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**RE-INVENTING JAMAICAN HISTORY: ROGER MAIS AND
GEORGE WILLIAM GORDON**

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Abstract

This paper represents the convergence of two lines of interest and research: (1) in concepts and uses of history in Caribbean literature; (2) in the Jamaican writer Roger Mais.

George William Gordon comes into the picture both as a notable figure in Jamaican history and as a literary subject. Gordon, a coloured man, was Justice of the Peace and representative of St Thomas in the East in the House of Assembly in the 1860s.

Although he was a prosperous landowner himself, he fought vigorously on behalf of black peasants and smallholders against members of the white plantocracy, and was an outspoken critic of Governor Eyre in the Assembly. After the Morant Bay rebellion in 1865 he was arrested on Eyre's orders and executed for his alleged implication in the rebellion. In 1965 he was named as a National Hero of Jamaica, alongside Paul Bogle,

leader of the rebellion. In a now almost forgotten play *George William Gordon*, written in the 1940s, Roger Mais dramatised Gordon's involvement in the events of 1865.[1] Mais was not the first or last writer to turn Gordon into a literary hero or to recast the rebellion in fictional terms, but his reinvention of this historic episode is of peculiar interest because it is connected with events which earned Mais himself a small but unforgotten niche in modern Jamaican history.

RE-INVENTING JAMAICAN HISTORY: ROGER MAIS AND GEORGE WILLIAM GORDON

Reinventing history

In this paper I may sometimes use the word 'history' in its everyday sense of things-that-happened-in-the-past, but when talking about written history I'm concerned with historical narrative as explanation of the past: history as 'rhetoric'. The premise (current in postcolonial criticism) from which I start is that all histories are reinventions; there is no 'single narrative truth which [is] "simply" the closest possible representation of events'. History-writing is a matter of constructing one of many possible configurations of the past, the past itself being a 'chaos of forms' [2]. I also find useful the modern challenge to the assumption that there is an unbridgeable divide between 'factual' and 'fictional' representations of the past. Peter Munz argues that history as 'explanatory narrative', is based on 'generalizations'; thus a 'novel can be genuinely historical if the generalizations . . . used in the narrative are genuinely those of the time and place the story is about.' (Munz, 865). The anonymous Jamaican novel *Marly; or, A Planter's Life in Jamaica* (Glasgow, 1828) has long been used as a source-book of Jamaican social history in pre-emancipation times. V.S. Reid's novel *New Day* (1949) is recognized similarly as inscribing a political history of the period from 1865 to 1944.

The most recent book on the subject of the writing of British imperial history describes historiography as being ‘about how and why a people have come to comprehend themselves in a certain way’ (Winks, p.xliii). Both history-writers and political leaders in the British West Indies embraced the concept that a nation’s or people’s identity is defined by its past; as Norman Manley declared in a public speech, ‘those who are daring to . . . talk about a national being must never forget that the history is the living garment of a nation’ (Nettleford, 113, undated). The nationalist movement both benefited from and fuelled the drive towards the reclamation of West Indian history by West Indian writers. B.W. Higman describes 1938 as a ‘watershed in the history of West Indian history-writing’, heralding the emergence in the English-speaking Caribbean of a ‘professional elite’ of historians writing about their own territories (Higman, 89). It is no coincidence that 1938 was a key year in West Indian political history also, with labour riots in Trinidad, Jamaica and Barbados, the appointment of the Moyne Commission, and the foundation of the People’s National Party in Jamaica. It was also the year in which C.L.R. James’s pioneering history of the San Domingo revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, was published. His book is significant as much for the way it differs from academic histories as for its position as a harbinger of the rise of professional history-writing in the West Indies. While not himself a professional historian, James held a well-developed Marxist theory of history.[3] In the Preface to the first edition of *Black Jacobins*, he described history as a combination of analysis and demonstration, but expressly admitted that his book was not a disengaged analysis: writing in the context of the Spanish Civil War, Stalinist purges, and ‘the fierce shrill turmoil’ of international Socialism, he says

The violent conflicts of our age enable our practised vision to see into the very bones of previous revolutions more easily than heretofore. Yet for that very reason it is impossible to recollect historical emotions in that tranquillity which a great English writer, too narrowly, associated with

poetry alone. . . . Such is our age and this book is of it, with something of the fever and the fret. (Preface repr. in James, 1963, ix-xi)

The allusions to Wordsworth ('recollect . . . tranquillity') and Keats ('the fever and the fret') are not merely ornamental. They typify the holistic nature of James's cultural outlook: two years before publishing *Black Jacobins* he had represented the history of the Haitian revolution in the form of a play, *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, performed in London in 1936 with Paul Robeson in the title role. 'History' and 'literature' were thus interwoven with politics from the beginnings of the West Indian independence movement.

