

## **Jamaica's Highest Honour: The Order of National Hero**

**By Chelsea Stephenson**

Established in 1969 through the National Honours and Awards Act, Jamaica's Order of National Hero is the highest award that can be bestowed in the country. It, along with the other National Honours and Awards, made it possible for the nation to recognize those who have contributed meaningfully to the development of the nation. Since the systems' inception, to this date, only seven individuals have received the award of the Order of National Hero: Marcus Garvey, Sir Alexander Bustamante, Norman Washington Manley, George William Gordon, Nanny of the Maroons, Paul Bogle and Samuel Sharpe.

Samuel Sharpe was the main instigator of the 1831 Slave Uprising (also known as *The Baptist War*), which began on the Kensington Estate in St. James. This anti-slavery revolt was largely instrumental in bringing about the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies. Although his initial plan was for a peaceful protest, it morphed into an outright insurrection and, when the dust settled, more than 500 enslaved persons lost their lives. For his role in the uprising, Sam Sharpe was hanged on May 23, 1832, just two years before the passing of the Abolition Act in the British Parliament.

Nanny, who was a leader of the Windward Maroons at the beginning of the 18th century, was particularly important to the Maroons in the fierce fight with the British during the First Maroon War from 1720 to 1739. All of the legends and documents refer to Nanny as an exceptional leader to her people. She inspired them to struggle to maintain that spirit of freedom and life of independence, which was their rightful inheritance. The Right Excellent

Nanny of the Maroons, and The Right Excellent Samuel Sharpe, were conferred the Order of National Hero on March 31, 1982.

Jamaica's first National Hero, Marcus Mosiah Garvey, was conferred with the Order of National Hero in 1969 for his role in activism and the empowering of Black people across the world. During his career, Garvey travelled extensively, observing the poor working and living conditions of Black people. In 1914, he started the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which grew into an international organization. He encouraged self-government for Black people worldwide, self-help economic projects and protested against racial discrimination. He also formed the People's Political Party (PPP) in 1929, which constituted Jamaica's first political party.

Both George William Gordon and Paul Bogle sought to fight for the rights of the freed Blacks of post-emancipation Jamaica, and although they were both hanged for their efforts, they are remembered today as National Heroes. Gordon entered politics, despite severe odds, since the people whose interests he sought to serve did not qualify to vote. He urged them to protest against and resist the oppressive and unjust conditions under which they were forced to live. It is this injustice, campaigned against by Gordon that urged Paul Bogle, a Baptist deacon in Stony Gut, to lead a protest march to the Morant Bay courthouse on October 11, 1865. The confrontation that ensued was violent and both men were arrested and executed. Though horrific, the 1865 Uprising brought about a change in the official attitude, which made possible the social and economic betterment of the people. Both The Right Excellent Paul Bogle and the Right Excellent George William Gordon were conferred with the Order of the National Hero in 1969.

A brilliant scholar and athlete, soldier and lawyer, Norman Washington Manley identified himself with the cause of the workers at the time of the labour troubles of 1938 and donated time and advocacy to the cause. In September 1938, he founded the People's National Party (PNP) and was elected its President until his retirement in 1969. Manley and the PNP supported the trade union movement, then led by Alexander Bustamante, while leading the demand for Universal Adult Suffrage. Through his leadership, Manley became Chief Minister of Jamaica in 1955 and served in that capacity until 1959, after which he served as Jamaica's first and only Premier from 1959 to 1962.

When Alexander Bustamante began to make his presence felt in Jamaica, the country was still a Crown Colony. Pay and working conditions were poor in the 1920s and 1930s and failing harvests and the lay-off of workers resulted in an influx of unemployed people moving from the rural areas into the city. In advocating the cause of the masses, Bustamante became the undisputed champion of the working class. In 1943, he founded the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), with himself as head. Sir Alexander also became the first Prime Minister of Independent Jamaica in 1962. On October 18, 1969, Bustamante was conferred with the Order of National Hero along with his cousin, Norman Washington Manley.

Though some of Jamaica's National Heroes existed in different time periods across our history, serving as freedom fighters and political activists, their positive contribution to the building of our nation is undeniable. If others should be added to this group of National Heroes, it is hoped that their contribution to the nation will be as great as that of these seven heroes.

## **Bibliography**

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