
The Morant Bay Rebellion, British Colonial Policy, and Travelling Ideas About Haiti

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Abstract

In this article, I examine how Haiti was deployed by Governor Eyre and his supporters in the debate over the Morant Bay Rebellion in Britain. I argue that Eyre's defence was bolstered by proliferating notions of scientific racism. Scientists, such as members of the Anthropological Society of London, that included many politicians and colonial administrators amongst its ranks, promoted the notion that Haitians and Jamaicans were inherently united through shared racial characteristics. As events at Morant Bay took shape, both Eyre and observers in Britain looked to Haitian history for an analysis of the motives of the protestors.

Introduction

In defending George William Gordon, who was executed by Governor Eyre during the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica in 1865, one witness, a Dr Robert George Bruce, swore before the Royal Commission that Gordon had never demanded of his supporters that “[w]e must do as they have done in Hayti.”¹ The Royal Commission, sent from Britain to investigate Eyre’s actions during the War, in which hundreds of Jamaicans were brutally massacred and tortured and over a thousand displaced, was particularly interested in whether Gordon had cited Haiti. They pressed Bruce further, asking “What do you understand by the cry ‘Do as they do in Hayti?’” Bruce replied “It has no significance at all here – it means to cut the white people’s throats . . . It is that they are to kill all the white people.”² The Commission investigated whether Gordon had cited Haiti to discern if, as Eyre and his supporters claimed, the motive of the protestors at Morant Bay was simply to enact a