Literature and History in the English-speaking Caribbean

Nana Wilson-Tagoe in her valuable study, *Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature* (1998), offers the first comprehensive exploration of the ways in which history intersects with literature in Anglophone Caribbean writing. An alternative approach, examining different literary representations of a specific historical event or sequence of events, has been adopted by Rhonda Cobham-Sander in relation to Jamaican literature and the Morant Bay rebellion. That episode provides unique scope for such a case-study because of the wealth of material that exists, in the form of archival records, historical accounts, poems, plays, fictional narratives and – not least – oral tradition. In a chapter on 'History as the Basis for Fiction' in her doctoral thesis, *The Creative Writer in West Indian Society*, Cobham-Sander analyses four fictional representations of the Morant Bay rebellion, one of which is Mais's play *George William Gordon*. A revised version of this chapter was published last year in *Small Axe*, as 'Fictions of Gender, Fictions of Race: Retelling Morant Bay in Jamaican Literature'. I'm much indebted to both of Cobham-Sander's studies, but my concern with Mais is somewhat different. By considering his play within the precise context of its time I want to show how closely his retelling of the

Morant Bay story was implicated in the politics of another critical period in Jamaican history.

Morant Bay 1865

The story of the rebellion itself and its brutal aftermath, when on Governor Eyre's orders martial law was declared in St Thomas, and troops of soldiers and Maroons rampaged through the parish flogging, hanging and shooting black suspects or runaways and setting fire to houses, is too well-known to need repeating here. News of these events provoked a storm in Britain, and a Royal Commission was appointed to investigate. It took quantities of evidence in Jamaica, and concluded that although Eyre had acted with commendable speed and vigour, his reprisals were reckless, excessive and unnecessarily prolonged. The circumstances of Gordon's arrest and conduct of his trial were subsequently condemned by the Lord Chief Justice of England as 'altogether unlawful and unjustifiable' (Underhill, 92). Eyre was dismissed from office and the island was placed under Crown Colony government.

Accounts of the events of 1865, from 1866 when the report of the Jamaica Royal Commission was published down to Gad Heuman's detailed and judicious study in 1994, have been extremely numerous, changeable over time, and fraught with controversy. The causes of the rebellion, the manner of its suppression, its constitutional repercussions, and its place in the history of black resistance to white hegemony have all been matters of dispute. While there is general agreement that, *because* of the Morant Bay affair, 1865 was a significant point in Jamaican history, there is no general agreement as to what was most significant *about* it. Some writers accepted Eyre's view of the rebellion as the beginnings of 'a second Haiti'; for others it was no more than a local 'riot', though 'epoch-making' in its political consequences

(Curtin, 178). According to viewpoint, it demonstrated an unquenchable spirit of resistance to oppression among the negro people, or their incurable barbarity and violence; the failure of the white élite to co-operate with the black masses (Brathwaite, 1971, 308), or simply the unworkability of constitutional government in a country where blacks outnumbered whites so heavily ('The whites cannot be trusted to rule the blacks, but for the blacks to rule the whites is a yet grosser anomaly', Froude, 262). Another focus of disagreement and change is over *agency*: whether the most significant role was played by the black rebel-leader Bogle, the white ruler Governor Eyre, or the brown politician Gordon. In historical accounts, the major shift of focus after the 1950s was towards Bogle; by 1981 the rebellion had become known as 'Paul Bogle's Revolt' (Higman, 215).

Literary representations of the events of 1865 comprise, to my knowledge, three novels, three poems, a short story, a play, and a dramatic episode (see Bibliography); there may be others I haven't discovered. Apart from the poem by Francis Berry, all are by West Indian authors and were written between 1939 and 1960, the years in which Jamaica moved towards self-government and independence. In contrast to documentary histories of the same period, Gordon is foregrounded in these literary texts more often than either Bogle or Eyre. Prior to any of the literary texts, however, two folksongs were in circulation. Collected by Walter Jekyll and published in 1907, they show how the events of 1865 entered into oral tradition and kept the rebellion and its aftermath alive in the minds of black people forty years later. In both of these songs, 'War down a Monkland', and 'Oh General Jackson', the emphasis is primarily on the suffering inflicted on the people of St Thomas by the punitive campaign ordered by Governor Eyre and carried out by Major-General Forbes Jackson and others. Eyre himself is not mentioned, but nor are Bogle or Gordon either. The songs do not refer openly to the political causes and results of the rebellion, or to the initial use of violence by the

protesters, an issue which, as Cobham-Sander points out 'was to become central to later literary attempts to deal with the events at Morant Bay' (Cobham-Sander, 2000, 5). In 'War down a Monkland' however, there is a significant reference to Queen Victoria.

The song begins:

War down a Monkland

War down a Morant Bay

War down a Chiggerfoot,

The Queen never know.

War, war, war oh!

War oh! Heavy war oh! [4]

The implication is that Eyre and his officers were acting unlawfully without sanction of the Crown (Cobham-Sander, 2000, 4). Many blacks did indeed believe in the Queen as their protector against the white rulers, landowners and magistrates in Jamaica.

