

## I Introduction

In her book Slaves and Missionaries : The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society 1787-1834 Mary Turner argues that the works of the various sectarian missions indirectly contributed to the 1832 rebellion. She states that, although the missionaries themselves, unlike some of their supporting churches, remained more or less neutral in the position of slavery in order to maintain their tenuous relationship with the landowning class of the island, the infrastructure their missions provided, along with the nature of the Christian message itself, proved to be an important catalyst for the ensuing rebellion. The arguments for Turner's case are well crafted and well documented. Still, it must be noted that her interpretation of historical data is at times strongly geared towards her general thesis, leaving room for additional facts. The purpose of this essay, then, is not to attack Turner's argument outright, but instead to fill in some additional facts not emphasized in her book.

As mentioned, Turner does not propagate the theory that sectarian missionaries were in any way directly responsible for the 1832 rebellion - although she titles it as 'the Baptist war -': rebellion was a product of a newly found sense of self, the

education and inter-estate communication that the network of missions provided. The missionary is thus seen as an involuntary but nevertheless, primary tool for the self-liberation of the slave. What Turner fails to emphasize in her book, however, is the degree to which, prior to the uprising<sup>1</sup>, the missionaries were involved in trying to maintain the status quo. Although specific examples of missionary co-operation with the slave system do appear in her work in the first chapter ('the Planters and the Missionaries'), they are somewhat negated by the 'positive' evidence presented in subsequent passages. In order to recreate some balance, the focus of this essay will be on those missionary activities that showed the co-operation that existed between the missionaries and the landlords before the uprising began. Since the format of this paper does not allow for an all inclusive investigation, the activities of two of the groups - the Baptist and the Moravians - will serve as examples of the variety of ways in which such cooperation manifested itself. Note that, by itself, this essay cannot subvert Turner's main thesis. A more detailed study, however, might place

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<sup>1</sup>note that the period under discussion ,here, does not include the time after the rebellion. The violence which they encountered following the uprising forced almost all of the missionaries away from their neutral stance on the issue of slavery. Some of them, i.e. the Baptist Knibb, became active crusaders for the abolitionist cause. The important role that the missionaries played in securing the downfall of british slavery is well documented in Turner's book under the chapter of "Emancipation achieved".

missionaries and their work in a less positive light than that presented by Turner, for it might reach the conclusion that the sectarian activities, through their cooperation with the landowning class re-enforced the position of the slave, thus potentially prolonging the existence of slavery itself.

## **II The Moravian Example**

In this section as well as in the following chapter on the Baptists, the evidence gathered from one secondary text each will be used to illustrate the general argument. Clearly, then, this essay is not to be construed as an all encompassing analysis of Moravian and Baptist cooperation with the established class. Still, even this limited amount of primary material source is sufficient to shed light on some of the more obvious tendencies towards collaboration.

The text used in this chapter is J.H Buchner's Moravians in Jamaica (1971). First published in 1854, its author, a missionary himself, had arrived on the island in 1839. The book, written on the occasion of the centenary of the Moravian arrival in Jamaica, chronicles the history of the mission developments in a rather sympathetic light, for obvious reasons. Nevertheless, the account, reconstructed mostly from missionary

diaries and reports, encompasses sufficient evidence for the work at hand.

From its inception the Moravian mission in Jamaica was closely tied to the landowning class, i.e. the estate holders. The first missionaries arrived in 1754 at the request of two wealthy families, the Fosters and the Barhams, owners of the Elim, Two-mile-wood, and the Bogue estates (Buchner, 24). In essence, the missionaries became employees of the estates, utilized mainly to heighten productivity. As Buchner states:

Here was a missionary supported by the proprietor, as it were in his employ; another officer added to the staff of agents on the plantation; to him the overseer complained of laziness and disobedience of the slaves; he was expected to reprove them, to tell them to obey and to work diligently. For instance, let us accompany the missionary to the sick house;... there he would find many laid up with sores and various diseases; all were accused by the overseer of feigning diseases....; and the missionary, instead of being permitted to speak a word of comfort and condolence, would be called upon to lecture them on the sin of deception and idleness. (18)

Early Moravian missionaries had, thus, unwillingly become part of the slavery system. It should also be noted that this type of close cooperation was more or less unique to the Moravians; a similar estate owner/missionary dependency relationship did not exist among the Baptists, for example.

