
Punishment, Discipline and Agency in the Government Reformatory in Colonial Jamaica 1869–1885

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Abstract

In 1869, the government established the Government Reformatory and Industrial School in Stony Hill to house both boys and girls convicted of crimes or declared destitute and orphaned. In its early years, the institution was plagued by rumours of amputations, disease and disfigurement among the inmates. In 1875 and 1877, Governors Grey and Musgrave, respectively, convened a Commission of Inquiry into the conditions of the inmates of the Government Reformatory. Commissioners in the 1877 inquiry found evidence of 'cruel and capricious punishment' in which boys were shackled together in pairs for months at a time.

Relying on correspondence as well as witness testimony before the commissioners, this paper examines conflicts among staff members about the treatment of children as well as tensions between inmates and the school's administration to explore the culture of work and punishment at the Government Reformatory. A rarely engaged topic in Caribbean historiography, this paper explores the relationship between punishment, childhood and reformatories in colonial Jamaica. The culture of punishment in the reformatory reflected earlier practices of violence and punishment inherited from slavery. The conflict over the treatment of children not only provides insight into how the Government Reformatory operated but also the relationship between labour and debility in children's work schedule and the ways in which children attempted to exercise agency in their daily lives.

Between October and November of 1869, the Jamaican government moved 168 boys and 71 girls to the newly established Government Reformatory, housed in the old military barracks in Stony Hill. Almost immediately, rumours circulated of general mismanagement and the disfigurement of inmates within the institution. Contemporary reports suggest that the old military barracks had served as a goat pen during its abandonment and the government had failed to rehabilitate and clean