According to a contemporary observer, Henry Clarke, '[the negroes] have a personal love for the Queen whom they regard as the giver of their freedom and their defender from their oppressors' (Olivier, 1936, 182). [5]

Significance of 1865 for Jamaican politics in the pre-Independence era

Connections between the outcome of the 1865 rebellion and constitutional developments in Jamaica in the twentieth century began to be discovered in the early 1930s. James Carnegie notes that publication in 1933 of Lord Olivier's book *The Myth of Governor Eyre* was a catalyst of change in Jamaican attitudes towards the Morant Bay rebellion itself, stimulating contemporary readers to draw lessons from it for their own time. Olivier retold the history of the rebellion from a viewpoint sympathetic towards the black peasants, putting the blame for the revolt squarely on the shoulders of the Governor and the Colonial Office. The book stirred up controversy in 1933-34, not

only because it challenged standard versions of the Morant Bay affair, but also because of its perceived relevance to the current situation. Olivier's book revived memories of 'recent official excesses', and led some conservative reformers to admit that 'their own proposals were based on the 1865 constitution'; i.e. they wanted simply an improved form of Crown Colony government (Carnegie, 77, 153).

In 1938 the radical People's National Party was launched under the leadership of Norman Manley, with a threefold commitment: to serve the interests of the masses of the people; to develop a Jamaican 'national spirit'; and to initiate a move towards self-government (Nettleford, 19-20). Manley had a firm grasp of the value of myth in nation-building, and George William Gordon admirably suited the role of founding father of the new Jamaica envisioned in the PNP programme. Both by his actions and in his personal identity he stood for the realisation of Manley's ideal of a national unity subsuming differences of race, colour and class. The son of a slave woman and a white planter, he married an Englishwoman and rose on his own merits to a position of repute and power in Jamaican society. Yet he remained 'a staunch and unfailing advocate of the interests of the negro, to which race, by his birth, he was allied' (Underhill, 90), and was martyred – as Manley put it – 'for no greater crime than that he dared to speak for the poor and to denounce the rulers of the land' (Nettleford, 275).

Vic Reid's *New Day* (1949), by far the best known and most influential of literary accounts of the rebellion, is built on Manley's dream of a racially and culturally integrated future for Jamaica under representative, autonomous government. Its narrative spans Jamaican history from 1865 to 1944; the 'new day' celebrated was the grant on 20 November 1944 of a new constitution guaranteeing internal self-government. Reid's novel thus 'provided a genealogy for the movement towards self-government and independence' (Higman, 210). The narrator is a Jamaican of mixed

African and European descent, while the hero of the final section (Part Three), the narrator's grandson by a white mother, is a politician, transparently modelled on Norman Manley, to whom the book is dedicated. Reid takes some liberties with factual history, [6] but to the extent that his novel reflects a teleology current in the period represented in Part Three, it supports Munz's contention that a novel can be 'genuinely historical' if its generalizations 'are genuinely those of the time and place the story is about'. It is precisely because *New Day* 'explained' the past in terms that seemed authentic to many in Jamaica in the 1940s that it achieved classic status in West Indian literary history. Reid shows the achievement of self-government in 1944 through patient and astute negotiation by the coloured middle-class leaders of the PNP both as the outcome of a grass-roots rebellion by black peasants in 1865, and as the dawn of a new age of social and racial integration.

Under altered perceptions later, flaws in this historical narrative appeared. Its validity was challenged in 1971 by two West Indian critics, Sylvia Wynter and Kenneth Ramchand, in *Savacou*, No. 5. For Wynter, Part Three failed 'by ignoring the fact that a change in the superstructure of the plantation, a new Constitution, even Independence, were charges which left the basic system untouched'. For Ramchand, Reid's argument failed because 'the particular connection he wishes to make between a disastrous attempt at popular revolution in 1865 and the song and dance of a new constitution negotiated by middle class politicians is a false connection' (quoted by Mervyn Morris, n.p). *New Day* occludes the fact that the dissolution of the Assembly and return to Crown Colony Government in 1866 was welcomed by the black population, and under an enlightened governor, Sir John Peter Grant, much needed administrative and economic reforms were introduced. Long after 1865, lower class blacks continued to regard government from Britain as their best safeguard. In 1883 the

negroes of Kingston petitioned against the idea of representative government on the grounds that under Crown government ‘the great body of the negro population *were never during any period of administration more satisfied and contented*’, and that without its protection ‘our fellow-Colonists would not allow us to enjoy the breath we breathe’. That attitude survived into the twentieth century (Olivier, 1936, 233-4). In the 1940s Alexander Bustamante exploited residual black distrust of the Jamaican ruling class by attacking the idea of self-government and insinuating that the PNP was bent on promoting the interests of the brown middle class. One of his most effective slogans in the 1944 election was ‘self-government means brown man rule’. As Manley perceived, Bustamante, was ‘playing on historic ancient fears’ in order to persuade the masses that the PNP’s goal of self-government was designed ‘to create a brown-man dominance over the black’ (Hart, 302).