Yet, fulfilling a 'slave-driving' function was not the only infraction of early Moravian missionaries. As Buchner confesses in his introduction, the missionaries at one point became slaveholders themselves:

The first instance of this [moravian slaveholdership] occurred in St. Thomas... . It was about the year 1740, that one of the Brethren, stationed by himself was taken ill with fever... . When in this pitiable and forsaken state, the congregation, slaves themselves, collected money and purchased a slave, whom they presented to their minister to attend upon him in his forlorn situation. This was the first slave possessed by a Moravian. They could not procure free servants, and having become familiarized with slavery, they were thus led to purchase and hold slaves as servants. (22)

Buchner, in the introduction, further confesses that slaves also worked on an estate owned by the Moravians (23)<sup>2</sup>. It should be noted that these examples are isolated incidents within the historical development of the Moravian missionary settlements in Jamaica. Nevertheless, they shed light on the conceptual framework of these early missionaries: slavery itself was not seen as inherently evil; only its effects on the slaves, i.e a low level of christian moral standard, was perceived as negative. As Buchner puts it: "they [the missionaries] might see and mourn over the evil consequences, but the thing itself was, still, in their opinion, an ordinance of the Lord, who maketh the rich and the poor, and ordaineth to each man his station" (21).

Such a blatantly naive and escapist view of slavery did not persist among the Moravians: more and more, they came to realize the fundamental injustice inherent in the slave system. Still,

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<sup>2</sup>Although Buchner at this point does not specify where exactly these slaves were kept, it can be assumed that he is referring to the settlement at Old Camel where, as he mentions in chapter 1, slave labour was used to work the fields.

cooperation between missionary and landowner persisted well into the 19th century. From Buchner's account of the thirty years before the rebellion of 1832 numerous anecdotal information point to the symbiotic relationship that existed between the Moravians and the landowners. The following interview between a magistrate and a converted slave highlights this relationship nicely <sup>3</sup>:

To the first question of the chairman, respecting the nature of the instruction that they had received, he replied, " We are told to believe in God, who sees us everywhere, and his son Jesus Christ; and to pray to him in heaven."-- "Well, what more?" "We must not tell lies." "What more?" "We must not steal from massa." "What more?" "We must not run away and rob massa of his work." "What more?" "We must not have two wives, for by and by they will get jealous, and hurt one another, and massa's work will fall back." "What more?" " We must pray for buckra (overseer) and everybody." Here the magistrate closed his examination by saying "Well, go along" (Buchner, 53).

Buchner fails to document whether this conversation was obtained from a court transcript or whether it was re-told by a witness of the proceedings. Still, it provides a glimpse into the very convenient entwinement between theological teachings and slave productivity, a relationship which was not lost on some of the slave holders. As a missionary puts it : "The advantages resulting to the planters from the Negroes being instructed in

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<sup>3</sup>The slave in question was a converted Muslim by the name of Robert Peart. He had been converted by Br. Lang who had served at the Old Camel Mission. Although, the date at which this interrogation took place is not specified in Buchner's account, using other information it can never-the-less be placed around the beginning of the year 1812.

the gospel, and becoming truly converted to God, seem to be generally acknowledged; and proprietors who formerly disliked our work, and even opposed their slaves in going to church, now encourage them " (71). A rise in productivity was not the only advantage gained by landholders who let the Moravians preach among their slaves, as will be seen in the following description of events during the rebellion.

The uprising that started towards the end of 1831 and lasted into 1832 are well documented, and will not be discussed in detail here. The focus, instead, will be the reaction of the Moravians to the events, i.e. their attitude towards the rebellion.

For the Moravian missionaries the rebellion was extremely unsettling, since it greatly endangered the fragile, long-worked for relationship they had build with the landowning class. It followed, then, that the Moravians lent little support to the rebellious elements, choosing instead, to combat the uprising using the pulpit as a tool for opposition: slaves were to be "faithful, not only to the good and gentil, but also to the froward" (Buchner,71). Having to be 'good and gentil' implied the rejection of violent forms of protest, even when the object against which the protest is directed, in this case the landowning class, is morally reprehensible. The christianized slave's behaviour during rebellion was, thus, strictly defined,

for: "resistance and rebellion are unlawful to him, his conscience and religious conviction condemn them" (Buchner, 71); as a result "his master may, therefore, safely discard all fear of violence and murder by the converted christian slave...to gain his freedom, he will not use means which scripture does not sanction "(71).

That this was not only true in theory but also in practice can be gathered from Buchner's documentation of the Pfeiffer case<sup>4</sup>. The many Witnesses called by the defense had all stated that "they never heard Br.P. mentioned a word about the slaves being free; but, on the contrary, always heard him tell them, they should be obedient to their masters, and faithful in the performance of every duty required of them" (Buchner, 96). As Pfeiffer, himself, later recounts in a letter to his superiors:

That the negroes of this estate [the Bogue] behaved well during the unhappy insurrection, will be a cause of thankfulness to the worthy proprietors. They merely left off work for a few hours, in consequence of being threatened with the destruction of their houses and cane-pieces, by the insurgents. However, when I went over to them, and begged them to return to their duty, they complied without much hesitation. On the adjoining estates the members of our congregation likewise conducted themselves properly;... (Buchner, 97).

