting into the vicious

condition of people living how they can." The result was an increasing prison population, often committed to jail for stealing food.¹²

The report of the Baptist Union reinforced many of Hill's conclusions and supported some of Underhill's claims. Based on the findings of Baptist missionaries all over the island, the Union pointed to the severe lack of employment, despite the desperate means often adopted by people to find work:

It appears that in some districts numbers of people are known to walk from 6 to 30 miles in search of work, that numbers even in crop time, applying to the Estates for employment, are turned back without obtaining it: that at the present time in consequence of drought, and in some cases from partial cultivation, some Estates are working short time; & that in many districts creole labour has been displaced either wholly or in part by that of Coolies, Chinese, and Africans.

This was the case during the high season; after the sugar had been harvested, there was even less work available.

The consequence of an excess supply of labour was a sharp drop in wages. While task work had usually taken the place of day labour, the amount of labour involved in a task had sometimes been significantly increased. At the same time, wages had been reduced, often by as much as twenty-five percent. The Baptists were not blaming the planters for lowering their labour costs, but they wanted the Governor to understand "the actual condition of the labouring population of the country, that your Excellency may see the general truthfulness of the representations contained in Dr. Underhill's letter..."¹³

An Anglican minister in the parish of Westmoreland, Henry Clarke, agreed that, at least in his part of Jamaica, the people were "in a distressing state of poverty". The low wages were partly to blame for this situation: the top rate of one shilling per day was insufficient to feed and clothe a man, even without taking into account the additional costs of his family. To add to this problem, the high import duties on many necessities as well as taxes on such working items as horses, mules and wheels were "calculated to starve the people... and must result in reducing all classes of the community to poverty".¹⁴ Clarke's analysis of Jamaica's plight, like that of Richard Hill and the Baptist Union, echoed many of Underhill's sentiments. Yet there were many who disagreed with Underhill's letter and with his description of Jamaica.

A planter with estates in Metcalfe and St. Mary and a member of the Government, Henry Westmorland, found that Underhill had painted a far too gloomy picture of the black population and of the colony generally. Unlike some districts in the island which were suffering from drought or other problems, his parish and his plantations were flourishing. Westmorland's labourers worked only half-days, and his properties were often short of labour. Another member of the Government, Dr. Hamilton, reinforced Westmorland's claim that in most

cases, the difficulty on plantations was to attract a sufficient number of workers. Hamilton also pointed to the success of many small settlers, especially in their production of crops such as ginger, honey and pimento. For Hamilton, the small settlers were "a thriving race, their number is rapidly increasing, the cultivation of minor products is augmenting and if in some districts distress does exist, it does not prevail as a general rule among the agricultural population".¹⁵

Others who replied to Eyre's request for information admitted that Jamaica's situation was very serious. However, they blamed the problem on the people themselves. Samuel Oughton, a Baptist missionary in Kingston, was aware of the widespread poverty in the island and the increase in crime. But Oughton did not believe that

these accumulated evils are to be wholly or principally attributed to excessive droughts, inability to obtain employment or dear salt fish and calico; ...the real cause in the great majority of cases is, in my opinion, only to be found in the inveterate habits of idleness, and the low state of moral and religious principles which prevail to so fearful a degree in our community.¹⁶

Eyre agreed. He believed that the poverty and crime in the colony was due to the apathy and indolence of the community. In responding to Underhill, the Colonial Office adopted this line. After carefully looking into Underhill's allegations, officials decided that the peasantry were "not suffering from any general or continuous distress from which they would not be at once relieved by settled industry".¹⁷

Much of the Jamaican press also adopted this approach to Underhill's letter. *The Colonial Standard* denounced Underhill's suggestions as "socialist doctrines of prevention" and claimed that the letter was full of misrepresentations. It maintained that the real problem was that "sugar does not pay as it ought, because the gentlemen of Mr. Underhill's stamp preach against slavery, and prefer to sweeten their tea with slave sugar to paying him one penny extra per pound for that which is produced by a man and a brother..."¹⁸ *The Guardian*, also a pro-planter newspaper, disputed Underhill's notion that the people were starving and claimed that the drought was hardly a new phenomenon for Jamaica. On the other hand, *The County Union*, a paper published in Montego Bay, agreed with Underhill's description of the distress in the country. Another independent newspaper, *The Sentinel*, maintained that there was a great deal of truth in Underhill's allegations, although it had reservations about some of the statements in the letter.¹⁹

However, it was the meetings which arose in the wake of Underhill's letter - rather than the views of the island's press or Eyre's correspondents - which would provide a better test of the people's assessment of the crisis facing Jamaica.

