Preachers George Gordon and Paul Bogle are anything but obscure evangelists in the collective memory of Jamaica. Their images appear on postage stamps and coins because they count among the country’s proclaimed National Heroes. They owe their posthumous fame to Governor Edward John Eyre who accused them of conspiring to foment rebellion at Morant Bay in 1865. Both were hung after trials by court martial. Historians have written a great deal about this famous event but none have treated the debacle from the particular perspective of the native evangelist.

A stoush between civil authority and black preaching had been on the cards for some time, which is why the governor rushed to judgment when he got word of a serious affray at the Morant Bay Court House on Wednesday 11th October 1865. The previous Saturday, a crowd had gathered at the Court of Petty Sessions to attend the trial of a poor man accused of trespass and stealing food from a derelict estate. When he was convicted Paul Bogle cried out that the man should appeal. On Monday warrants were issued for the apprehension of Bogle and several other members of the crowd, but an angry throng prevented police from making the arrests. After despatching a letter to the governor calling for assistance in resisting injustice, Bogle and many others gathered at the Court House where a Vestry meeting was being held on Wednesday. Unknown to them, the principal magistrate of the district (known in Jamaica as the Custos) had also written to Governor Eyre requesting that troops be sent to assist him in case of trouble. ‘The Ringleader in this affair’, he wrote, ‘is a man of the name of Paul Bogle who generally acts with Mr. G W Gordon.’ At the court house Bogle and many others found soldiers of the local militia marshalled for defence. The Custos proceeded to read the Riot Act when violence erupted. Whether the crowd had thrown stones or a nervous rifleman had first pressed the trigger cannot be known. A volley was fired into the crowd killing seven. The mob retaliated, setting fire to the Court House and nearby buildings. When the officials tried to leave the burning building several of them were killed by the irate crowd. The first reports to reach England gave lurid details.

1 Custos Ketelhodt to Eyre, 10 Oct. 1865, enclosed in Eyre to Cardwell, 23 Nov. 1865, CO137/395, British National Archives, Kew (henceforward CO).
...no less than sixteen gentlemen were known to have been killed, and eighteen others wounded at Morant Bay. He says that the Rev. V. Hershell "is said to have had his tongue cut out while yet alive," and that "an attempt is said to have been made to skin him." He positively states that Mr. Price, a Negro gentleman, "was ripped open and had his entrails taken out," and that "many of the sixteen persons then murdered are said to have had their eyes scooped out, their heads cleft open, and their brains taken out." Pall Mall Gazette, 27 Nov. 1865.

[After these gory deeds the rebels] left for the Baptist chapel to have a prayer meeting, and to thank God for their success, intending afterwards to return and remove their dead. After half an hour spent in psalm-singing by those blood-stained wretches one of their leaders addressed them, pointing to the favour which the Almighty had shown in delivering their enemies into their hands, and exhorting them to further acts of fanaticism, as ordered to them by God for their deliverance. Daily News 14 Nov. 1865.

Practically all of the alleged atrocities were subsequently shown to be false, as were the supposed doings at the Baptist chapel. At the time, however, they appeared to justify the ferocious retribution visited upon the poor people of Morant Bay and surrounding regions.

On Thursday, 12th October Gov. Eyre summoned a Council of War, proclaimed the eastern region of the island to be in rebellion, declared Martial Law in the affected areas, and sent troops to Morant Bay. Over the next ten days or so an estimated 469 persons were killed by the military in the field or at courts martial, including of course Paul Bogle and his alleged co-conspirator, George W. Gordon. Upwards of 1000 dwellings were destroyed. In Britain the affair provoked a debate that ranged far beyond the question of whether rebellion had been in the minds of the crowd at the Court House and the justice of Eyre’s brutal response. Led by The Times in London, many argued that the rebellion showed the folly of Christian missions and Abolition because the Negro race was irredeemably savage. Governor Eyre became the focus of attention and a committee of influential British intellectuals was formed to advocate his prosecution and another defended his conduct. Eyre was stood down from his post and a Royal Commission set up to examine Jamaican witnesses. The substantial documentation accumulated in the course of the public controversy and the Royal Commission puts a spotlight on the indigenous evangelist as a figure of suspicion for colonial authorities.