The behaviour of the slaves at the Bogue estate was by no means

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<sup>4</sup>The case against Br. Pfeiffer , a missionary stationed at New Eden, is one of the few documented cases of Moravian persecution by the island authorities. He was arrested on September 7th, 1932 and charged with having incited rebellion among the slaves under his care. After a short trial Pfeiffer was exonerated of all charges.

an isolated incident. As part of Buchner's defence of Moravian activity he sites numerous examples were similar inaction among the slaves, which he attributes to the positive Moravian influence. Thus, he claims that in the congregations nearest the main seat of the rebellion, that is New Camel, New Fulneck, Mesopotamia, Malvern, and Beaufort, "not even a single member was implicated " (Buchner,102). He, further, mentions incidence , where on estates 'controlled' by Moravians, slaves defended their masters property, betrayed rebellious slaves, and even fought on the side of the landowners (Buchner,103-104). Although, exaggeration on Buchner's part cannot be dismissed here, it is quite possible that much of what he claims is, indeed, true; given the persecution that missionaries of other denominations suffered, i.e. the Baptists, incidence such as those described by Buchner would account for the Moravian's relatively lenient treatment following the rebellion. Seemingly, then, the cooperation with the landholders that the Moravians had exhibited before the events of 1832, was also evident in their activities during the rebellion.

That Moravian missionaries, like their colleagues from other denominations, did not take an active part in the events connected to the uprising is made quite clear in Turner's book. What she fails to point out, however, is the degree to which some missionary societies active on the island were persuing

the status quo in regards to the slavery issue. That the Moravians were not the only denomination to do so will be documented in the following section.

### **III The Baptists**

The purpose behind this section is not to document Baptist missionary activities in any great detail. Instead, it will serve, simply, as evidence that the moravian attitude towards slavery was not unique among Jamaican missionary movements. To this end, examples used will be limited to ones that will point to these similarities: a more detailed study would have to follow.

The information for this chapter is extracted from John Howard Hinton's Memoir of William Knibb, Missionary in Jamaica.

Published in 1849, it consists mostly of Knibb's correspondence with a variety of sources. Although the general portrayal is an extremely sympathetic one, the first sections of this book, dealing with Knibb's arrival and pre-rebellion activities on the island, are useful for the purpose of this essay.

When reading Knibb's letters, starting with his arrival in 1825, the degree to which the author abhors the slavery system quickly

becomes apparent. It is, therefore, important to separate Knibb's personal view from the activities of the Baptist missionary movement as a whole. What becomes evident, then, is that although the Baptists' opposition to slavery seems to be more pronounced than that of their Moravian colleagues it nevertheless is mostly limited to internal discussions rather than overt opposition: as will be seen, it was only after the landowner systematically hounded the Baptist missionaries following the 1832 rebellion, that Knibb and his colleagues openly called for the abolition of slavery. What follows, is carefully extracted evidence showing that in essence, the Baptists made no effort in changing the status quo.

The Baptist missionary work on Jamaica started in 1812, relatively late compared to the Moravians. No evidence exists that the first missionaries to arrive were particularly disturbed by the slavery system surrounding them. Justification for this statement lies in the fact, that at least one of them, Dr. Tripp, engaged in the slave trade himself as is shown in the following letter, penned before 1825, between two of Tripp's colleagues:

... 'Tripp bought and sold slaves!' Yes; and what a good action it was. A member of the church, of whom he had good opinion, had a wife and two children who were slaves... . The man came in great distress to Tripp, fearing that they would be sold away, and sent to a distance. He very earnestly begged Tripp to buy them, that they might not be parted from them. Tripp had not sufficient money, but borrowed some from Coultard, and bought

them, promising the man to give them liberty when he could repay him. The man was a good while ere he could get the money, but at last repaid Tripp. He bought another afterwards, at his own desire. (Hinton, 70).

Knibb, himself, engaged in a similar acquisition, though, to his credit, liberated the slave without demanding restitution (Hinton, 71). Unlike Tripp, who, by becoming an active slave trader "gave the sanction of his example to the whole system of traffic in the bodies and souls of men "(Hinton, 71), Knibb did not inadvertently re-enforce the system. Still, by engaging in the slave trade themselves, the Baptist, like their Moravian colleagues, re-enforced the traditional relationship between whites and the black slaves.