II

The first significant petition in 1865 was a memorial from the poor people of St. Ann to the Queen. Although Eyre maintained that it was the first public response to Underhill's letter, the petition was prepared before that letter appeared in the island press.²⁰ Nor was it the outcome of a large public meeting, as most of the subsequent petitions would be. The petition was nonetheless important: in it, the people of St. Ann complained about their inability to find work on the estates and about the low price of their alternative crop, pimento, which was not even worth harvesting. Since their own provision grounds were exhausted from overuse, the petitioners were forced to rent land. But the cost was exorbitant and there were other problems as well:

In many instances our provisions is [sic] destroyed by cattles, and if the proprietors find the most Simple fault, three months notice is given and we have to destroy our provisions, at the same time numbers of us having a large family of 11 or 12 children depending on the provisions for subsistence.

They appealed to the Queen to rent them Crown land at low rates; they would then

put our hands and heart to work, and cultivate coffee, corn, canes, cotton and tobacco and other produce [;] we will form a company for that purpose if our Gracious Lady Victoria our Queen will also appoint an agent to receive such produce as we may cultivate...²¹

The petition was sent to the Governor, who forwarded it to the Colonial Office. In his accompanying despatch, Eyre made his own views about the memorial very clear. He regarded it as the "first fruit" of Underhill's letter and expected others in a similar vein. For Eyre, they would have the effect of making the peasantry "discontented with their lot and disinclined to conform to the laws which regulate their taxation, their civil tribunals or their political status, all of which they have been informed are unjust, partial or oppressive".²²

Other petitions followed the St. Ann's petition, although they were the result of very different gatherings. As Abigail Bakan has suggested, these subsequent meetings provided a means of political expression which had been denied to the majority of the population (Bakan 1990: 76). The usual pattern was for a group of freeholders to ask the Custos of a particular parish to choose a time and a place for the meeting. The request from a group in the parish of St. David was typical:

We the undersigned Freeholders and other inhabitants of this Parish, respectfully request your honor will be pleased to grant us a place, and appoint a time, where we might meet for the purpose of expressing our sentiments in reference to the distressed condition of the

inhabitants occasioned by the drought and other causes, that we might adopt a memorial for presentation to Her Majesty's Government.²³

The freeholders generally signed their names, and several of these requests were published. In some cases, the Custos organized the meeting, advertised it in the press, and chaired it.

Several of these public meetings adopted broadly similar petitions. The memorials complained about the state of the island and some of its institutions, but were not highly critical of the plantocracy. At a large gathering representing the parishes of Clarendon and Manchester, the petitioners approved of Underhill's letter; at the same time, they sympathized with the plight of the planters. Their second resolution, for example, viewed "with alarm the continual decline of the proprietary body". Like those attending the Underhill meetings in St James and Hanover, they complained about the "crushing weight of taxation" and called on the British Government to establish an inquiry into the causes of Jamaica's decline. Similarly, the memorialists were concerned about the "unrighteous competition they have to maintain with the slave grown produce of Cuba"; accordingly they wanted Spain to observe her treaties with Britain regarding the slave trade.²⁴

The Underhill meeting in St. James was also held in May. A newspaper reporter described it as "so mixed and weighty a gathering – so solid a demonstration – never in our memory has been got together in this town". Prominent planters, merchants, and ministers were present as well as labourers, and the meeting was chaired by the Custos. As in Clarendon and Hanover, speakers voiced their concern about the high level of taxes, but here the attack was directed specifically against the House of Assembly. Wellesley Bourke, one of the members of the House from St. James, maintained that many assemblymen met "for one purpose – the perpetuation of taxes and an upholding of the corruption that involved the people, the planters, and the whole island, in one general poverty".²⁵

Like the attacks on the slave trade, these diatribes against the House won considerable support. For instance, two planters who could not attend the St. James meeting wrote to Bourke on the subject. In their view, "the evils we have most to fear [...] are the House of the Assembly and the present Executive Committee, in whom we may briefly say nine-tenths of the country [...] have no confidence".²⁶ Such statements expressed a concern for the state of the colony, but they clearly did not envision any significant changes in the social or political hierarchies in the island. The resolutions at the meeting in St. James did not threaten the status quo. But even at the meeting in St. James, and more importantly at other types of gatherings, there was a very different response to Underhill.