Roger Mais and the Morant Bay rebellion

Mais first heard about the Morant Bay rebellion as a boy, when he was living in St Thomas in the East, on a coffee plantation in the Blue Mountains. Mais was born into a coloured, middle-class family in 1905 and grew up in the country, but lived mainly in Kingston throughout his adult years. According to his own account, he underwent a road-to-Damascus conversion to politics and the people’s cause during the general strike in Kingston in 1938 (Daphne Morris, 1986, 304). He became a personal friend of Norman and Edna Manley, was an active supporter of the PNP, and campaigned vigorously for self-government as a political journalist. He wrote prolifically in the 1930s and 40s – poems, plays, and prose fiction, published and unpublished – but the three novels on which his reputation now rests were all published in London after he left Jamaica in 1952, deeply disillusioned with Jamaican society. After two years in

England and France he was forced by illness to return to Jamaica, where he died of cancer in 1955, at the age of forty-nine.

In an autobiographical sketch titled 'A Ghostly Company', Mais relates how he first heard about the Morant Bay affair from 'an old man named Sammy Beckett who used to come up the trail every morning from . . . Somerset, to do odd jobs about the place. . . He wasn't actually born a slave, but he just missed it.' (Mais, *Gently Brother*). The date would have been about 1915, though the anecdote was recorded much later. Beckett's recollections are given in an English approximation of the words he used, or might have used:

He told us how he had watched the scarlet coats of the Queen's Mounted Infantry riding down the mountain trail in single file that time they came to quash the rebellion among the peasantry which the peasants themselves didn't know anything about. He watched them hidin' behind some [word missing] -bush. If they had seed them they would have chased him. . . . If he didn't stop, they would have sent a ball out of their muskets to stop him as they had stopped others who had tried to run away. . . . You stopped running and they caught you and led you to a lure and beat you to make you tell what you didn't know nothing about; or they would beat you because you tried to run away.

He told us of the burning and the looting that had taken place at that time, and how the militia men stole horses and pack mules along the way so that by the time they reached Morant Bay, every jack man <sic> of them was mounted. [7]

Mais concludes sardonically: 'All this was completely strange and bewildering to us because we were never taught Jamaican history in any of the schools we had attended.' The old man's recollections were doubly startling to young Mais: firstly because they revealed unheard-of atrocities committed within living memory by British soldiers against black peasants; secondly because they exposed the great lacuna in the 'history' that was taught in Jamaican schools.

In 1942, some years before he wrote *George William Gordon*, Mais published a short story, *The Noose*, set in the context of the Morant Bay rebellion. Mais's perception of

the events of 1865 would still have been coloured by memories of Beckett's stories, but in the meantime the gap between oral and written history had been filled by reading Olivier's *Myth of Governor Eyre* (a footnote to *The Noose* names Olivier's book as the source of its factual details). The narrative deals with the rebellion obliquely: its savage aftermath provides the framework for a sexual encounter between a domineering white overseer and a mulatto woman, his reluctant mistress. The overseer comes to her house, while her husband is absent. He tells her that he has been watching the punishment of blacks at Morant Bay, and describes how one of them was hanged simply because he showed mute defiance of the presiding officer by refusing to cry out in pain while he was being lashed.[8] The reader learns that this victim was in fact the woman's husband, but his identity is not revealed to the woman herself. The story ends with the overseer being haunted by images of the husband's suffering and defiance.

Inserted into the dialogue are details of events at Morant Bay, including the arrest of Gordon and the probability that he will be hanged, seen through the lens of the white overseer's prejudices. These interpolations seem at first sight no more than a device to achieve dramatic irony and add historical colour to the story, but they have a subtler function also. By setting a triangular white-black-mulatto drama against the backdrop of public events in 1865, Mais tacitly draws attention to the corresponding racial pattern formed by the leading protagonists in the rebellion, Eyre, Bogle and Gordon. That pattern was being replicated in turn in Jamaican politics in 1942, when white colonial authority was pitted against discontented black masses, for whose interests brown middle-class politicians, such as Manley, Bustamante, and Mais himself were campaigning.

Where these parallels lead to is not clear. The story is disturbingly ambiguous also on issues of race and gender relations, as Cobham-Sander points out (2000, 23). It's as if the political and social ferment in which Mais was caught up in 1938-42, overlaying the strong impression made on him by Beckett's account of the sufferings of black people under a punitive white authority, stirred up ideas too powerful and complicated to channel effectively. The story avoids crude polemics, however, and makes a quiet point: while the brutishness and bigotry of the white overseer are not understated, his mental torment implies that in an unjust society even the oppressor suffers.