The similarity between the Moravians and the Baptist, evidenced in regard to slave holding, vanishes somewhat when one examines each groups relationship to the estate holders of the island. Unlike their fellow missionaries, the Baptist seldom established missions on the estates themselves, thus, eliminating the danger of becoming part of the plantation power structure. Whether it was this, or another tendency (i.e. their late arrival to Jamaica), that led to their strained relationship with the planters cannot be explored, here. What can be concluded however is that, as was the case with the Moravians, whenever plantation owners cooperated with the Baptist missionaries it would ultimately be to their benefit, as can be observed in a letter

written by the E.Barrett, brother of the owner of the Oxford and Cambridge estates, in 1832:

... I can assure you that I never attributed to yourself [Knibb], or Mr. Burchell, any blame as directly producing or promoting the late melancholy disturbances.... My opinion, an opinion resulting from my own frequent and confidential intercourse, not only with my own negroes, but with negroes of various other states, is, that religion had nothing to do with the late disturbances, but, on the contrary, its absence was a chief cause of them. No people could have conducted themselves better than all the negroes upon Cambridge and Oxford estates, and in like manner the people upon Retreat pen... (Hinton,135).

Knibb himself writes:

... out of 980 members [in his congregation] ... only three have been found in any great degree guilty; while on many estates, my people have defended their master's property, night and day, and on one they have taken up the rebels who came to burn it.... I have members on eighty-four different properties, not one of them having been burned (Hinton,136).

These two passages make up only a fraction of the evidence presented by Hinton in defense of the Baptist, i.e. Knibb's, role in the uprising. Even if some of these accounts were to be dismissed as exaggerations or falsehoods, the remaining evidence poses some problems for Turner's theory, referred to in the opening paragraphs: if, indeed, the infrastructure provided by the missions provided an important tool for the rebels, how is it that the slaves who utilized this infrastructure more than others, i.e. the congregations, for the most part remained passive during the rebellion ? A similar point can be made for her 'exposure to Christian doctrine' argument. In any case, evidence seems to suggest that, as in the case of the Moravians,

Baptist activity before and during the rebellion tended more than anything else to favour the status quo.

That this was indeed the case can be extracted from a speech given by Knibb to the Baptist Missionary Society after his arrival in England in 1832:

... If it be said, as it may be, that this is a subject [Knibb is referring to the debate on abolition] at variance with the objects of this society, I answer, that the oppressors of our Christian brethren in Jamaica have forced it upon your attention. Your missionaries sought it not. They strove to prevent it, patiently pursuing their avocation in the religious instruction of the slaves, and they would still have steeled their hearts against the groans of suffering humanity, and have beheld their brethren and sisters chained, imprisoned, and lacerated, for listening to the religious instruction they imparted;... I say, we should still have maintained the silence that had been imposed on us as to civil and political affairs, however enormous, and cruel, and revolting the evils we were compelled to witness, had they not at last deprived us of the privilege of telling the poor, ill used, and oppressed slave that he would, if a believer in the gospel, spend an eternity of happiness in heaven...(147).

Two points are clearly expressed here: first, the Baptist missionaries, like their Moravian colleagues, never intended to exert any pressure on the slave system as such; their aim was simply to operate within the frame-work of the system as best they could. Secondly, according to Knibb, it was the planters' persecution, rather than the injustice of slavery, itself, that caused the missionaries to re-act; herein lies an important point, one that will now be discussed in the conclusion.

#### **IV Conclusion**

The purpose of this essay was to provide some balance to Turner's argument that missionary activities contributed indirectly to the 1832 rebellion. The crux of her thesis has not been seriously challenged here. Still, some questions need to be answered in order to make her case air-tight, the role of the planters being one of them. As Knibb claimed in the above mentioned passage, it was the planters' increasingly violent persecution of the missionaries that led him to crusade against slavery; little doubt exists, then, that the estate holders reaction to the rebellion, rather than the rebellion itself hastened the move towards abolition. The question that remains is whether the outcome would have been different, had the planters, from the beginning, cooperated more closely with the various missionary societies. Evidence gathered from Buchner's and from Hinton's accounts indicate that estates under missionary supervision were relatively immune from the violence that surrounded the 1832 rebellion, strengthening the argument that missionary activities contributed rather than antagonized the status quo. Whether or not this type of pacification outweighed those indirect contributions toward rebellion that are mentioned by Turner remains, then, to be examined in a more comprehensive analysis than is provided here; a distinct possibility exists, however, that the slaves revolted, not because of missionary activities, but despite them.



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