One of the speakers who followed Wellesley Bourke at St. James was the Baptist missionary, Rev. Edward Hewitt. But he claimed to be speaking as "a British subject and citizen of Jamaica" rather than as a Baptist. Hewitt had observed the growing poverty in the island; this was especially evident in the poorer clothing worn by his parishioners. His main attack, however, was directed against the high taxes in the island, which helped to support the Established Church. Hewitt added that "we are taxed enormously for Immigration purposes. All of you have to pay." This statement was immediately denied by a leading planter on the platform who, along with several others, then walked out of the hall. Although this temporarily disrupted the meeting, Hewitt carried on. He argued that "13,500 Immigrants have been brought to Jamaica and what good has this done for the country. It is you the labourers who ought to work and then you will prosper".²⁷

Hewitt's views were reinforced by another Baptist missionary, Rev. J.E. Henderson. He was concerned about the huge debt the colony owed, part of which had been created to import immigrant labour from India. Henderson asked:

Have they done any good? (Voices, "No, no, no.") Do they pay taxes? (Voices, "No, no, no.") The natives who are the labouring population are driven away from the estates, and coolies taken in their stead.²⁸

This anti-planter, anti-immigration line was not only taken up by Baptists. At the public meeting in Hanover, a planter was discussing the need to abolish the export duty on sugar and rum which had been imposed to help meet the costs of importing labour. At that moment, "as by a preconcerted signal, stentorian lungs gave forth, with a vigour and a power which were irresistible. '*No, no, they would have no immigration.*'"²⁹ The uproar continued when the next speaker, the clerk of the peace, suggested that the picture of distress in the island should not be exaggerated. According to one report:

The demonstration which followed this simple observation beggars description, and such as is never witnessed save at the closing scene of a strongly-contested and exciting election... Clenched fists were lifted above the crowd, and seemed to threaten the annihilation of any one who would dare to assert that the picture of poverty was capable of being overdrawn!³⁰

There were strong sentiments at some of these meetings, then, opposing the planters views on immigration and any attempts to counter the picture of distress in the island. But, elsewhere, the criticisms were not just limited to these issues.

There were a range of Underhill meetings which differed from the quasi-official ones in St James and Hanover. Also held in May and June, several of

these gatherings were organized by the Underhill Convention, a group of blacks who strongly supported Underhill's letter. The Convention appears to have been behind the meetings which took place in Kingston, Spanish Town, and St. David.³¹

The Underhill meeting in Kingston was chaired by George William Gordon, the most prominent opponent of Governor Eyre in the House of Assembly. Those who submitted resolutions included local preachers, some attached to the "Tabernacle", a native Baptist chapel Gordon had helped to establish in Kingston. There were also black politicians and other independent clergymen involved in the gathering, a group of people that a member of the administration later described as "political agitators".³²

The speakers at the meeting were generally hostile to the Government. For example, Rev. Edwin Palmer, a black Baptist missionary, complained that the

people were poor and destitute, the planters robbed them of their wages, that they were trampled under foot, the Government was oppressive, that the merchants in Kingston would employ none but white or coloured men in their stores which was a disgrace and a shame, that the time would soon come when they would be compelled to do it.

Palmer described a new law authorizing whipping as directed only at blacks and aimed at re-introducing slavery. He was not alone in such attacks. A vestryman from St. David, Samuel Clarke, reportedly warned the audience that whites could no longer "keep down negroes, and although you won't give us education we will show them that we shall yet have a position in the country".³³

While other speakers carried on in a similar vein, the resolutions adopted at the Kingston meeting provided strong support for Underhill as well as a radical critique of the Government and the ruling class in Jamaica. One resolution complained about the "class legislation" of the island and suggested that "the time has arrived when the masses of this country must speak out their woes, labouring as they do under many wrongs and disabilities..." The memorialists were also opposed to the enormous expenditure to import labour and pointed to "the systematic abnegation of every principle involving the Education of the Masses and other measures of a preventive and ameliorating character". The partial state of the law, the lack of jobs, the low wages, and the general distress in the colony: all came under their scrutiny. But what may have worried the authorities most was their call

upon all the descendants of Africa in every Parish throughout the Island, to form themselves into Societies and hold Public Meetings, and cooperate for the purpose of setting forth their grievances, especially now, when our philanthropic friends in England are leading the way.³⁴

The resolutions of the Kingston meeting were couched in much stronger language than those from St. James, Hanover, and Clarendon. There was more open defiance of the authorities and more demands for change. The petitions of the meetings in Spanish Town and St. David were less pointed but even more specific than those of their Kingston counterparts.

At the Spanish Town Underhill meeting, the resolutions centred on the desperate situation of the artisans and tradespeople of the town. Since so little work was available, many of them "have been compelled to leave their homes to seek employment in foreign climes, and many others are only deterred from doing so, because they do not know what is to become of their families in their absence". As in Kingston, the petitioners complained about the high import duties on raw materials and finished products; the duties made it almost impossible for local artisans to compete with mass manufactured goods imported from abroad. The memorial concluded by corroborating Underhill's statements about the state of the colony and by thanking the British philanthropists for their concern about Jamaica.³⁵

For Eyre, this meeting was a counterpart of the Kingston Underhill meeting. Some of the same black politicians who opposed the government, such as William Kelly Smith and Joseph Goldson, were prominent in both meetings. A vestryman for St. Catherine, A.C. Sinclair, was also very concerned about the Spanish Town meeting and regarded it as a "revolutionary gathering".³⁶ Yet the chairman of the meeting, A.H. Lewis, who was one of the representatives of the parish in the Assembly, described it as an orderly meeting without "the least attempt at any expression which could lead to disaffection".³⁷ Nonetheless, the meeting clearly sympathized with Underhill's letter.