Mais's play *George William Gordon* presents the Morant Bay rebellion mainly as it affected the ruling class in Jamaica. The action begins immediately before the rebellion, and ends with Gordon's execution. Subtitled 'A historical play in fourteen scenes', it is modelled loosely on Greek tragedy: scenes of realistic dialogue alternate with verse choruses which reflect symbolically on the wider significance of the events. Mais follows recorded history closely: for example, disembodied voices quote at length from evidence given to the Commission about the slaughter, destruction and summary executions carried out by the army under martial law. All the leading characters are historically documented, and apart from Gordon himself most of them are white: Governor Eyre, members of the plantocracy and army officers, Gordon's wife, doctor, and lawyer. Mais does however allow the voice of negroes to be heard. One scene shows Paul Bogle with his followers, preparing for the march on Morant Bay; in another, dialogue between two women servants provides a sketch of racial attitudes in 1865 as viewed by the black underclass. Where Reid's *New Day* creates 'an optimistic story of West Indian political evolution' (Wilson-Tagoe, 271), Mais's vision is tragic and prophetic. Gordon earns heroic stature by his resistance to injustice and misuses of power by the ruling class, and suffers a martyr's death in the peasants' cause. Parallels

in the text between Gordon's social and political views and those of Manley and the PNP are evident, but no specious connection between the rising of 1865 and constitutional change in 1944 is suggested. Nevertheless, a fortuitous connection links Mais (and the new constitution) in 1944 with Gordon in 1865. Both men were outspoken critics of established power in colonial Jamaica and both paid the penalty for their dissent.

In 1944 Mais was imprisoned for sedition. His offence was the public denunciation of British imperialism at the height of the Second World War. In a front-page article printed in the PNP newspaper *Public Opinion*, he declared that Britain's real aim in the war was to keep the Colonies in a permanent state of subjection, poverty and degradation. The spark that ignited Mais's fury was publication in June 1944 of the official draft of the new constitution of Jamaica. This should have been a triumphant moment for the nationalists, the culmination of years of hard campaigning for internal self-government. Instead, it was a moment of bitter frustration, because the draft Constitution failed to incorporate vital terms, accepted by the Colonial Secretary a year earlier, ensuring a real hand-over of power to the new government. In the PNP there was a sense of outrage and betrayal. 'Under the new Constitution power remains with the Governor, the agent of Imperialism. Not the slightest jot of power has passed to the people', wrote Frank Hill. At a public meeting on July 3, Norman Manley described the new draft constitution as 'guttled' of 'all we have fought for in five years' (Post, 2.446-7). Mais's article appeared a week later on July 11. Under the headline 'Now We Know' it began:

Now we know why the draft of the New Constitution has not been published before. The authors of that particular piece of hypocrisy and deception are the little men who are hopping about . . . all over the British Empire implementing the real official policy, implicit in the statements made by the Prime Minister.

(The allusion is to Churchill's notorious utterance of November 1942, 'I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire'):

That man of brave speeches has told the world again and again that he does not intend the old order to change; that he does not mean to yield an inch in concessions to anyone, least of all to people in the colonies. Time and again he has avowed in open parliament that, in so many words, what we are fighting for is that England might retain her exclusive prerogative to the conquest and enslavement of other nations . . .

On July 12 the police raided the offices of *Public Opinion* and seized Mais's manuscript, and he was arrested and charged with breaches of Defence Regulations. His trial in August became a *cause célèbre* in the island. The odds were stacked against him from the start, [9] and in spite of a brilliant defence by Norman Manley and H.O.A. Dayes, he was convicted and sentenced to six months in gaol. Mais, like Gordon, was made a scapegoat for troublesome dissidents: Colonial Office papers show that he was regarded as one of the 'wild men' believed to dominate the PNP, and that his trial provided an opportunity to restrain them (Post, 2.448).

In November 1944 the official Jamaica Constitution was published, with the critical clause restored.[10] The immediate beneficiaries, however, were not Manley and the PNP, the architects of the new constitution, but Bustamante and the Jamaican Labour Party, who swept to power in the first general election in December 1944 by a huge majority. Bustamante had no coherent social or economic policy, but he had an intuitive grasp of 'peasant and working class consciousness' (Post, 2.356), and had unified black workers under the banner of the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU). Manley's nationalist and socialist aspirations, on the other hand, alienated many in the upper and middle class and failed to gain the support of the masses (Hart, 300-301). The victory of 'the Chief' was a bitter pill for Mais. Already, in his writings of 1939-43, he had shown his discontent with the prevailing middle-class ethos of

Jamaican society. Bustamante's populist concentration on trade union concerns and his alignment of BITU with the interests of local capitalists hardened the class and colour divisions which were at the root of Jamaica's social problems, while his tepid support in public of the goal of full self-government seemed to betray covert pro-colonialist leanings which were anathema to Mais.

In June 1945 Mais came out of gaol to a hero's welcome.[11] *George William Gordon* was written sometime after this, possibly by 1 March 1947, when the chorus to scene 11 ('Men of ideas outlive their time') was published in *Public Opinion* as a separate poem, titled 'Voice of the Narrator'. A measure of self-identification, both ideological and biographical, is apparent in Mais's choice of subject. His recent experience of the penalties awaiting outspoken opponents of the establishment, his agreement with Gordon's recorded opinions on social and political matters, and his recognition of Gordon's position as a rebel against the ethos of his own class, were all bonds of sympathy. Nevertheless it would be wrong to infer that Mais's sole, or even main interest in dramatising Gordon's story was personal. *George William Gordon* is very clearly the vehicle of a more general and passionate concern for the future of Jamaica and its people.

