



# Victorian Jamaica

TIM BARRINGER AND WAYNE MODEST (Editors)



*Grave of Eighty Rebels near Morant Bay, Jamaica*

Grave of Eighty Rebels near Morant Bay, Jamaica, albumen print, from Alexander Dudgeon Gulland, *Photography Album Documenting the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica (1865), the Indian Northwest Frontier Hazara Campaign (1867-1870), Views of Malta, Ireland, Guernsey, Spain, and Elsewhere*. Graphic Arts Collection, (GAX) 2009-0016E, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

*Grave of Eighty Rebels  
near Morant Bay, Jamaica, 1865*

Albumen print mounted in album assembled

by Alexander Dudgeon Gulland. Firestone Library,

Princeton University. | WAYNE MODEST

Elegantly written in cursive, the caption below the image identifies it as the “Grave of Eighty Rebels near Morant Bay, Jamaica.” This photograph is one of the few remaining images from the British colonial government’s violent suppression of the rebellion of blacks in Jamaica in 1865. It is one of twenty-five images of the rebellion included in a photographic album assembled by Alexander Dudgeon Gulland, a British Army officer stationed in Jamaica during the rebellion. Gulland’s album was acquired in 2009 by the Firestone Library at Princeton University.

At a fork in the road, two adults stand in front of a mound of dirt that allegedly covers the bodies of eighty rebels executed on the orders of Governor Eyre. The men are accompanied by a child, who is off to the side, next to a donkey-drawn carriage. They look into the camera from the shadow of a large cotton tree that towers over them. One can infer that these persons in the photograph, with their carriage, are gravediggers. Or could they be mourners? While the mound is ostensibly the subject of the image, the cotton tree dominates the composition. In the immediate background is a thatched vernacular house behind a fence. Giving the image depth, the dirt roads draw our eyes farther into the background, where we find a more grandiose house for comparison.

Although the exact location of the grave is unknown, the burial site has cultural significance. The cotton tree and the crossroads both have symbolic meaning within Afro-Jamaican traditions. The silk cotton tree is a place where the spirits reside, as well as a locus of the power of healing. In African and Afro–New World cultures, moreover, the crossroads is a gateway to other worlds, where the guardian figure Esu-Elegbara, or Legba, also known as a trickster, resides.

But perhaps the power of this photograph lies elsewhere, not in its symbolic importance within an Afro-Jamaican worldview. Its power is conceivably in its *eventfulness*. Here I take my cue from Ariella Azoulay and other more recent scholars who have been interested in the event of photography.<sup>11</sup> Emancipation occurred in Jamaica in August 1838; photography was first demonstrated six months later, in January 1839. This coincidence in chronology means that the documentary properties of photography, its evidentiary function, were not available to capture the fact of slavery and the emancipation proclamation and celebrations. Yet despite the lack of chronological overlap, Krista Thompson has demonstrated how photography produced after the official end of slavery in the British Caribbean has been taken to represent the conditions of slave life.<sup>12</sup>

But for Azoulay the event of the photograph is not simply the event that the photograph captures, the fleeting instant that the image fixes chemically on paper—what Henri Cartier-Bresson described as the “decisive moment.”<sup>13</sup> The event of photography emerges out of the set of relations between maker, subjects, and the viewer of the photograph. In this sense, the photograph is a situation, an event, and Azoulay’s approach is to think about “a certain form of human being-with-others in which the camera or the photograph are implicated.”<sup>14</sup> Now we are led to wonder about that relationship between Alexander Dudgeon Gulland, the British Army officer, and the subjects pictured, whether mourners or gravediggers. Or, more cogently, between this functionary of the colonial state, whom we can presume to have been complicit in this state-sanctioned violence and who now trades his rifle for a camera, and those eighty so-called rebels buried under the mound pictured.

And, we can extend Azoulay’s claim about the eventfulness of photographs even further: for the event of photography, on her account, continues even after the photograph’s making, emerging as an “infinite series of encounters,” in relation to the photograph.<sup>15</sup> The process of emancipation that was inaugurated in 1838 was ongoing and incomplete in 1865, when this photograph was taken, and would last throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and beyond. With each encounter, then, this image of the *Grave of Eighty Rebels near Morant Bay, Jamaica* produces the event anew in relation to its viewer.