The St. David's meeting also applauded Underhill's efforts on behalf of the island. But the petition was specifically concerned about the plight of the small settlers. One of the resolutions maintained that labourers on the estates were

not honestly and adequately paid for their labour; that great wrong and injury attends the small settlers in the destruction of their provision grounds by the unlawful and unrestricted freedom of large herds of cattle belonging to proprietors of estates and pens...

The memorial also complained about the lack of justice in the Jamaican courts: the petitioners believed that there was "a law for the rich and a law for the poor". To improve the situation generally for the small settlers as well as for the traders, the St. David's meeting suggested the establishment of an Island Agricultural Loan Bank or Joint Stock Company. Those at the gathering also called for the establishment of a committee known as the Central Communicating Committee "to correspond with the yeomen throughout the island on subjects of agriculture and other branches of native industry".³⁸

This meeting was marked by acrimony, especially toward the Custos of St. David, W.P. Georges. One of the resolutions described the Custos as "one of our bitterest enemies" and complained that Eyre had sought information on the Underhill letter from Georges. St. David, like St. Thomas in the East, was a politically divided parish. According to Georges, the Underhill meeting in St. David had been organized by his leading political opponent, Samuel Clarke, and "others who delight in Political Excitement".³⁹

Whatever the differences within the parish, however, these resolutions made it clear that there were serious problems between the planters and the small settlers. This was especially the case in the courts but also over the provision grounds of the labouring population. The treatment of estate workers was also taken up at an Underhill meeting in St. Mary in late June. In addition to airing some of the same issues as the Kingston and Spanish Town meetings, the St. Mary petitioners pointed to the "present low prices paid as wages to labourers... and that so tardily". This reinforced reports of estate workers being paid in arrears and sometimes kept waiting for months for their pay.⁴⁰

The series of Underhill meetings from April to late June clearly highlighted the crisis affecting Jamaica. No one doubted the impact of the drought or the result of the depressed sugar market. The repeated pleas about the lack of jobs, the plight of the small settlers, the low pay for estate work, and the state of the law should have alerted colonial officials to a different range of problems. But the reaction of the Governor as well as of the Colonial Office was to stigmatize the supporters of Underhill and to ignore some of the critical difficulties facing the island.

Many of the Underhill meetings appointed deputations to present their petitions to the Governor. Like several other groups, the representatives of the Kingston meeting were received by Governor Eyre, informed that he would forward their resolutions to the Colonial Office, and left in no doubt that the Governor could not support them.⁴¹ Writing to the Colonial Office just ahead of this meeting, Eyre made clear how much he differed from Underhill's supporters:

My own conviction is that the pressure which now undoubtedly exists amongst a portion of the population, and which from the long continuance of the drought has become intensified during the last few weeks, owes its origin in a great measure to the habits and character of the people, induced by the genial nature of the climate, the facility of supplying their wants in ordinary seasons at comparatively little exertion and their natural disposition to indolence and inactivity, and to remain satisfied with what barely supplies absolute wants.⁴²

The Colonial Office shared these views. Its response to the original petition of the poor people of St. Ann was drafted by the head of the West India Department, Henry Taylor. The Government's view was that

[...] the prosperity of the Labouring Classes as well as of all other classes depends in Jamaica, and in other Countries, upon their working for Wages, not uncertainly or capriciously, but steadily and continuously, at the times when their labour is wanted, and for so long as it is wanted, and that if they would use this industry, and thereby render the Plantations productive, they would enable the Planters to pay them higher Wages for the same hours of work than are received by the best Field Labourers in this Country... and they may be assured that it is from their own industry and prudence, in availing themselves of the means of prospering that are before them, and not from any such schemes as have been suggested to them, that they must look for an improvement in their condition.⁴³

Known as "The Queen's Advice", this document was widely circulated in Jamaica: 50,000 copies were disseminated in July to all parts of the colony.