The conception of history governing Mais's reconstruction of the Morant Bay affair is underpinned by the Hegelian dialectic: the choruses insistently point *beyond* local and temporal history to a timeless force of 'destiny' working through historical process. From a rhetorical viewpoint, the play has a triple agenda: firstly, to valorise constitutional change; secondly, to promote the idea of 'social revolution' built on 'equality and justice'; thirdly, to project a vision of Jamaica's 'destiny'. The first of these ideas is conveyed directly through dialogue. Gordon is shown worrying about the

possible dissolution of the Jamaican Assembly and return to Crown Colony government, a prospect he regards as a 'retrograde step' and which he attributes to ruling class fears of 'representative government' (scene 1; 1996, p.6). For Gordon representative government is 'a logical step in our natural political growth', but it is resisted by the ruling class because 'they think it will be giving power into the hands of the [poor] people' (scene 6, p.50).

The Jamaican audience Mais was hoping to address would not have missed parallels with contemporary opposition by right-wingers, even in the PNP, to extension of the vote to the lower class (Hart, 68). Similarly, Mais's Gordon recognisably prefigures Manley in his desire to achieve change by peaceful means, not by revolution; Gordon reacts with dismay to news of the violence at Morant Bay (scene 7, p.58). It is notable that among all the literary representations of 1865, Claude McKay's poem alone presents the rising by blacks in unequivocally positive terms. Even Mais, by focusing on Bogle's actions *preceding* the march on Morant Bay, diverts attention from the violence of the rebels to the legitimacy of their cause. Bogle and his followers are nevertheless presented in heroic light by the chorus ('When a man has a vision to overtake', scene 5, pp.44-47), in which both their actions and their foreseeable deaths are shown to fulfil a destined pattern of resistance and martyrdom in the cause of freedom: like their slave forefathers, they took 'the way they had to go'. The goal of 'social revolution', however, is presented in the chorus to scene 11 (pp.85-87) as far distant, sanctified by Christian precedent and clothed in strongly Biblical language and imagery. Gordon is equated with Jesus, both 'men of ideas' ahead of their own time. By their death, the 'idea' for which such men stand is propagated like 'seed springing up a multitude'. Just as 'the great social revolution for which Jesus died / Did not die with him', so 'the idea of equality and justice with Gordon / Went into the ground and and

sprung up like seed, a multitude'. The process of maturation, Mais insists, is long and slow: 'all things must wait a time and a season'; 'A hundred years [from Gordon's death] the seed was a-growing', but 'A hundred years is not too long'. Mais's chronology points to 1965 as the year of fruition, but at the end of the chorus the time-scale is doubled: 'twice a hundred years is not too long'. Mais's gradualism, translated into political terms, typifies the Fabian socialist strand in PNP thinking in the 1940s, but his calculated deferment of the achievement of an equal, just society probably indicates also his pessimism about progress in Jamaica under Bustamante's government.

The dichotomy *George William Gordon* presents, between timeless 'destiny' and local, historical events, the ideal and the material, was thus in part a response to social and political actualities at the time of writing. Daphne Morris argues convincingly that the dual structure was a means of resolving the conflict between Mais's 'disillusionment with the contemporary Jamaican situation', and 'his faith in the Jamaican people's capacity ultimately to realise their destiny' (Daphne Morris, 1988, 175). 'Destiny', however, was also a leading concept in nationalist rhetoric. In 1938 Manley had proclaimed in ringing terms: 'We believe that the people must consciously believe in themselves and their own destiny and must do so with pride and confidence and with the determination to win equality with the rest of mankind' (Nettleford, 100). For Manley, Jamaican 'destiny' involved the transcendence of racial distinctions: the national motto 'Out of Many One People' was his coinage.[12] However, among PNP writers in the post-war *Public Opinion* circle with which Mais was associated there was already an incipient movement towards black nationalism. In a famous poem, 'History makers' by George Campbell (1945), 'history' and 'destiny' converge in the lives of Jamaican working-class women. Although the word 'black' itself is not used in the

poem, the image is clear. The women stone-breakers, who are the 'history-makers' of the title, finally receive the accolade of 'Destiny shapers'. But the heroizing of black people at this stage tended to imply that their main contribution to Jamaican society came from their innate dignity, strength and endurance, and an integrity uncontaminated by bourgeois values. Awareness that they had cultural traditions to contribute to the 'national culture', differing from but not inferior to Euro-Caribbean norms, was only beginning to dawn in the 1940s.

