

**Jamaican Christian Missions:
Their Influence in the
Jamaican Slave Rebellion of 1831-32
and the End of Slavery**

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“As far as the author has observed, he must say, that the slaves who are Christians are generally more sober, steady, peaceable, and obedient, than those who are not.”¹ When John Stewart wrote these words in 1823, he clearly did not have any idea that the same Christian slaves that he wrote about would incite one of the worst slave rebellions in Jamaican history. The so-called “Baptist War” that occurred during the Christmas season of 1831 was an important step in Jamaica’s abolition of slavery.² The slaves involved in this rebellion were the adherents to Baptist and other Christian missions in Jamaica, and religion played a large part in their plans of rebellion. Although slave emancipation in Jamaica was ultimately decided in the British Parliament, the Parliament acted in part because of a severe slave rebellion in Jamaica—a rebellion incited by Christian missions.

At the start of colonial slavery in Jamaica, converting the slaves to Christianity was not considered a good idea. Planters feared that Christianity would make the slaves lazy and take up too much of the time that they could spend working, or even that the slaves were not intelligent enough to grasp the concept.³ When slaves were finally taught Christianity, they were not allowed to officially join the Church of England. Black people, it was thought, could not be genuinely Christian.⁴ Because of the idea that the black slaves should

not be converted to Christianity, there was not much of a Christian influence among the slaves until the arrival of the Baptist missionaries. The Baptist missionaries were in favor of freeing the slaves. They were among the first white people to care about the slaves in Jamaica.⁵ These missionaries brought the idea of Christianity to the slaves, and in time, the ideas mixed with the religious beliefs the slaves brought with them from Africa, such as “myalism.”⁶ The first colonial missions tried to justify slavery by using parts of Christian teaching that could fit with the concept of a slave society, so the slaves did not take to that brand of religion, but the ideas of equality and brotherhood inherent in Christian doctrine that they taught mixed with myalism’s beliefs against evil helped in the slave’s struggle for freedom.⁷ Many of the white Baptist missionaries told the slaves to wait patiently, for emancipation would come eventually, but the slaves were spurred on by the missionaries’ subtle support of abolition.⁸ Amongst the other white religious groups, no such support existed.

The newly combined sect of African and Christian religions provided an outlet for the slaves to express themselves. Religious meetings were the only place where slaves were allowed to gather freely, and the church services gradually transformed into meetings where political interests were discussed.⁹ These meetings of the new church did not worry the Baptist missionaries because they believed that the Baptist teachings would prevent the slaves from entertaining ideas of rebellion; however, as Abigail Bakan succinctly stated, “The slaves interpreted Christian doctrine as a legitimization and spur to revolt; the missionaries interpreted it as a barrier against such action.”¹⁰ The missionaries were not present at these religious meetings, so the slaves had no one stressing obedience. Slaves could freely discuss ideas of freedom and rebellion.

One of the instigators of the rebellious meetings of the slaves was Sam Sharpe. Sharpe was a slave in Montego Bay, and he also was a member of the Baptist church. Sharpe could read and became

¹ John Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica; with Remarks on the Moral and Physical Condition of the Slaves, and on the Abolition of Slavery in the Colonies* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 284.

² Gad J. Heuman, *The Killing Time: The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 35.

³ Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica*, 285.

⁴ Abigail B. Bakan, *Ideology and Class Conflict in Jamaica: The Politics of Rebellion* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990), 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51. Myalism was an “anti-witchcraft against the evil deeds of others,” that became a new Afro-Christian religion.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸ Richard Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), 249.

⁹ Mary Reckord, “The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831,” *Past and Present* 40 (1968): 111.

¹⁰ Bakan, *Ideology and Class Conflict in Jamaica*, 57.

a regular speaker and leader in the Baptist mission. Sharpe's owner apparently did not object to his position as preacher and allowed him to hold nighttime religious meetings without the supervision of whites; however, Sharpe used this trust to his advantage, and the services became a cover for rebellion-organizing meetings.¹¹ Sharpe believed that the Bible supported the slave's freedom, and his loose interpretation led him to formulate a rebellion that would lead to emancipation.¹² Sharpe's original intention for the rebellion was a passive resistance movement, which gained much larger support and participation among the slaves than if Sharpe had tried to raise a violent revolt.¹³

At the time that Sharpe was beginning to develop a Baptist following and to prepare for rebellion, talk of abolition was floating around the island. Rumors were spread that the British would soon be emancipating the slaves. Not surprisingly, the majority of these rumors were coming from the Baptist missions on the island.¹⁴ Even though a royal proclamation was eventually given disputing the rumors, the island was in a political uproar, mainly because the proclamation was not widely posted around the island. The governor was under the impression that it would just increase the talk of emancipation.¹⁵ When the proclamation was distributed, it only served to increase the unrest. Because of the environment of expectancy, the call for passive resistance was even more well-received.¹⁶ According to recent research, slave rebellions were more likely when the slave's expectations were frustrated, as in the case with the Jamaican slaves and the rumors of freedom.¹⁷ While the slave population was preparing for drastic measures, the missionaries were trying their best to convince them not to rebel and that the matter would be settled in England.¹⁸

After all of the planning and preparing by Sam Sharpe and the slaves that followed him, the rebellion began on December 27, 1831. The slaves had conducted numerous meetings under the guise of religious gatherings and had planned to stop work and commence with passive resistance, although that is not how it ended up

¹¹ Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery*, 253.

¹² Reckord, "The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831," 113.

¹³ Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery*, 254.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹⁷ Heuman, *The Killing Time*, 34.