Most copies of "The Queen's Advice" were distributed around the island without any apparent protest. However, a group of Baptist missionaries in St. James refused to circulate the document. They found that it was inapplicable to their parish and that the copies which had already been circulated had caused "an amount of irritation most painful to observe". Like many other people in the island, the missionaries did not believe that the Queen could have written the document. They believed that she "could never have addressed the suffering poor without one kind word of sympathy for them in their distress brought upon them by circumstances over which they had no control". Eyre dismissed these comments by portraying the Baptists as troublemakers who had participated in the Underhill meeting held at Montego Bay.⁴⁴

III

Conditions in Jamaica during the summer of 1865 did not improve. The drought continued in most parts of the island, and further gloomy predictions appeared in the press. In Vere, there was no work for the people and "stealing and starving in all directions". There was a serious question about maintaining control in the parish: *The County Union* reported that "a state of anarchy is gaining ground that will soon bid defiance to the civil power under its most energetic exercise".⁴⁵ The situation was no better in St. Elizabeth. A letter writer to *The Morning Journal* warned that if things did not change there, "a dire fate awaits Jamaica and her people".⁴⁶

As if to fulfill this prophecy, rumours of a conspiracy in western Jamaica began circulating in late July. At first, the targets were some of the leading planters in St. Elizabeth. One of them, Raynes Waite Smith, represented the parish in the Assembly and was a former member of the Government. A storekeeper near Smith's plantation had found an anonymous letter which attacked Smith. The letter claimed that the Queen had sent Smith a large

quantity of rice, but that he had either kept it for himself or used it to feed his Indian indentured labourers. Smith had also heard that some people planned to take over his large house; according to one rumour, the house "would do very well for them by-and-by".⁴⁷

This was only one of the elements of the conspiracy. The Custos of St. Elizabeth and president of the Legislative Council, John Salmon, wrote to Governor Eyre alerting him to rumours of an outbreak expected on August 1, the anniversary of Emancipation. Salmon believed that some of the people would resist paying taxes on that day or would seek to appropriate land.⁴⁸ These were not the only rumours about a forthcoming rebellion. Some small settlers in St. Elizabeth had informed a magistrate that a large group of blacks planned to proceed to Black River, the most important city in the parish. Once there, the women would take whatever they required from the shops.⁴⁹ A doctor living in the parish reported a variant of this story:

The storekeepers, for instance, said remarks were constantly dropped in their stores, such as when people came to buy a bit of cloth they would say, "You stop, August will soon come, and cloth will be cheap."⁵⁰

One of the causes of the threatened disturbance was a report that the Queen had sent a large amount of money for the people of St. Elizabeth to purchase land. However, the Custos had kept it for himself. Another was a continuing concern among ex-slaves about the possibility of being reenslaved. According to a Catholic priest who was familiar with western Jamaica, the fear of reenslavement was not limited to the people of St. Elizabeth but had spread through St. James and Westmoreland as well.⁵¹

The prospect of a rebellion prompted many families to flee to Black River for protection. By the end of July, they had come to believe that the blacks were intent on killing whites and browns.⁵² A doctor who worked among blacks in the parish, Alexander M'Gatty, reported that by that time "the parish was in a wild state of excitement."⁵³ The Custos was clearly very frightened; he was particularly worried about leaving his family on his plantation while he dealt with the situation at Black River. Salmon blamed the Underhill meetings for the threatened outbreak:

The general opinion among proprietors white, Colored and Black is that all this disturbance and ill feeling is to be attributed to the late assertions which have been made that the negroes are ill treated and cheated and unfairly dealt with and oppressed and that if permitted to be reiterated there will be no peace or security for property or life.⁵⁴

St. Elizabeth was not the only parish where trouble was expected at the beginning of August. The Custos of St. James, G.L. Phillips, informed Eyre that

he had received anonymous letters “conveying threats of Fire and Robbery” because of the prevailing high prices in the shops and the low wages paid on the plantations. One rumour predicted that the outbreak would begin in St. James, and another was that the leaders of the plot came from there as well.⁵⁵

Under these circumstances, Eyre requested that two men of war be sent to the affected areas, the first to Black River and the second to Montego Bay and Lucea. Although the Governor did not believe that an outbreak was likely, he thought it wise to take these precautions. In his correspondence with the commodore in charge of the fleet, Eyre suggested that “if the ships were to have a little gun practice in each of the Ports it might be useful in letting the Peasantry know of their presence”.⁵⁶ Whether or not the threat was a real one, Salmon reported that the ship sent to Black River, the Bulldog, had achieved the desired result. All was quiet in the parish. At the very least, the visit of the Bulldog pleased many of the people in the parish who were allowed to inspect the vessel.⁵⁷

After a lull in early July, the Underhill meetings continued. The gatherings in August and September were similar to those organized by the Underhill Convention. Moreover, George William Gordon was heavily involved in these later meetings. In his newspaper, *The Watchman and People's Free Press*, and in a placard which appeared in St. Ann and in St Thomas in the East, Gordon actively encouraged the people in the two parishes to attend the meetings. To attract support in St. Ann, he made use of Underhill's letter, the poor people's petition of St. Ann, and the Government response to it:

People of St. Ann's,
 Poor people of St. Ann's
 Starving people of St. Ann's
 Naked people of St. Ann's.

