
Precursors to Morant Bay

The Pattern of Popular Protest in Post-Emancipation Jamaica (1834–1865)

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Abstract

In the broader context of post-emancipation Jamaica, the trouble that erupted in St Thomas-in-the-East in October 1865 must have appeared initially as merely the latest in a long series of protests and disorders that had troubled the peace of the island since the days of the Apprenticeship. For during the middle years of the century, the courts were overwhelmed with prosecutions for riot. Exploiting both judicial records and more conventional sources like newspaper reports and Colonial Office correspondence, this article investigates the varied causes of popular discontent in the thirty years after the abolition of slavery. Religious conflict, property disputes, taxation, and electoral rivalries, it is argued, constituted the most frequent sources of disaffection, while almost every disturbance manifested a powerful popular hostility to the recently established police force. Most of these grievances, moreover, demonstrated the manifold disappointments of emancipation, which in turn can be explained largely by the failures of government policy and the hardening of official racism since the abandonment of the commitment to reform in the early 1840s.

On the night of 8 June 1835, according to the evidence of police sergeant James Dunn, loud noises ("drums, fifes, yellings and shoutings") were heard coming from premises behind the barracks near the racecourse in Spanish Town. The noise had begun at nine o'clock in the evening. Around two hours later, as the volume increased, he and six colleagues went to investigate. They reminded the merry-makers of a previous visit to the same location when the police had been instructed by a special magistrate to prevent such celebrations, and ordered everyone to pack up and go home. They refused point blank, one of them answering that "they were free men and would act as they liked". The police were forced to retreat, being showered with a barrage of brickbats, and were chased back to their barracks by "a crowd of 200 persons at the lowest calculation". The Attorney General, prosecuting this case, referred to