On this point Mais's rhetoric in *George William Gordon* is time-locked. In his novels later, he was to be one of the first writers to represent Rastafarianism sympathetically as an authentic form of black cultural expression, at a time when Rastas were stigmatized as criminals and social outcasts; but the play was written out of a different perceptual field. Here, an archetypal black man is hailed as torch-bearer of Jamaica's national spirit simply by virtue of his primitive, organic, vitality: 'Black man / Along this lonely road / where are you going? / . . . / Son of elements / This virgin soil / These hills / These virgin plains / O man of origins / Organic' (chorus, scene 12, pp.94-95). This peasant figure is, like Gordon, a 'Man of destiny', but unlike Gordon he is 'The backward brother', deprived of cultural inheritance by his slave ancestry, 'Man without heritage, birthright, / Man in bondage to the dust'. [13] More than fifty years on, it is all too easy to read this as a denial of the social and cultural potential of black people. But Mais's vision of a Jamaican future redeemed by its black peasantry derives more immediately from his reading of D.H. Lawrence and Walt Whitman than from his political embroilment in Kingston in the 1940s. Lawrence and Whitman were formative influences on Mais's grandiose artistic credo, expounded in 1942 or thereabouts in an unpublished treatise, *Form and Substance in Fiction*. This work says nothing at all about West Indian culture but offers a panoramic, humanist view of art and life. In the

concluding chapter, Mais defines artists, including writers, as ‘transmitters of life’ (Lawrence’s phrase) through their ‘god-given’ powers of insight and creative energy. Ultimately it is ‘the artists of the world’, not the politicians, who will lead the human race towards the higher stages of its evolution. Politics belong to ‘the dark ages’ of human progress:

When we consider the world – that is man – economically, socially, politically, we are revolted at the injustices, the inhumanities of man towards his fellowman. But when we stop to consider that . . . man – the human race – is in his infancy, we will begin to understand these things better. (Mais, 1942, 258-76)

The ‘Black man’ of *George William Gordon* is Mais’s avatar of quintessential humanity as manifested in the folk, the common people, of Jamaica. Mais would undoubtedly have assented to the conclusion that Edward Brathwaite reached many years later in his study of cultural diversity and integration in the Caribbean, ‘that for the Caribbean, as elsewhere, the basis of culture lies in the folk, and that by folk we mean . . . a people who, from the centre of an oppressive system have been able to survive, adapt, recreate’ (Brathwaite, 1974, 64).

Conclusion

The attempt by Roger Mais in *George William Gordon* to reinvent the history of the Morant Bay rebellion as a staging-post in the Hegelian progress of the human spirit towards freedom is a brave failure. As realistic drama, his presentation of the political context of the rebellion and of the character of George William Gordon himself was and remains persuasive and moving. Mais succeeded also in investing his narrative of events in 1865, both realistically and symbolically, with a significance for Jamaica in the 1940s that was and still is intelligible. But plans to produce his play in Kingston in 1949 came to nothing, for reasons that remain obscure, while Reid’s *New Day* was published with acclaim in the same year. Nettleford says of Manley that he may have

‘underestimated the age-long schism of the society between those white and brown persons high in the pyramid of inheritance and the black peasant and urban-dweller at the base’ (xliv-v). Mais saw that schism too clearly to satisfy the desire in 1949 for an optimistic vision of social progress in Jamaica. The politics of the 1940s are now themselves part of history and its reconfigurations. As Heuman (186) notes, the Jamaican group Third World commemorated Morant Bay in 1977 in the lyrics of ‘96° in the Shade’, but Cobham-Sander (2000, 30) points out that these later references to the rebellion ‘tend to align the political descendants of Manley and Bustamante with Eyre and the plantocracy of the days of slavery, and to range Gordon, Bogle and Garvey against them as defenders of the people against the establishment’.

Notes

[1] I understood from conversation in 1968 with Mais’s sister, the late Jessie Dayes, that the play was the winning entry in a competition set up by *Public Opinion* in 1945, but I have failed to verify this claim. It was not performed in Mais’s lifetime, and not printed before Errol Hill’s edition in 1976. This is the moment to acknowledge the generous help I received this summer in my efforts to recover details about the play and its context; warm thanks especially to Owen Minott, Noel Vaz, Errol Hill, Carey Robinson, Mervyn Morris, John Maxwell, Liz Hearne, and Richard Hart.

[2] Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 355-6; they quote ‘chaos of forms’ from Hayden White, ‘The Politics of Historical Interpretation’, *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982).

[3] See especially ‘Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity’ in James (1992). Wilson-Tagoe (27) comments on the ‘surprising Eurocentrism’ of James’s perspective in *Black Jacobins*. In the second edition, however, James added an appendix providing a specifically West Indian narrative of revolution (‘From Toussaint L’Ouverture to Fidel Castro’, reprinted in James, 1992).

[4] The refrain is a proleptic reminder of Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poem on the Brixton riots, *All wi doin is defendin*, with its repeated ‘war--- war’, ending ‘fe war --- war / freedom is a very firm thing’. LKJ’s poem (esp. in the audio version) expresses the same mixture of suffering and defiance as the folk song.

[5] Bogle himself ‘made it clear that he was not rebelling against the Queen’ (Heuman, 36). The notorious ‘Queen’s Advice’, distributed in 1865 before the rebellion by Jamaican authorities and widely believed to have been written by someone other than the Queen herself, helped to ferment resentment against local leaders.