You who have no sugar estates to work on, nor can find other employment, we call on you to come forth, even if you be naked, come forth and protest against the unjust representations made against you by Mr. Governor Eyre and his band of Custodes.⁵⁸

At the meeting itself in St. Ann, a native pastor who had also been involved in the Kingston meeting, Rev. James Crole, expressed great concern about the “oppressed, distressed, wretched and deplorable condition” of the mass of the population. In his view, the “oppressive system of Government” was the cause of their plight (Stewart 1983: 385).

Gordon used similar tactics to drum up support for the meeting in St. Thomas in the East. In the placard, he was particularly abusive toward the Custos, Baron von Ketelhodt, a German who had married an Englishwoman and settled in Jamaica:

People of St. Thomas ye East, you have been ground down too long already. Shake off your sloth, and speak like *honourable* and free men at your meeting [...] But can you and the inhabitants of St. Thomas ye East longer bear to be afflicted by this enemy to your peace - a Custos whose feelings are foreign to yours?⁵⁹

As in many other parishes in the island, Ketelhodt, as Custos of St. Thomas in the East, had been asked to have a public meeting on the state of the island. Although he had agreed to hold the meeting at the court house on August 12, Ketelhodt postponed it at the last minute. Nonetheless, the meeting was held in the market place opposite the court house.⁶⁰

Gordon chaired the meeting, which was attended by many men who were later implicated in the rebellion. For example, Paul Bogle, James McLaren, and Samuel Clarke were present and were among those who either proposed or seconded resolutions. A schoolmaster from Amity Hall in St. Thomas in the East, John Anderson, reported that this was not the only Underhill meeting in the parish. Anderson had been at an earlier such meeting at Stoakes Hall, and he had brought resolutions from that meeting to the larger gathering at Morant Bay. There is a possibility that this pattern of holding local gatherings which fed resolutions to the larger parish meeting was replicated elsewhere in the island.⁶¹

Some of the resolutions adopted at the Morant Bay meeting reiterated complaints which had been aired at other Underhill meetings. There was concern about the increasing level of taxes, the difficulties of finding employment, and the problem of low wages. As in the Kingston meeting, which Gordon also chaired, those present attacked "the oppressive nature of many of the Acts which have recently passed the Legislature of this island [and] are such as to create feelings of apprehension for the future well-being of society [...]" There was also considerable bitterness directed at the Custos for his "illegal and oppressive conduct towards the rights of the constituency of this parish and the island generally [...]". Ketelhodt's attempt to postpone the meeting was seen as "unconstitutional"; furthermore, the meeting concluded that "the generally arbitrary, illegal and inconsistent conduct of the Custos is destruction [sic] to the peace and prosperity of the affairs of the parish."⁶² The final Underhill meeting in Vere in early September would repeat some of these sentiments.

Gordon presided over the meeting at Vere, just as he had at several other Underhill meetings. Again, as in St. Thomas in the East, the Custos, Louis MacKinnon, refused to allow the meeting to take place in the court house. MacKinnon justified this stance by pointing out that "these meetings do an infinite deal of mischief" and allow men he considered agitators to gain notoriety. But the meeting, held in the town of Alley, went ahead in the open air under a large tree.⁶³

There are various versions of Gordon's speech at the meeting, which lasted upwards of an hour. But there is little doubt that Gordon strongly attacked the Governor using highly emotive language. In one report, Gordon called Eyre "a bad man" who "sanctions everything done by the higher class to the oppression of the poor negroes." Similarly, Gordon derided "The Queen's Advice": she would never have written such a document which was "all trash". He also complained about the lack of justice in the parish, about the low level of wages, and about the general poverty of the people. Indeed, Gordon had hoped to collect money for the Anti-Slavery Society but found that the people were too poor.⁶⁴

Similar statements had been made at other Underhill meetings, although it is possible that Gordon's language was stronger than usual on this occasion. What differentiated this speech from many others was Gordon's alleged statement encouraging revolution and invoking the dreaded image of Haiti. According to two bookkeepers working in Vere, Gordon concluded his speech by telling the audience that they should not be afraid of the consequences of attending the meeting:

I was told by some of you that your overseer said, that if any of you attended this meeting they would tear down your houses. Tell them that I, George William Gordon, say they dare not do it – it is tyranny, you must do what Hayti does; you have a bad name now, but you will have a worse then.⁶⁵