¹⁸ Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery*, 248.

happening. The rebellion started with the burning of a trash house on one of the large estates. Although Samuel Sharpe did not originally mean to promote violence and property destruction, the rebellion progressed that way anyway. The Black Regiment, a group of about 150 "soldiers" was the core of the military force, but there were many separate groups that participated. Unfortunately for the rebels, these groups were disorganized and had no experience in warfare. Most of the individual estates did not participate in passive resistance, but instead reveled in destroying property, killing livestock, or participating in other acts of defiance.¹⁹ The rebellion was put down by the first week in January 1832.²⁰ Much of the countryside was ruined. In St. James, one section of Jamaica, the damage was about 600,000 pounds. Altogether, the damages were over one million pounds.²¹ Only two acts of violence by the slaves against whites were recorded, and the slaves only attacked when threatened.²²

Although the rebellion did not last very long, it was a very substantial part of Jamaican history. The rebellion showed the growth that the slaves had achieved both politically and religiously and showed that the slaves could start a movement that could rock the foundation of Jamaican slave society. The religious meetings created a legitimate protest, as well as a mature spiritual group invented by the slaves.²³ The slaves, although not fully united, were still a large threat to the whites, and the planters were aware of this. During the period of slavery, Jamaica had a history of rebellion and resistance from the beginning through the post-slavery period.²⁴ The number of slaves in Jamaica greatly outnumbered the whites, which made the threat of any rebellion more frightening than if the whites outnumbered the blacks.²⁵

The Christian missions were ultimately blamed by the white planters and estate owners for the rebellion after it concluded, and they were ordered by the government to end their proselytizing to the slaves. The white plantation owners accused the missionaries of planning the rebellion. Six Baptist missionaries were put in jail, a

¹⁹ Reckord, "The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831," 119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

²² *Ibid.*, 124.

²³ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁴ Heuman, *The Killing Time*, 33.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Wesleyan missionary was tarred, and around 20 chapels were destroyed or damaged.²⁶ In the aftermath, the remaining missionaries decided to use the rebellion to illicit sympathy from the British people so that they might realize the atrocity of slavery and seek to abolish it in Parliament.²⁷ When Lord Mulgrave became Governor of Jamaica in 1832, he knew he would be greeted with hostility from the Baptist missionaries.²⁸ Mulgrave had not been sent to Jamaica to emancipate the slaves, so he had to watch the missions, especially the Baptists, very carefully because the slaves were still in a rebellious state of mind.²⁹

In the aftermath of the Rebellion of 1831, the Baptist and Wesleyan missions sent delegates to England to plead the case for emancipation of the slaves. These missionaries were powerful allies in the fight for freedom because they could testify before Parliament as witnesses. Back in England, these missionaries joined the emancipation movement already prevalent there. The missionaries provided the last stages of the anti-slavery movement and managed to convince Parliament that if abolition of slavery was put off any longer, more and more rebellions could ensue.³⁰ The slaves were still in an expectant mode because of the talk and rumors of abolition still abounded around the island. Even Lord Mulgrave acknowledged that freeing the slaves could not be put off much longer.³¹ In pleading their case, the missionaries persuaded the British government that slavery was more dangerous than it was profitable. Slavery was finally abolished in Jamaica on January 1, 1835, due in part to the contribution of the Rebellion of 1831.³²

The end of slavery in Jamaica led the way for a smooth switch to wage labor in 1838.³³ The Jamaican history of rebellion and insurrection finally paid off for the slaves. After almost 200 years of slavery and oppression, the slaves, with the help of Christian missions and missionaries, were able to make a bold enough statement to the whites to help secure their freedom and future.

²⁶ K.R.M. Short, "Jamaican Christian Missions and the Great Slave Rebellion of 1831-2," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 27 (1976): 57.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Wilbur D. Jones, "Lord Mulgrave's Administration in Jamaica, 1832-1833," *Journal of Negro History* 48 (1963): 46.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁰ Reckord, "The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831," 124.

³¹ Jones, "Lord Mulgrave's Administration in Jamaica, 1832-1833," 45.

³² Reckord, "The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831," 124-125.

³³ *Ibid.*, 125.

William Jardine: Architect of the First Opium War

Benjamin Cassan

History often overlooks the first Opium War, which was fought from 1840-1842.¹ Not only did this war mark a major transition in Chinese history, opening up the isolated empire to foreign markets, but it also gives insight into the foreign policy of the British Empire during the nineteenth century. Most historians who have written on the subject, however, focus largely on the controversy surrounding the opium trade, instead of on the war itself. Some have even labeled the British Empire of this period as drug pushers, and blame them for the opium addiction of millions of Chinese. John K. Fairbank, a renowned scholar on the war, referred to the British opium trade as, "the most long-continued and systematic international crime of modern times."²

Opinions like these do not look favorably upon the actions taken by the British Empire, and begs an obvious question: why would the British involve themselves in such a controversial trade, and why would they go to war for it? Historians differ on why Britain went to war in China. Some believe Britain waged war in China to preserve and expand its trading privileges there. Others theorize that the war was a result of the British wishing to defend their honor after Lin Zexu, the Imperial Commissioner, destroyed 20,000 chests of British opium.³ While each of these theories has an element of truth, neither takes into account the role played by the man who, in a real sense, was the driving force behind the war: William Jardine, a British opium merchant. First, along with his

¹ The first Opium War was a conflict between the British Empire and the Qing Empire in China from 1840-1842. The war was fought as a result of the Chinese officials attempt to suppress the opium trade within their borders.

² John K. Fairbank, 'The Creation of the Treaty System' in John K. Fairbanks, ed. *The Cambridge History of China* vol. 10 Part 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 213; quoted in John Newsinger, "Britain's Opium Wars," *Monthly Review* (October 1997): 35.

³ Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War, 1840-1842: Barbarians in the Celestial Empire in the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century and the War by Which They Forced Her Gates Ajar* (New York: Norton, 1976), 160.