[6] E.g. Reid makes his Manley representative (Garth Campbell) victorious in the election of 1944, actually won by Bustamante. Other deviations from recorded history were pointed out at the time by H.P. Jacobs in 'The Historical Foundations of *New Day*', *The West Indian Review* (March-May, 1949): see Cobham-Sander (1981), 277-8, and Mervyn Morris.

[7] Colonel Hobbs, commander of the troops who descended on Somerset (among other places), said of the floggings, shootings, and burnings: 'Such is martial law. The soldiery enjoy it, the inhabitants have to dread it. If they run, they are shot for running away.' (Underhill, 50).

[8] Cf. Underhill, 50: 'A scowling look was sufficient to bring down vengeance upon the wretched captives.'

[9] The Prosecutor was the Attorney-General, T.H. Mayers, a Barbados-born Englishman well known for his patriotic fervour and his hostility towards the nationalists. At his request, the trial was held at the Resident Magistrate's Court in Kingston, not at the Circuit Court (as usual in cases involving serious charges and issues of national importance), thereby depriving the defence of appeal to a jury. Finally, and ironically, Mais would probably have been acquitted under British law, because the clause in the Defence Regulations under which he was charged had been amended in Britain. Its unmodified form, retained in Jamaica, covered any attempt 'to influence public opinion in a manner likely to be prejudicial to the efficient prosecution of the war'. This was narrowed down in Britain to 'influence . . . by means of false statement, false document or false report' (information supplied by the late H.O.A. Dayes).

[10] Manley still regarded the 1944 constitution as no more than a 'half-way house' because it failed to provide for *responsible* government; 'in their (the Colonial Office) effort to play safe they gave great power but they did not give a corresponding responsibility', Presidential address, PNP conference 11 Aug. 1945 (Nettleford, 121-2).

[11] Mais's release coincided with the landslide victory of the British Labour Party in the 1945 general election. The Jamaican paper, *The Masses*, united the two events under the headline 'Socialist Writer Out --- Socialist Government In' (Post, 2.530).

[12] Manley saw 'black consciousness as integral to the nationalist movement' but 'refused to indulge in ethnocentricity' for fear of perpetuating the evils of racial prejudice in inverted form. 'He could not reconcile black nationalism with plural democratic nationalism' (Nettleford, lxvii).

[13] In a draft version, the section of the chorus beginning 'Black man' is titled 'The Backward Brother'.

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[Appendix: Mais, *George William Gordon*]

From Chorus, Scene 5

When a man has a vision to overtake
A mountain to climb [. . .]

It is not enough to engage the action
The men of Stony Gut engaged the action
They burnt the court house and killed the magistrates
And were themselves hanged
It is to see past the action and its outcome
To the empty nooses dangling from their trees
And to know the tree and the noose inevitable, and to know
That this is the way a man must go [. . .]

And no doubt Paul Bogle and Moses his brother
And Bailey and Bowie and Craddock
And Maclaren and Fonthill and other leaders
Might have had a vision of the naked trees
And nooses swaying in the wind
And of the alien fruit that was their own rotting flesh stark in the sun
But this was the way they had to go
And no other, for the undying truth at the heart of a man
As the heat at the heart of the fire
As the light at the heart of the flame
As the fire and the smoke in the green sap [. . .]

From Chorus, Scene 11

Men of ideas outlive their time
An idea held by such a man does not end with his death
His life bleeding away goes down
Into the earth, and it grows like seed
The idea that is not lost with the waste of a single life
Like seed springing up a multitude.

They hanged Gordon from a boom
Rigged in front of the court house
They hanged him with eighteen others for company
And Jesus had but two
But the idea for which Gordon lived
Did not hang with him
And the great social revolution for which Jesus died
Did not die with him
Two men they nailed with Jesus side by side
Eighteen went to hang with Gordon from the new-rigged boom
But the idea of equality and justice with Gordon
Went into the ground and sprung up like seed, a multitude
A hundred years the seed was a-growing in the ground
A hundred years is not too long
A hundred years is not too soon
A hundred years is a time and a season
And all things must wait a time and a season [. . .]

A single grain of corn will yield an ear of corn
And an ear of corn in two generations will sow a field
And these things befall between a moon and a moon
All things await a time and a season
And twice a hundred years is not too long
Or twice a hundred years too soon.

From Chorus, Scene 12

Black man
Along this lonely road
Where are you going?
Which way to the future,
For many roads lead there?

Son of elements
This virgin soil
These hills
These virgin plains
O man of origins
Organic
Man of destiny
Is this the road over these hills
The last of all these ways;
And you the last seeker
The backward brother,
Hand planted firm on hip
Facing the naked sun,
Insolent, gathering the spittle in your mouth
To void upon the dust?

[. . .]

Within the loins the issue of death
And pain and hunger
Man without heritage, birthright,
Man in bondage to the dust . . .

Out of these loins too new beginnings
And sun bright ways take rise,
New issue to bring harvest to this land. [. . .]

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