Gordon's remarks about Haiti were reported in the island press and also used as evidence in his court-martial at Morant Bay. In subsequent conversations on the subject, Gordon denied ever having brought up the example of Haiti. The report which appeared in *The County Union* and which was written by William March did not contain any such reference. But this version had been carefully scrutinised by Dr. Robert Bruce, the coroner for Vere, and one of the organizers of the Vere Underhill meeting. On the other hand, the report containing Gordon's alleged remark was prepared by men who were probably strongly opposed to Gordon's politics.⁶⁶

Whatever the truth of the allegation, it was widely believed that Gordon had raised the spectre of Haiti. Even Gordon's ally in Vere, Robert Bruce, claimed that he wrote to Gordon after the meeting making it clear that he did not like "the way [Gordon] spoke" and that he would not attend any more such meetings. Furthermore, Sidney Levien, the editor of *The County Union*, was also concerned about the possible consequences of the meeting. He wrote to Bruce that he wished "to shield you and them [the people of Vere] from the charge of anarchy and tumult, which in a short time must follow these fearful demonstrations."⁶⁷ Levien was not alone in expecting trouble. Col. Alexander Fyfe, the

stipendiary magistrate for St. David and a member of the Legislative Council, wrote an urgent letter in September to William Hosack, a member of the Executive Committee. In the letter, Fyfe warned the Government that it was "slumbering on a mine" but "did not seem to realize the danger [it] was in."⁶⁸

Yet the local Government as well as Whitehall remained unmoved either by the meetings or by the deteriorating conditions in the island. The Colonial Office response to the Underhill petition from Hanover arrived in Jamaica in September. In the despatch, the Colonial Office repeated its earlier homilies: it again counselled steady and continuous work.⁶⁹ In the face of an unyielding Government, it was becoming clear that the Underhill meetings could have little practical effect. Now that petitioning and peaceful meetings had failed, some people were preparing for war.

NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a paper first presented in March, 1986 at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London. I am grateful to participants at the seminar for their comments. The research for this paper was supported by the British Academy and the University of Warwick.
2. *The Falmouth Post*, 30 December 1864.
3. *The Colonial Standard and Jamaica Despatch*, 20 March 1865.
4. *The Falmouth Post*, 6 January 1865. See also resolution number 1 of the Underhill meeting held in Savanna-la-Mar in April: *The Sentinel*, 1 May 1865.
5. *The Falmouth Post*, 25 April 1865.
6. *The Falmouth Post*, 31 March 1865.
7. *The Colonial Standard and Jamaica Despatch*, 24 May 1865.
8. *The Falmouth Post*, 18 August 1865.
9. *The Falmouth Post*, 18 August 1865; *The Morning Journal*, 4 September 1865.
10. *The Morning Journal*, 20 March 1865. Underhill's letter was reprinted in (Underhill 1865). The quotations which follow are taken from Underhill's letter.
11. C.O. 137/388, Eyre to Cardwell, 2 March 1865, no. 40. Unlike Eyre, Lord Olivier, a later governor of Jamaica, supported Underhill's letter: see (Olivier 1936: 119).
12. C.O. 137/390, Eyre to Cardwell, 19 April 1865, no. 90: Hill to Austin, 15 March 1865.

13. C.O. 137/391, Eyre to Cardwell, 6 May 1865, no. 128: Report of the Baptist Union, 1 May 1865.
14. C.O. 137/390, Eyre to Cardwell, 12 April 1865, no. 90: Henry Clarke to the Bishop, 6 March 1865.
15. C.O. 137/390, Eyre to Cardwell, 19 April 1865, no. 90: Westmorland's remarks on Underhill's letter; C.O. 137/391, Eyre to Cardwell, 23 May 1865, no. 135: Dr. Hamilton's remarks on Underhill's letter.
16. C.O. 137/388, Eyre to Cardwell, 2 March 1865, no. 40: *Jamaica Guardian*, 25 February 1865.
17. C.O. 137/390, Eyre to Cardwell, 19 April 1865, no. 90; C.O. 137/391, Rogers to Underhill, 5 August 1865, attached to Eyre to Cardwell, 6 May 1865, no. 128.
18. *The Colonial Standard and Jamaica Despatch*, 2 May 1865; *Ibid.*, n.d., reprinted in *The Morning Journal*, 27 March 1865.
19. *Jamaica Guardian*, n.d., reprinted in *The Morning Journal*, 27 March 1865; *The County Union and Anglo-Jamaican Advertiser*, 24 March 1865; *The Sentinel*, 11 April 1865.
20. JRC, Evidence of Rev. Benjamin Millard, p. 782.
21. C.O. 137/390, Eyre to Cardwell, 19 April 1865, no. 90: The Humble Petition of the Poor People of Jamaica and parish of St. Ann.
22. C.O. 137/390, Eyre to Cardwell, 25 April 1865, no. 115.
23. *The Colonial Standard and Jamaica Despatch*, 12 June 1865.
24. *The Morning Journal*, 26 May 1865.
25. *The Morning Journal*, 26 May 1865.
26. *The Morning Journal*, 26 May 1865.
27. *The Morning Journal*, 27 May 1865.
28. *The Morning Journal*, 27 May 1865.
29. *The Falmouth Post*, 23 May 1865.
30. *The County Union*, 23 May 1865.
31. *The Morning Journal*, 16 June 1865.
32. JRC, Evidence of Henry Westmorland, p. 859.
33. Papers, p. 216.

