Surviving the Suppression
The Significance of Witnesses' Testimonies before the Jamaica Royal Commission of 1866

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Abstract

This article assesses the importance of testimonies taken before the Jamaica Royal Commission of 1866 in facilitating significant insights into the challenges faced by ordinary residents of St Thomas in the East prior to and during the events of October 1865. The testimonies illustrate the role of religious affiliation, gender, race and class-based stereotypes in the deadly unfolding of the suppression. A case-study analysis of the experiences conveyed by the testimonies underscores their significance as narratives of commemoration for the many who experienced the state-unleashed terror of October 1865.

The evidential base for this article rests primarily upon the minutes of evidence of the Jamaica Royal Commission of 1866 which details testimonies by survivors of the suppression enforced immediately following the Morant Bay Rebellion of 11 October 1865. A total of 212 witnesses were called under sections C (witnesses as to deaths) and D (witnesses as to destruction of property by burning). The commission’s categorization of each witness as “black” or “coloured”, as well as the witnesses’ own references to their living conditions, occupations, property or business, facilitates reasoned conclusions regarding the experiences of these inhabitants of areas such as Morant Bay, the Plantain Garden River District and the Blue Mountain Valley both before and after the rebellion. Reliance on these minutes of evidence presents limitations that should be acknowledged. Despite the occasional use of interpreters, there may have been a degree of cultural and linguistic misinterpretation in the communications between white commissioners and black witnesses. Additionally, the delay between the revolt and the start of the inquiry may have contributed to some confusion on the part of some witnesses in recalling the sequence of events. Also taken into account was the