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## 'Bring in all Rastas, dead or alive!'

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Those are the infamous words of Sir Alexander Bustamante, national hero and first prime minister of independent Jamaica. Bustamante's turn of phrase comes straight out of the Wild West: "Wanted dead or alive." Bustamante apparently conceived all Rastafarians as outlaws in a Hollywood western who had to be exterminated by any means necessary.

Issuing a death sentence, Bustamante literally turned all Rastafarians into villains. Guilty or innocent, they could no longer expect to enjoy the protection of the law. All Rastafarians were completely demonised and became victims of comprehensive state brutality. How did this come about?

Half a century ago, at about 4 a.m. on 'Holy' Thursday, six bearded men set fire to a gas station in Coral Gardens. They were armed with machetes, guns, bows and arrows. I suppose it was cowboys and Indians, Jamrock style. The leader was Rudolph 'Franco' Franklyn, who had a big grievance against the owner of the gas station, Ken Douglas.

Franklyn and several other bearded men had long been squatting on land in Coral Gardens. They lived in relative peace until the land was sold to Douglas. Naturally, the new owner asserted his right to the property and attempted to drive the squatters off the land. As is often the case, the squatters refused to budge.

During one of several attempts at eviction, Franklyn was shot by the police. He survived but was told by a medical doctor that he would die sooner rather than later from a bullet lodged in his body. Determined to take revenge on his assailants, Franklyn sought allies to launch his counter-attack.

### DREADLOCKS AND COMBSOME

At the time, there were two groups of Rastafarians living in MoBay: the dreadlocks and the combsome. The dreadlocks lived on Railway Lane and the combsome squatted in Coral Gardens. Franklyn irrationally proposed that both groups of Rastas join forces to burn down Montego Bay. The dreadlocks rejected the scheme on the basis that Rastas defend 'peace and love'.

Franklyn, who seemed to subscribe to the philosophy "I don't give a damn, I done dead already", pressed along with his plans. Instead of burning down all of MoBay, he settled for Douglas' gas station, an obviously flammable target.

On the morning of the attack, there was only one attendant at the station, Mr George Plummer, who fled for his life to the nearby Edgewater Inn Motel. He, clearly, had no shares in the company. A Mr Marsh, who was at the motel, foolishly ventured out to investigate the matter. In a most unfortunate turn of affairs, he was murdered. By midday, seven others lost their lives, including Franklyn.

According to a **Gleaner** report published on April 13, 1963, "*The Montego Bay Fire Brigade had responded to the fire alert at 4:53 a.m. from the house of Dr Carol Delisser. The blaze at the gas station was brought under control after 5 a.m. led by Supt Sydney Burke, who joined the police squad that rushed up from Montego Bay under Inspector Fisher. Five vehicles, including two civilians, started into the hills after the Rastafarian gang. Among those chasing the gang was Mr Causwell, who was on his way to Kingston but decided to give some help to the chase.*

*"They drove through two miles of rough terrain from the ruins of Rose Hall Great House. The search party ran into the gang or rather ran into an ambush. The bearded men attacked from an overhanging cliff above. In the fight which ensued, two of the gang were shot to death and Corporal Melbourne and Mr Causwell were cut down. By then, it was discovered later that Headman Fowler had been already cut down about a mile from his home on Tryall Farm."*

The day's gruesome events became known as 'the Coral Gardens Incident'. But this was much more than an isolated 'incident'. Franklyn's murderous rampage was a sign of the fundamental inequities of Jamaican society. Landlessness is a recurring a problem which has never been properly addressed by successive pre- and post-Independence governments.

## WINSTON CHURCHILL'S CIGARS

The response of Bustamante's government to the terrible actions of six bearded men was brutally excessive: "Bring in all Rastas, dead or alive!" Why should all Rastafarians be exterminated because of the actions of six men, especially since the ringleader had already been killed? Bustamante's irrational call signified much more than a need to restore the peace. The Coral Gardens 'Incident' was a chilling episode in a long history of state violence against Rastafari.

In 1954, under the premiership of Bustamante, a major Rastafarian encampment, Pinnacle, was burnt down. The camp was located in St Jago Hills, close to Sligoville. Pinnacle was a productive agricultural hub, yielding rich crops such as cassava, peas, corn and, of course, ganja. Maintaining African traditions of collective labour, Pinnacle flourished under the leadership of Leonard Howell.

French journalist H el ene Lee, author of **The First Rasta: Leonard Howell and the Rise of Rastafarianism**, published in 2004, proposes that Howell was the first Jamaican 'don' in the best possible sense of that word. He was a don in the British sense of a university professor. Howell was a Garveyite who valued scholarship.

He was also a charismatic community leader who gave hope to landless Rastafari who left Kingston's concrete jungle for the hills of St Catherine. Pinnacle comprised approximately 5,000 acres, even though Howell owned only a conservative estimate of 150 acres and, possibly, up to 400.

According to anecdotal evidence, much of the ganja produced at Pinnacle found its way to the warfront during the Second European War. Ganja was seen as therapy for the troops. It was even rumoured that Winston Churchill's famous cigars contained much more than tobacco. In 1953, Churchill visited Jamaica, staying at the Tower Isle hotel. Was there any connection between his visit and the destruction of Pinnacle? I leave the answer to conspiracy theorists.

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