34. *The Colonial Standard and Jamaica Despatch*, 6 May 1865.
35. *The Morning Journal*, 23 May 1865.
36. C.O. 137/391, Eyre to Cardwell, 7 June 1865, no. 143; *The Morning Journal*, 10 July 1865.
37. JRC, Evidence of A.H. Lewis, p. 839.
38. *The Colonial Standard and Jamaica Despatch*, 14 July 1865.
39. C.O. 137/392, Eyre to Cardwell, 12 July 1865, no. 174: The St. David Resolutions, 26 June 1865; Georges to Austin, 10 July 1865.
40. *The Morning Journal*, 6 July 1865; 29 June 1865.
41. *The Morning Journal*, 18 May 1865.
42. C.O. 137/391, Eyre to Cardwell, 6 May 1865, no. 128.
43. C.O. 137/390, Cardwell to Eyre, 14 June 1865, no. 222.
44. C.O. 137/392, Eyre to Cardwell, 22 August 1865, no. 210: Henderson, Dendy and Reid to Myers, 4 August 1865; C.O. 137/393, Eyre to Cardwell, 20 September 1865, no. 237: Henderson, Dendy and Reid to Jordon, 19 August 1865.
45. *The County Union*, n.d., reprinted in *The Morning Journal*, 17 July 1865.
46. *The Morning Journal*, 17 July 1865.
47. JRC, Evidence of Raynes Waite Smith, p. 744.
48. JRC, Evidence of Henry Westmorland, p. 857: Salmon to Eyre, 22 July 1865.
49. C.O. 137/392, Eyre to Cardwell, 7 August 1865, no. 198: Salmon to Eyre, 25 July 1865.
50. JRC, Evidence of Dr. Alexander M'Gatty, p. 666.
51. JRC: Evidence of Henry Westmorland, p. 857: Salmon to Eyre, 25 July 1865; Evidence of Rev. Joseph Woollett, p. 548.
52. JRC, Evidence of Thomas Wheatle, p. 599.
53. JRC, Evidence of Alexander M'Gatty, p. 667.
54. C.O. 137/392, Eyre to Cardwell, 7 August 1865, no. 198: Salmon to Eyre, 28 July 1865.
55. C.O. 137/392, Eyre to Cardwell, 7 August 1865, no. 198; Phillips to Austin, 26 July 1865; Smith to Salmon, 24 July 1865, private and confidential; JRC, Evidence of Henry Westmorland, p. 857: Salmon to Eyre, 22 July 1865.

56. C.O. 137/392, Eyre to Cardwell, 7 August 1865, no. 198; Eyre to Commodore Cracroft, n.d. See also Robotham 1981: 88.
57. C.O. 137/392, Eyre to Cardwell, 7 August 1865, no. 198; Salmon to Austin, 4 August 1865; Salmon to Capt. Wake, R.N., 4 August 1865.
58. JRC, Proceedings and Despatches on the trial of George William Gordon; *The Jamaica Watchman and People's Free Press*, 21 August 1865.
59. JRC, Proceedings and Despatches on the trial of George William Gordon; *The Jamaica Watchman and People's Free Press*, 21 August 1865.
60. *The Colonial Standard and Jamaica Despatch*, 21 July 1865; *The Jamaica Watchman and People's Free Press*, 21 August 1865.
61. JRC: Evidence of Henry Clyne, p. 735; Evidence of John Anderson, pp. 958-59. For example, there were two meetings in the parish of St. Elizabeth; see JRC, Evidence of Thomas Wheatle, p. 599.
62. JRC, Appendix, pp. 1156-57.
63. Papers, MacKinnon to Jordon, 27 September 1865, p. 230; JRC, Evidence of Joseph Williams, p. 852.
64. JRC: Evidence of James Humber, p. 444; Evidence of William March, pp. 888-89; Evidence of Dr. Robert Bruce, p. 730.
65. JRC, Evidence of James Humber, p. 444.
66. JRC: Evidence of James Ford, p. 388; Evidence of William March, pp. 888-90.
67. JRC, Evidence of Dr. Robert Bruce, p. 729.
68. JRC, Evidence of William Hosack, p. 925.
69. *The Falmouth Post*, 22 September 1865.

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